

# **A Literacy Framework for Alberta**

Discussion Draft #2 - July 25, 2008

The logo for the province of Alberta, featuring the word "Alberta" in a stylized, bold, sans-serif font. The letter 'A' is significantly larger and more prominent than the other letters, and the 'l' is also notably tall.

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## **SECTION A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **1. Introduction**

Alberta has high quality basic education, advanced education and workforce development policies and programs. However, Albertans who are concerned about maintaining and improving our quality of life and economic prosperity have identified the need to develop a comprehensive literacy framework and action plan for Alberta.

The Alberta government's strategic plan includes a focus on maintaining quality basic and advanced education, promoting lifelong learning and supporting human resource development to enable Albertans to be responsive, caring, creative, self-reliant and contributing members of society. Quality learning opportunities develop the learning, work and life skills Albertans need to achieve their aspirations and potential in our increasingly knowledge-based economy. The most basic of these skills include the ability to read, write and complete mathematical computations. These are the basic skills or building blocks for effective communication, further learning, problem-solving and active citizenship.

A coordinated literacy framework for Alberta, along with school-aged and adult literacy components, contributes to a Pan-Canadian priority of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). Through the CMEC's Literacy Action Plan, ministers from each province and territory have committed to work together to increase the literacy levels of all Canadians through a number of actions including the development of literacy frameworks in each jurisdiction.

### **2. The importance of literacy**

Literacy proficiency has consequences for learning outcomes, health status, civic participation and social engagement, and economic performance.

- Literacy development begins between birth and five years of age when the foundation is laid for school literacy and lifelong learning.<sup>i</sup> Family literacy programming has the benefits of assisting parents to understand and strengthen their skills – as a child's first and best teacher and to help parents with their own literacy skills. Providing parents with the knowledge of the importance of talking, reading and learning together with their young children is a preventative strategy that ensures that children have the necessary early language and emergent literacy building blocks when they start school.
- Data from the 2003 international literacy survey supports other research which shows the relationship between learning outcomes of children and their parents. Prose literacy scores of youth (aged 16 to 25) varied with their parents' level of education. Youth whose parents have not completed high school have the lowest prose literacy scores in 2003. Across all provinces and territories, more than one-third of 16 to 25 year-olds had inadequate literacy levels defined as levels 1 and 2 on international adult literacy measures.<sup>ii</sup>
- In Alberta, 40% of the population aged 16 years and older had reading and numeracy skills below level 3. While the average scores in Alberta were well above the general

population of Canada, 40% translates into over 1 million adult Albertans who do not have the desired level of literacy competence for coping with the increasing skill demands of the emerging knowledge and information economy.<sup>iii</sup>

- While the young and educated tended to have higher literacy scores, the relationship between age, education and ability level is complex. The level of proficiency attained at the end of formal education is an important determinant of the proficiency level observed throughout an individual's life. However, some adults have problems because their skills degenerate from lack of use - 34% of adult Albertans with weak literacy skills had post-secondary education. Workers in jobs that under-utilize their essential skills face the risk of losing the skills because they do not use them regularly.<sup>iv</sup>
- The majority of low literacy adult Albertans are employed - 67% with level 1 prose literacy levels and 79% of those at prose level 2. Although adults with low skills are employed, they tended to have low incomes (less than \$25,000 a year), have longer periods of unemployment and shorter periods of employment. Adults with poor and weak literacy skills (literacy levels 1 and 2) are two and a half times more likely to be unemployed for six months or more than individuals with higher literacy skills.
- Over the past decade, increased labour productivity was the most important driver of economic growth among most industrialized countries. Literacy rates correlate to productivity rates. Even small increases in the literacy skills of a population can have a profound effect on a national economy. A 1% rise in average literacy rates would equate to an increase in productivity of 2.5% and a 1.5% increase in GDP.<sup>v</sup> Alberta's productivity growth of 1.2% (based on hours worked averaged from 1995 to 2005) lags behind the 1.5% growth of Canada and the 2% growth of the United States and Japan.<sup>vi</sup>
- Canadian organizations are under-investing in employee training, and are failing to allocate their training dollars in ways that lead to stronger business performance, according to the Conference Board of Canada.<sup>vii</sup> Results of workplace essential skills programs<sup>viii ix x</sup> included an increase in safety records, improved worker confidence, improved productivity and performance and increased staff retention.
- The benefits of higher literacy levels are more than economic. International literacy survey data supports the link between higher literacy skills and higher levels of physical and mental health status. A positive relationship was also shown between civic participation, social engagement and literacy. Higher prose literacy scores were correlated with higher rates of volunteerism and participation in one or more civic organizations.<sup>xi</sup>

### **3. Alberta Government Context**

A coordinated literacy framework will build on the strengths of our current basic education (Kindergarten to Grade 12), advanced education and workforce development systems, and ongoing initiatives to enhance our education and training systems.

