



## **Investing in Literacy and Essential Skills in Atlantic Canada**

Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance

Pre-Budget Consultations 2016-2017

Submitted by: PEI Literacy Alliance, Literacy Nova Scotia and Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick

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### **Executive Summary**

Atlantic Canada has some of the lowest literacy and essential skills levels in the country. In 2012, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) found that nearly half of the working-age population in Canada is ranked at less than Level 3, the level that workers in many Canadian occupations need for successful performance<sup>1</sup>. The percentages of working age adults ranked at Level 3 in Atlantic Canada are: 56% in NFLD, 54% in NB, 50% in NS and 46% in PEI<sup>2</sup>. Despite the obvious need for literacy and essential skills services, federal support for literacy coalitions who provide these services in Atlantic Canada ended in 2014.

An increasingly knowledge based economy demands that our population grow and adapt to an evolving society. The automation of traditional industries such as fisheries and aquaculture, forestry and agriculture has impacted these sectors and employers are facing labour shortages as they attempt to hire and retain employees with the appropriate skills. Through collaboration with governments, communities and businesses, Literacy Coalitions in the Atlantic region have a valuable role to play in enhancing literacy and life long learning. In order to ensure that Atlantic Canadians have the opportunity to participate fully at work, at home, and in their community, we must scale up our services and collaborate with others to strengthen the skills of our citizens. We have the skills and expertise to address the adverse impact that low literacy and essential skills levels has on our economy, civic engagement, health, crime rates and communities. We require stable funding from our Federal Government for our coalitions as we come together to form the Atlantic Partnership for Essential Skills and to sustain and grow our much needed programs and services.

### **Brief History**

Since their inception in 1986, the Canadian network of literacy coalitions had been funded by the Federal Government with project funding. In 2010 until 2014, the federal government invested with core funding to:

- Build knowledge and expertise
- Develop and sustain partnerships and networks

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<sup>1</sup> SRDC - UPSKILL: A Creditable Test of Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills Training

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada, ESDC and CMEC - Skills in Canada: First Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

- Broker tools, supports and best practices
- Maintain a sound organization

Literacy coalitions in the Atlantic provinces have played a leadership role in developing effective literacy programs and supports that created a positive and lasting impact in the lives of many Atlantic Canadians. The Atlantic coalitions were part of a larger network of provincial, territorial and national coalitions throughout Canada. Since the withdrawal of Federal support in June 2014, only 9 of the 15 coalitions are still operational, despite the fact that literacy levels across Canada remain low. According to PIAAC in 2012, 49% of Canadians ranked below Level 3 for literacy proficiencies and 55% ranked below Level 3 for numeracy proficiencies<sup>3</sup> – the pre-existing conditions required to capitalize on opportunities. The remaining coalitions have been faced with the challenge of providing much needed literacy and essential skills services to Canadians with limited resources and an ever-shrinking network of partners across the country.

### **Making Real Change Happen**

We are encouraged by the commitments made by our new Federal Government in the Speech from the Throne in December 2015. These commitments are listed below along with the significant impact literacy and essential skills training and supports in Canada could have on realizing them.

- ***the Government believes that all Canadians should have a real and fair chance to succeed.*** Literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills are key to the ability to fully participate in opportunities and to succeed in society - whether as citizens, family members, consumers, or employees. These skills provide a foundation for the development of other, higher-order cognitive skills, and are prerequisites for gaining access to, and understanding of, specific domains of knowledge. In addition, they are necessary in a broad range of contexts, from education, to work, to everyday life.

Adults with higher proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments tend to have better outcomes in the labour market than their less-proficient peers. They have greater chances of being employed and, if employed, of earning higher wages. Those with low literacy skills are more than twice as likely to be unemployed.<sup>4</sup>

An investment in a skilled and engaged population will result in a more proactive and sustainable social infrastructure. A 1% increase in literacy and essential skills in Canada would create a workforce that is 2.5% more productive. That would increase Canada's GDP by 1.5% or \$18 billion year after year. This return is 3 times higher than investing in equipment.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Statistics Canada, ESDC and CMEC - Skills in Canada: First Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

<sup>4</sup>OECD -Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills

<sup>5</sup>The Essential Skills Group Inc. - <http://www.essentialskillsgroup.com>

Although employment is important, it should not be the only emphasis. Literacy must be valued and supported for its positive impact on health and wellness, democracy and civic engagement, inclusion, families and communities. It strengthens our communities and makes them safer, more prosperous places to live. Proficiency in information-processing skills is positively associated with many aspects of individual well-being, notably health, beliefs about one's impact on the political process, trust in others, and participation in volunteer or associative activities.

