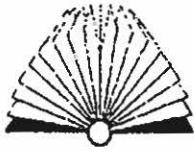


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**NWT Literacy Council**

**Box 761, Yellowknife, NT X1A 2N6**

May 25, 2000

Mr. Michael Miltenberger  
 Chairperson,  
 Standing Committee on Social Programs  
 Legislative Assembly  
 GNWT  
 Box 1320  
 Yellowknife, NT X1A 2L9

Dear Mr. Miltenberger,

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with the Standing Committee on Social programs next week.

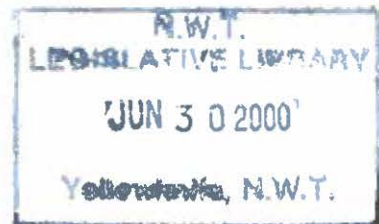
Attached is a paper prepared for our presentation to the Standing Committee that provides an overview of the impact of literacy on a range of public policy areas. It also provides a snapshot of some of the adult literacy statistics in the NWT, the current funding picture and some recommendations. This paper will also be distributed to members of Cabinet and the regular MLA's.

Please contact me if you require any additional information or have any questions.

Sincerely,

Cate Sills  
 Executive Director

c: Dave Inch



## Making the Case for Literacy

### Defining Literacy

We live in an information-based society, which demands increasingly sophisticated literacy skills. Literacy is no longer defined by the basic ability to read, but rather, how people use written information to function in society. This changes our assumptions about literacy and its links to broader social, economic and political issues.

Statistics Canada recently released a report called *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society*. Here are some of the findings:

- Literacy is strongly associated with economic life chances and well-being.
- Literacy affects employment stability, unemployment and income.
- There is a large "wage premium" for workers with high literacy skills and a corresponding income penalty for those with lower skills.
- Literacy is not simply the results of schooling. Literacy skills can be lost after leaving school if they are not used regularly at work and at home.
- Canadians use their literacy skills more in the workplace than at home.
- People on social assistance have lower than average literacy skills, which makes finding jobs and stable employment more difficult.
- Low literacy skills are found not just among marginalized groups, but among significant proportions of the adult populations surveyed. Many people do not recognize they have a literacy problem.
- In Canada, a significant number of people are excluded from adult education and training programs due to low literacy skills.

Literacy is critical to supporting citizen participation in the social and economic life of the NWT. Literacy is important for communication and in making informed decisions. It is a necessary ingredient for active citizenship and community participation. It also makes significant contributions to the economy in terms of higher employment, income and increased productivity. It has strong links to social development in terms of reduced poverty, unemployment, public assistance and crime; and improved health and child-rearing practices.

We have a literacy problem in the NWT, one that limits a significant number of citizens from active participation in the economic, social and political life of their communities. It is important for the government to consider literacy development in as broad a public policy context as possible. Literacy is not a one-dimensional issue. We need to develop a comprehensive strategy for literacy development that cuts across government departmental policy areas. This strategy must:

- Broaden our understanding of literacy as an important element of economic productivity and labour market participation, of health and well-being and of social cohesion.
- Promote inter-departmental policy and programming solutions.
- Promote an understanding that literacy is everyone's concern and requires support from public and aboriginal governments, employers, social agencies, communities and families.
- Make a commitment to reducing inequalities and ensure that there is access to high quality literacy programs and these programs are adequately resourced.

One of the biggest challenges is achieving effective partnerships across a number of government policy areas. The following is a snapshot of some of the broader policy areas within government and their links to literacy.

### **Literacy and Families**

The current emphasis on "child welfare" and "child poverty" should not obscure the fact that children live in and are dependent upon families. Family poverty means child poverty. Families at-risk result in children at-risk. Family success contributes to children's success and to the success of our communities.

Current research tells us that early experiences help to determine brain structure. That structure shapes the way people learn, think, behave and respond to challenges for the rest of their lives. Adult interaction with a child during this sensitive early period influences language development, thinking, behavior, social interactions and how well children cope with the school system.

Parental education and support must begin before childbirth and continue throughout their child's school years. All parents want the best for their children and will do what they believe to be in their child's best interest. Parents need to know, and want to know, how their children develop and what they can do at each phase to nurture positive growth. All parents can be effectively involved in the education of their children, regardless of family circumstance.

It is well documented that parents' educational levels, particularly mothers', are strongly linked to children's health, school readiness and school achievement. This correlation implicates a range of complex social issues – socio-economic circumstances, accessibility of information and resources; adequate support systems – that must be addressed. These interrelated needs require an innovative response that crosses traditional sectoral boundaries, addresses the family as a whole and maximizes available resources.