*A Learning Alberta, Alberta's Commission on Learning* and the *K-3 Numeracy/Literacy Report* identified the important role of early learning and the need to break the intergenerational cycle of low literacy/low socio-economic status by investing in family literacy and other parenting supports. This includes Early Childhood Services educational programming for children as young as 2 ½ years old, and the Parent-Child Literacy Strategy that supports intergenerational family literacy programming for parents and their preschool-aged children.

A commonly cited reason for non-completion of high school is that students do not have the literacy skills to keep up with an increasingly complex high school curriculum. To address this, a key strategy to increase high school completion is the development of school-aged literacy component of the literacy framework. This component will identify strategies that support literacy development across all subject areas in all grades.

The need to increase literacy and other foundation skills of adult Albertans was identified in *A Learning Alberta* and *Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce*. Both initiatives recognize that people are the shaping force in sustaining Alberta's economic performance and quality of life. There is a commitment to enhance access to education and training for groups underrepresented in education and the workforce. This is occurring through initiatives to strengthen learning and literacy programs in communities for adults of all ages, and to assist employers and industry associations to improve literacy and essential skills among employed Albertans. Lifelong learning and workforce policies and programs are key components in Alberta's literacy continuum. A summary of Alberta Government Literacy Programs is included in Appendix A.

## SECTION B: A LITERACY FRAMEWORK FOR ALBERTA

### 1. What is literacy?

Literacy is more than the ability to read and write. It involves the knowledge, skills behaviours and attitudes that enable individuals to think critically, communicate effectively, deal with change and solve problems in a variety of contexts to achieve their personal goals, develop their knowledge and potential and participate fully in society.

- **Literacy is complex.** In our knowledge-based society, literacy competencies extend beyond reading and writing to extracting and critically analyzing information to solve problems in different situations. Literacy requirements vary depending upon whether the setting is school, work, in the community or elsewhere.
- **Literacy is life long.** The development and maintenance of literacy competencies is life long. It begins at birth with early learning experiences and continues through adulthood. Literacy skills need to be used daily to be maintained. Also, literacy requirements evolve over time throughout the life course and with advances in technology and social and cultural structures.
- **Literacy has personal, social and economic benefits for individuals and society.** Individuals with higher literacy skills have been shown to have higher income, better health, greater social and civic engagement, life long access to learning and less involvement with the justice system.

### 2. Literacy Development is a Shared Responsibility

Alberta's success in having a population with highly developed literacy competencies is dependent upon the commitment and collaboration of many partners:

- individual learners and their families
- schools and school jurisdictions
- community-based adult learning and literacy organizations and post-secondary institutions
- employers and employee and industry organizations
- community volunteers
- public libraries and other organizations, and
- governments and other funding bodies.

Our vision is for a coordinated comprehensive approach that moves literacy development outside the traditional view of a classroom for children to one that enables all individuals to have opportunities to develop and expand their literacy competencies throughout their life, in families, communities and workplaces.

### **3. Vision**

Albertans have life long opportunities to develop and expand their literacy competencies to participate fully and successfully in living, learning, and work.

### **4. Values**

Literacy policies, programs and services:

- Are learner-centred and responsive to the strengths, abilities and needs of individuals.
- Acknowledge and value the language, culture, spirituality and traditions of learners, families and communities.
- Are delivered through collaborative partnerships.
- Support innovation and excellence in teaching and learning.
- Are based on shared responsibility and accountability.
- Are developed and implemented through open, honest, consistent and transparent processes.

### **5. Outcomes**

- Programs and services are inclusive and accessible to all learners.
- Individuals develop and enhance their literacy competencies.
- Education and training providers have the capacity and the infrastructure to deliver quality literacy programs and services.
- Collaborative partnerships support and sustain literacy programs and services.
- Policies, programs and services support a continuum of literacy development for Albertans of all ages.