Adults at lower levels of proficiency in literacy are more likely than those at high levels to report poor health, that they have little impact on the political process, and that they do not participate in associative or volunteer activities. Individuals with lower proficiency are also more likely than those with higher proficiency to report less trust in others.<sup>6</sup>

- ***the Government's agenda reflects that Canada's strength is its diversity.***

While Atlantic Canada is experiencing a population decline, First Nations communities in the region are experiencing rapid population growth. As such, First Nations communities are experiencing unique challenges in meeting the needs of community members. First Nations communities are important stakeholders in our programs and supports. Access to quality and culturally relevant education and community-based literacy and essential skills training will allow First Nations communities to become more sustainable.

We have an aggressive immigration policy and must ensure that supports are in place to facilitate immigrants to build successful lives. According to PIAAC in 2012, 62% of recent and established immigrants to Canadians ranked below Level 3 for literacy proficiencies.<sup>7</sup> Providing literacy and essential skills resources is key to an effective retention strategy and helping immigrants adapt to new lives.

## **Going Forward**

As small organizations, we recognize the importance of working together to build our capacity to serve those in need. The remaining Atlantic literacy coalitions have loosely formed the Atlantic Partnership for Essential Skills with the recent coming together of the Executive Directors and Board Chairs of the Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick, Literacy Nova Scotia and the PEI Literacy Alliance, as well as representatives of the NS Department of Labour and Advanced Education and PEI Department of Workforce and Advanced Learning. Since Literacy Newfoundland closed its doors last year, we will be looking for a partner organization in Newfoundland as we move forward. Literacy coalitions in the north, NWT Literacy Council, Yukon Literacy Coalition and Nunavut Literacy Council have also formed a similar

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<sup>6</sup> OECD, ESDC and CMEC – Skills Matter: Further Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada, ESDC and CMEC - Skills in Canada: First Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies



partnership, the Northern Alliance for Literacy and Essential Skills, and are keen to continue working with us in the Atlantic region. We know that our counterparts in BC, Quebec and Saskatchewan are also eager to continue to partner with us as we work on the issue of low literacy and essential skills in Canada.

We all have an important role to play in collaboration with governments, communities and businesses in supporting lifelong learning and adult literacy. We are on the front line battling low literacy in Canada - this problem needs to be funded to a similar extent as other battles against sickness, addictions, terrorism and other threats to the economic well being and prosperity of the country.

In Atlantic Canada, our coalitions have the skills and expertise to address the adverse impact that low literacy and essential skills levels has on our economy, civic engagement, health, crime rates and communities. We provide literacy and essential skills services for all of our community members:

- In PEI, we work toward advancing literacy and essential skills for all Islanders. We promote literacy and essential skills in the home, community and workplace Island-wide. We support professionals in the literacy field and conduct research and work with our local government to identify gaps in literacy services. We deliver programs and services that support adult learners, families, and children such as the Summer Tutoring Program for Kids which has successfully provided tutoring services to 10,894 elementary school children over the past 15 years and our Adult Learner Program which has provided over \$136,000 in bursaries to adult learners returning to school.
- In Nova Scotia, we ensure all have access to quality literacy, essential skills and lifelong learning opportunities through certification and professional development for practitioners, financial supports to learners, providing enhanced learning opportunities and supporting over 30 community learning organizations. Since 2010, 1908 practitioners received training; 42 learners received \$33,000 in financial aid and 621 participated in LNS training sessions; and 137 grants of \$320,269 in addition to 329 computers were distributed to 93 organizations.
- In New Brunswick, the Literacy Coalition provides continued leadership and support to enhance literacy and essential skills through training workshops, the development and distribution of resources and through fundraising, which is allocated to 20 community-based literacy organizations province-wide as well as support to enhance early literacy through family literacy initiatives and working with early learning and childhood centres.

The much needed literacy and essential skills programs and services are in jeopardy. We continue to have the support of our Provincial governments, communities, and businesses. However, in Atlantic Canada we are facing complex challenges which require stronger partnerships between all sectors and all levels of government. In order to meet these challenges and ensure our citizens have the opportunity to participate, we must scale up our services and collaborate with others to strengthen the skills of Atlantic Canadians.



### **Recommendation**

Atlantic Literacy Coalitions need adequate and stable funding in order to build on our existing expertise, scale up our services, and together as the Atlantic Partnership for Essential Skills, strengthen the skills of our citizens. We recommend that the 2017 Federal budget include an annual commitment of \$600,000 for each of the next 4 years by the Federal government to invest in literacy and essential skills programs and services for Atlantic Canadians, with a commitment to increase this amount as our programs continue to show success.

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