Self-concept, social development, cognitive development and reading all begin in families through listening and talking; singing, laughing and playing games; telling and reading stories; asking and answering questions; drawing pictures and writing; stimulating imagination through play and books; connecting language to the world the child knows and sharing new experiences to make that world a little larger. A supportive environment and different opportunities for using literacy are more important to reading development than is acquiring a set of skills; learning to read takes place on a daily basis as part of everyday life.

Parents are the prime nurturers and first teachers of the next generation, and deserve all the support and resources that society can muster. Their powerful and challenging role is critical to the well-being of the Northwest Territories as whole. Literacy programs that support parents are critical components of any strategy aimed at helping at-risk children.

### **Potential Strategies**

- Include family literacy as part of the broader family support policies and programs;



### Literacy and Community

The strength and success of families is built upon the strengths and successes of its individual members. In the same way, the strength, success and future direction of NWT communities depends upon the strengths and successes of its individual members and families.

*Literacy skills not only contribute to the success or failure of labour markets, they are also the threads of a nation's social and cultural fabric. A critical element of social cohesion, literacy helps people maintain their independence and quality of life and participate actively in society. (International Adult Literacy Survey, 1996)*

*Literacy helps people manage conflict, respect diversity in society and work with others. On a society-wide scale, the denial of education harms the cause of democracy and social progress...(The State of the World's Children 1999, UNICEF)*

Self-government, land claims and constitutional development will have an impact on all Northerners. Strong literacy skills are essential for informed and active citizen participation and decision making.

#### Potential Strategies:

- ensure that public information from all levels of government is written in plain language and is easily accessible;
- recognize literacy as a community development issue;
- provide adequate funding for communities to support local literacy programs;

### Literacy and Schools

Parents and family members are children's first teachers and educators' greatest allies in developing positive attitudes towards learning. Families lay the foundation for reading and learning long before children enter school. Schools build on that foundation.

Parents aren't always aware of the strong influence they have on their children's literacy development and attitudes toward learning. This influence, although particularly critical in the first few years of life, continues to play an important role throughout a child's formal education.

Parents whose own literacy levels are limited may need help in supporting their children's learning. There is compelling evidence to argue that one of the most important ways to improve education for children in the schools is to provide more and better education for their parents and to help parents fully participate in the education of their children. In fact, one of the most significant predictors of school success is having a mother or primary caregiver who completed high school.

A significant number of teenagers who become mothers and fathers, either after dropping out of school or while still enrolled in school, present an urgent challenge for our communities. School-based, community supported literacy programs that provide on-site education and support for parents and children could help meet this challenge.

**Potential Strategies**

- support the development of parent’s literacy skills through family literacy programs;
- provide resources to school districts to develop outreach programs that support parental involvement in schools and their children’s education;

**Literacy and Adult Education**

Student-centred, participatory approaches to adult education have been shown to be more effective than traditional teacher-centred approaches, which often tend to replicate a system that has already failed many adult learners. Participatory approaches focus on developing literacy skills in a context that is meaningful to people’s lives and using literacy in supporting personal choice and empowerment.

Access to education, training and support services is decreasing for those with limited literacy skills and other training and employment barriers. The focus is on short-term training that may not adequately address the practical life and job readiness skills, literacy and basic education needs of many participants. Without appropriate attention to literacy skill development within skills training programs, people will be set up for failure either in the program itself or on the job.

Many of the smaller NWT communities do not have access to on-going adult basic education programming. Programs that are delivered in the smaller communities, either through the public college or community-based groups, rely on project-based funding such as the now-defunct Community Skills for Work program. It is unclear how literacy programs will be funded in the future.

This type of unstable, short-term funding for literacy programming creates unequal access between communities – those fortunate enough to have base-funded services and those who must seek out increasingly smaller amounts of funding to provide the services required.

**Potential Strategies**

- ensure equitable access to literacy programs and services across the NWT;
- make a meaningful investment in literacy programs and services;
- ensure that employment-related training addresses the literacy needs of the participants;

**Literacy and Health**

*Literacy is a major factor underlying most other determinants of health. However health is defined or measured, people with limited literacy skills are worse off than others with higher literacy skills. (Perin, Health Canada, 1998)*

*Illiteracy has an impact on health even greater than that of income or nutrition. (World Bank, 1980)*

- Research indicates that the education level of parents, particularly the mother, is the most reliable indicator of family health.