### **6. Key Components**

- Create more learning opportunities
- Strengthen instructor qualifications
- Develop a stronger curriculum
- Improve coordination of policy, programs and services.

## 7. Actions

Following are key components with a summary of the actions suggested by participants at the Alberta Literacy Forum on April 14, 2008.

Key Component	Actions
Create more learning opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement a public awareness campaign on the importance of developing life long literacy competencies for Albertans of all ages.</li> <li>• Develop easily accessible information and educational/career counseling and outreach services to facilitate access to appropriate programs.</li> <li>• Identify barriers to literacy learners and implement specific strategies to overcome barriers and enable more learners to access literacy programming.</li> <li>• Develop special initiatives to reach out and respond to the literacy learning needs of First Nations, Métis, Inuit peoples, immigrants, francophones, and persons with disabilities.</li> <li>• Engage families and seniors in literacy programming.</li> <li>• Increase access in rural and remote communities.</li> <li>• Ensure that learning and learner supports are available to enable learners to continue in programs and be successful.</li> <li>• Expand community and workforce literacy programs and alternative delivery approaches to increase hours and locations of literacy programming throughout Alberta.</li> <li>• Engage employers and industry to provide workplace literacy and essential skills programming.</li> </ul>
Develop a stronger curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize and value nonformal learning.</li> <li>• Embed literacy development across all K-12, post-secondary, adult and workforce programs.</li> <li>• Develop, evaluate and share standardized curricula, lesson plans and teaching strategies.</li> <li>• Conduct research on the development and identification of benchmarks for quality programs and services.</li> <li>• Engage adult education and training providers in the development of standard learning outcomes, assessment and reporting for adult literacy which are aligned with essential skills and international adult literacy measures.</li> </ul>
Strengthen instructor qualifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support pre-service teacher training and professional development on the integration of literacy development in all content areas and the teaching of English as a Second language and Francisation, cultural competency and addressing the needs of students with learning disabilities.</li> <li>• Develop a human resource strategy to address issues affecting the attraction and retention of qualified literacy practitioners and literacy specialist teachers.</li> <li>• Explore the development of a family literacy and an adult literacy practitioner credential.</li> <li>• Support research on the identification of effective practices, and the incorporation of this knowledge into practice.</li> </ul>
Improve coordination of policy, programs and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish learner pathways to allow learners to transfer between programs.</li> <li>• Align foundational curricula and programs across the range of learning and training providers, early learning, K-12 and adult.</li> <li>• Encourage partnerships between schools, community groups, post-secondary institutions, employers, public libraries and others to coordinate programs.</li> <li>• Co-locate learner support services and facilities in local communities and regions.</li> <li>• Provide provincial leadership through a cross-ministry mechanism to coordinate literacy policies, programs and services.</li> </ul>

## **Appendix A: Alberta Government Literacy Initiatives and Programs**

### **Alberta Government Literacy Initiatives**

The Government of Alberta recognizes that lifelong learning starts at the moment of birth. The first six years of life lay the foundation of knowledge that supports children when they enter the education system. Premier Stelmach provided the Minister of Education with a mandate letter that identified a priority to increase broad-based supports and early intervention initiatives for at-risk children to improve their learning outcomes.

Alberta Education's mandate through the School Act states that a board or an approved school authority may provide an Early Childhood Services (ECS) program to a child who is younger than 6 years of age. Children from 2 ½ to age 6, identified with disabilities/delays are eligible for up to three years of ECS programming depending upon age, severity of disability/delay and its impact on the child's ability to function within an ECS environment. Funding is also available for children at least 3 ½ with mild to moderate disabilities and those who are gifted and talented. In 2007, Alberta Education introduced the Early Learners: English as a Second Language (ESL)/Francisation Programming for ECS to provide additional funds to help build language skills for children as young as 3 ½ years of age. ECS programs are delivered by school jurisdictions or an accredited private ECS operator such as HeadStart.

Alberta Advanced Education and Technology's (AAET) Parent-Child Literacy Strategy recognizes the important role that parents play as first teachers of their children. The strategy supports inter-generational family literacy programming for disadvantaged parents who have children up to age 6. Part-time programs are offered by community groups to increase the confidence and skills of parents to engage in early learning and literacy activities with their children, and to encourage parents to continue their own literacy learning.

Public education is provided free of charge to all Canadian citizens and permanent residents under 20 years of age until the end of secondary school. In Alberta, students are legally required to attend school from ages 6 to 16.

Alberta spends about \$30 million on the Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) learning system for each day that students are in school. Our public education system includes public, separate, francophone and charter schools, as well as alternative programs and virtual programs offered by school boards, and home education. Public and separate school boards operate the basic education system in the province — the universal system accessible to everyone. Separate school boards administer Roman Catholic and Protestant separate schools.

Alberta's curriculum is developed to ensure that it meets the needs of Alberta students, now and in the future. Alberta Education is developing a Literacy Action Plan to further enhance student achievement. The action plan will provide a contemporary definition of literacy in the Alberta context, guiding principles, goals and strategies to support educators in providing Alberta students with the strategic literacy instruction they need

for life long learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Alberta Education has produced a document entitled *Supporting the Literacy Learner: Promising Literacy Strategies in Alberta* to showcase 12 Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) projects from Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 that demonstrate promising literacy strategies for classroom implementation.

When students reach 20 and wish to further their secondary schooling, they are responsible for paying for their tuition, books and supplies, unless the individual qualifies for funding through Alberta Employment and Immigration funded programs.

The ministries of Alberta Advanced Education and Technology (AAET) and Alberta Employment and Immigration (AEI) share the responsibilities for publicly supported foundational learning for adults (equivalent to high school completion or IALSS levels 1 to 3).

Alberta Employment and Immigration provides full-time and part-time training programs for eligible adult Albertans so they can pursue further job-related training and/or find a job and substantially improve their employment opportunities. Eligible clients may receive financial assistance in the form of grants to cover tuition, books, supplies and income support. They may also receive health benefits.

In 2006/07, 19,360 clients received full-time training from about 100 public (Comprehensive Community Institutions, other post-secondary institutions and school boards) and private training providers. AEI provided over \$97 million for tuition, books, supplies and income support to increase employability, employment, and readiness for further training. Generally, eligible learners must be at least 18 years old and not have attended an education program under the School Act for 12 consecutive months. Training includes classroom-based programs (grades 1 to 9; Life Skills/Personal Management; or College Preparation Programs; ESL; or Academic Upgrading) or Integrated Training (a skill-based training program that combines job-related skills, work experience, employability and/or essential skills, and academic related and/or ESL training).

In 2006/07, AEI provided over \$3.5 million to over 3,200 clients for part-time training. Support is provided through two bursaries: the Skills Investment Bursary (up to \$1200 per semester to a maximum of \$3,600 for one calendar year for tuition, books, child care and transportation costs) and the Part-Time Bursary (up to \$300 per semester to a maximum of \$900 for one calendar year). In September 2007, the Skills Investment Bursary was increased to \$5,000 per year.

Across Canada, assisting adults to read and write is rooted in volunteerism and voluntary sector organizations. AAET supports a province-wide network of over 80 Community Adult Learning Councils, 72 volunteer tutor adult literacy and 50 family literacy programs which are mandated to provide adults with locally available tuition-free or low cost learning for personal, further learning, or employment purposes. These programs have the ability to reach learners where they are geographically and with respect to literacy level. Adults can be matched with a volunteer tutor, attend a part-time class, or participate in a family literacy program.

In 2006, 2,000 adults were matched with a volunteer tutor who assisted them with basic reading, writing and/or math. On average, these learners received 32.5 hours of tutoring. Almost half of these adults were between the ages of 18 and 35, with the majority seeking to improve their literacy skills for personal reasons. Community Adult Learning Councils offered 295 part-time adult basic literacy courses to 4,950 registrants and 454 English as a second language (ESL) courses to 5,887 registrants. About 6,800 parents (with their children) participated in family literacy programs. The community learning system receives about \$10 million annually, a portion of which is focused specifically on literacy programming.

Alberta Advanced Education and Technology mandates eleven Comprehensive Community Institutions<sup>xii</sup> to provide employment preparation, and foundational skills programs. An estimated \$65 million in operating grants support these programs. The Inmate Education Program provides an additional \$2.5 million to post-secondary institutions to deliver literacy, numeracy, social skill development, employability skills, academic upgrading, and skill training programs to adult offenders in the Alberta correctional system.