- There is a clear link between low literacy skills and health risks. Substantial evidence links low literacy levels to a wide range of harmful lifestyle practices, including smoking, poor nutrition, infrequent physical activity, abuse of alcohol and drugs during pregnancy, less prevalence of breast feeding, and infrequent physical examinations and screenings.
- Low literacy limits education and employment opportunities, access to information and resources, and control over one's life. This in turn can lead to poverty, lowered self-esteem, poor life-style choices, and increased stress levels. All of these factors have a major negative impact on health status.
- Health Canada has determined a complex range of factors that affect our health, both directly and indirectly, throughout our lifetime. These influences, or "determinants of health" include things like our genetic makeup, culture, gender, physical and social environments, health services, social support networks, healthy child development, education, employment, working conditions, income and social status, personal health practices and coping skills

**Potential Strategies**

- recognize literacy as a public health issue;
- ensure that all health information from is written in plain language and is easily accessible;

**Literacy and the Economy**

In recent years, adult literacy has come to be seen as crucial to the economic performance of industrialized countries. Literacy is no longer defined by the basic ability to read, but rather, how people use written information to function in society. Today, adults need a higher level of literacy to function well in the workplace. The workplace has become more complex and low-skill jobs are disappearing. As the structure of the workforce changes, as the demands of technology increase and as economies shift, investments in people have become critical.

In the NWT, there is considerable focus on economic development, particularly within the mining and oil and gas sectors. There are signs that a skills gap exists between the needs of employers and the ability of people to take advantage of the employment opportunities available. Much of the gap can be attributed to low literacy skills.

The Government of the NWT has recently developed a framework for its work over the next four years, called "Towards a Better Tomorrow". In it, the government has outlined a broad vision that includes resource development and improved economic and social benefits for Northerners. Without a long-term commitment to literacy skill development as part of an economic and social development strategy, a large number of Northerners will be unable to take full advantage of the opportunities. Employment development, including literacy, is the responsibility of government.

**Potential Strategies**

- Develop a multi-sectoral approach to workplace literacy development that includes business, labour, governments and literacy providers.



### Literacy and Justice

The majority of people in our prison system have lower literacy skills than the general population. According to statistics from the Yellowknife Correctional Centre, the average educational level of newly admitted offenders is Grade 6.

Investing in literacy is an effective crime prevention strategy. According to the National Associations Active in Criminal Justice, literacy programs can help get a t factors, such as poverty, unemployment, isolation and low self-esteem, that can lead to crime.

### Potential Strategies

- Identify effective approaches to support literacy programs aimed at at-risk youth and ex-offenders;
- Ensure that low literacy skills do not serve as a barrier to equal access to justice.

### What is the Literacy Situation in the NWT?

We do not have a clear picture of literacy rates in the NWT. National literacy surveys have never included the NWT, Nunavut or Yukon. We therefore rely on school completion rates as a proxy for literacy acquisition.

In the NWT, the rate of illiteracy is defined by having less than a Grade 9 education. Statistical information available through the 1999 Labour Force Survey indicates that 3,791 people or 13% of the population 15 years old and over have less than a grade 9 education. 19% or 5,639 people do not have a high school diploma.

On the surface, the NWT rates compare closely to the national average (although they are measured differently). However, amongst the Aboriginal population of the NWT, the literacy rate is significantly lower. 26% of the Aboriginal population 15 years and older has less than a grade 9 education and 29% do not have a high school diploma.

Highest Grade Completed Of the Population 15 & Over  
Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal People NWT, 1999

	Aboriginal	Percentage	Non-Aboriginal	Percentage
Grade 9 or less	3,453	25.6%	338	2.1%
High School, no diploma	3,919	29.0%	1,719	10.7%
High School Diploma	1,587	11.7%	4,202	26.3%
Other Certificate or Diploma	3,918	29.0%	5,670	35.4%
University Degree	237	1.8%	3,891	24.3%

Source: NWT Bureau of statistics, 1999 Labour Force Survey

**Employment and Literacy Levels**

Employment and income are directly related to a person's level of education. Fewer than 30% of those with a Grade 9 or less are employed. This rate rises to over 75% for those with a High School diploma and over 90% for those with a university degree. (Labour Force Survey, 1999)

**Employment Income and Literacy Levels**

Employment income also increases substantially with levels of education. A person with a Grade 12 diploma earns on average more than twice that of someone with a Grade 9 or less education (\$29,000 compared to \$14,000). Average income increases with every level of education to an average of \$50,000 for those with a university degree. (Towards Excellence, 1999)