## Alberta Government Literacy Programs

<b>LIFE STAGE</b>				
<b>Preschool</b>	Early Childhood Services (ECS) – for children as young as age 2 ½ for severe disability/delay, mild to moderate disability/delay, gifted and talented, ESL and Franciscation Education – School Jurisdictions and Private ECS Operators			
<b>Inter-Generational Adult + Preschool</b>	Parent-Child Literacy Strategy Part-time programs for disadvantaged parents with children up to age 6. AAET – Aboriginal organizations, Community Adult Learning Councils, Community Groups, Post-Secondary, public libraries			
<b>Children and Youth</b>	Basic education to age 20 Kindergarten, Grades 1-12 A range of additional assessment, programs, learning resources, professional and paraprofessional assistance available to address the diverse learning needs of students Education –Public, Separate and Francophone School Jurisdictions, charter schools, alternative, virtual and home schooling			
<b>Working Age Adults</b>	<b>For personal, further learning or employment purposes</b> Community Learning Programming Free tutor or low-tuition part-time classroom programs for adults.  Inmate Education Program supports literacy and other learning for offenders in Alberta's correctional facilities.  AAET – Community Adult Learning Councils, Community Groups, Post-Secondary Institutions, public libraries	<b>For personal, further learning or employment purposes</b>  Alberta Distance Education Tuition-based high school courses offered by Education. Tuition may be covered by AEI for eligible low-income adults.	<b>Primarily for employment</b> Support for full or part-time programming up to academic upgrading/college preparation in public or private institutions for eligible low-income adults out of K-12 for 12 months. May provide tuition, text books, transportation and income support for eligible adult and dependents. AEI – school jurisdictions, public institutions, private trainers  AEI - Specific programs/supports for groups such as youth, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples	<b>For employment</b>  Integrated vocational training for eligible adults. May provide tuition, text books, transportation and income support for eligible adult and dependents. Primary purpose is employment. AEI – school jurisdictions, public institutions, private trainers
		Tuition-based programming offered by high schools or post-secondary institutions. Tuition and other supports may be covered by AEI for eligible low-income adults.		<b>Workplace programming</b> for small and medium-sized employers AEI – workplace trainers and employers
<b>Seniors</b>	Community Learning Programming (as above) Includes specific programming for Seniors			

Alberta Advanced Education and Technology (AAET), Alberta Education, and Alberta Employment and Immigration (AEI)

## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> McCain and Mustard, *Reversing the Real Brain Drain*, 1999.

<sup>ii</sup> Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Statistics Canada, *Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Literacy and Skills Survey*, 2005, p. 42-43.

<sup>iii</sup> Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Statistics Canada, *Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Literacy and Skills Survey*, 2005, p. 112.

<sup>iv</sup> Harvey Krahn and Graham Lowe, *Literacy Utilization in Canadian Workplaces*, 1998.

<sup>v</sup> C.D. Howe Institute, Commentary, October 2005, *Public Investment in Skills: Are Canadian Governments Doing Enough?*

<sup>vi</sup> Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry, 2007, Jan Reurink (PowerPoint: *Productivity, What is it, how is it measured, and how does Alberta Perform?*)

<sup>vii</sup> Conference Board of Canada, 2005, "Learning and Development Outlook 2005: *Moving Beyond the Plateau – Time to Leverage Learning Investment*, quoted in TD Economics Special Report, May 23, 2006; see [http://www.td.com/economics/special/sl0506\\_prod.pdf](http://www.td.com/economics/special/sl0506_prod.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> Conference Board of Canada, March 2005, *Shaping Performance at BHP Billiton Diamonds Inc.*

<sup>ix</sup> Conference Board of Canada, December 2005, *Diavik's Workplace Learning Centre: A Literacy Gem that is Creating Opportunities and Enhancing Workers' Lives.*

<sup>x</sup> Conference Board of Canada, October 2005, *Elmsdale Lumber: At the Cutting Edge of Workplace Education.*

<sup>xi</sup> Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Statistics Canada, *Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Literacy and Skills Survey*, 2005, p. 91-96.

<sup>xii</sup> Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, *The Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta's Publicly Funded Advanced Education System* (November 2006) identified 11 Comprehensive Community Institutions.