**High School Graduation**

Equally alarming is the high drop out rate of youth from formal schooling. In 1997, the graduation rate was 27%, well below the national average of 68%. Dene students showed a graduation rate of 18% and the graduation rate for Metis students was 21%. The graduation rate for Non-Aboriginal students was 50%. (Towards Excellence, 1999)

**Funding for literacy**

Funding for literacy is available through the following programs:

- The Community Literacy Projects fund has a total budget of \$140,000 per year. The funding is allocated on an equal basis to the regions (approximately \$40,000 per region) for community projects.
- The National Literacy Secretariat, through a cost-shared arrangement provides \$125,000 to Aurora College for the delivery of literacy programs and services.
- As well, the Department of ECE provides base funding to Aurora College for the delivery of adult basic education 120 – 150. Total contributions to the college during the 1999 – 2000 fiscal year were approximately \$2.9 million. Only a portion of this funding supports lower level ABE at the community level.

The total expenditure for literacy and adult basic education in the NWT in 1999 was approximately \$3.7 million. In this fiscal year, the investment in literacy programming will be less with the cancellation of the Community Skills for Work program, which provided funding for programs for people on Income Support.

The government's investment must be viewed in the context of the Department of ECE's total budget of \$103,213,000. The Department of ECE spends less than 4% of its total budget on ABE and literacy, even though we know the most significant barrier to employment in the NWT is low literacy skills.

41% of those who are unemployed have a grade nine education or less. Last year, payments in Income Support totaled \$18.3 million dollars, while a total expenditure of \$825,000 was made available for programs for Income Support clients.

At least 25% of our adult population has a literacy problem and we are paying for this through additional income support costs, in health costs associated with low literacy, and



in the generational effect that a parent's low literacy level has on his or her child's progress in school and beyond.

#### **What can be Done?**

We have identified several recommendations for the government to consider:

1. **Recognize literacy development as a significant economic and social issue in the NWT and address it through the development of a government-wide literacy strategy. This strategy should include both policy and program development.**
2. **Make an on-going commitment to adequately fund and support literacy programs and services;**
3. **Support different approaches to literacy development that recognize the varying literacy needs in the NWT**
  - **family literacy** which focuses on supporting parents' literacy development so they in turn can support their children's learning and education.
  - **workplace literacy** which supports opportunities for employees to improve their reading, writing and problem-solving skills while on the job;
  - **employment readiness programs** that are adequately funded and supported by the various program support staff (Income Support Workers, instructors, Career Development Officers) and provide a holistic and integrated approach that includes literacy training, lifeskills and meaningful work experience.
  - **literacy issues of youth** - There are a large number of out of school youth who fall through the programming cracks. There is a need to provide learning opportunities for these youth that address both literacy development and meaningful work experience.
4. **Make a commitment to ensure all public information is written in plain, accessible language.**

<b>Percentage of Population 15 and over with less than a grade 9 – Rate of illiteracy by constituencies*</b>	
<b>% of population who are illiterate in Nunakput - 35%</b>	
• Tuktoyaktuk	33%
• Paulatuk	47%
• Sachs Harbour	21%
• Holman	40%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in Inuvik Boot Lake – 9%</b>	
• Inuvik	9%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in Inuvik Twin Lakes – 9%</b>	
• Inuvik	9%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in the Sahtu – 27%</b>	
• Norman Wells	3%
• Tulita	43%
• Fort Good Hope	27%
• Deline	45%
• Colville Lake	46%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in the Mackenzie Delta - 36%</b>	
• Tsiigehtchic	39%
• Fort McPherson	35%
• Aklavik	38%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in the North Slave – 40%</b>	
• Wekweti	72%
• Rae Lakes	52%
• Rae Edzo	32%
• Wha Ti	55%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in Nahendeh – 28%</b>	
• Wrigley	51%
• Trout Lake	19%
• Fort Liard	55%
• Fort Simpson	21%
• Nahanni Butte	62%
• Jean Marie River	52%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in Deh Cho – 38%</b>	
• Fort Providence	38%
• Kakisa	62%
• Enterprise	13%
• Hay River Reserve	39%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in Thebacha – 13%</b>	
• Fort Smith	13%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in Weledeh – 5%</b>	
• Yellowknife	5%
• Dettah	23%

<b>% of population who are illiterate in ALL OTHER YK RIDINGS - 5%</b>	
• Yellowknife	5%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in Hay River North - 11%</b>	
Hay River	11%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in Hay River South - 11%</b>	
• Hay River	11%
<b>% of population who are illiterate in Tu Nedeh - 33%</b>	
• Lutsel K'e	28%
• Fort Resolution	35%

\* In the NWT, illiteracy is defined as grade 9 or less.



