

Manitoba Adult Literacy Strategy Consultation

June 16, 2008

Submission by:

Manitoba Library Association

Endorsed by: Manitoba Library Consortium

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Introduction

The Province of Manitoba's Adult Literacy Act recognizes the vital importance of literacy, both to our province's continued economic growth and its increased social stability. In seeking community input for the Manitoba Adult Literacy Strategy, this consultation process recognizes the wisdom of gathering the collected expertise of adult learners, adult literacy practitioners, libraries and other organizations and institutions that comprise and support the adult literacy landscape in Manitoba.

The Manitoba Library Association asserts that libraries have played, and can continue a foundational role in support of adult learners and adult literacy practitioners. This role is manifest in three main areas: libraries compliment and strengthen the overall investment being made in adult literacy programs by providing access to an existing infrastructure of collections, services, programs and physical space; libraries provide the resources and services that support individuals' lifelong learning needs, including intergenerational learning; and, finally, libraries, and in particular, public libraries, provide socially inclusive environments in which individuals can fully engage with learning and literacy.

Libraries Augment Value for Money

Libraries add value to adult literacy programs by providing access to a range of collections, services and programs, and physical space. This infrastructure is of benefit to adult learners both during their time spent in a formal literacy program and beyond the completion of their formal study. It is to the advantage of adult literacy programs that they fully utilize libraries' existing infrastructure, through both informal practices and formal partnerships. Such partnerships are particularly of benefit in rural areas where

literacy rates are demonstratively lower¹ (Literacy Matters, p.10) and where there are fewer resources than in urban centres.

Collections

Libraries can and do function as important partners with literacy programs by providing easily accessible locations, as well as collections for learners and practitioners which are free and well managed. These collections include both print and electronic resources such as workbooks, grammar instruction resources and literature in plain language for learners, as well guidebooks, toolkits and pedagogical literature for instructors. These resources are housed in public libraries, but can also be found in other libraries, particularly in universities with education programs and at the provincially funded Instructional Resource Unit (IRU).

Libraries can, and do, play a complementary and supportive role to literacy organizations that can enable those programs to focus their finite resources on aspects of services delivery other than materials acquisition. For example, the 2007-2008 acquisitions budget of the IRU is in excess of \$167, 000. Additionally, Winnipeg Public Library has recently been successful in obtaining a grant of \$27, 500 which the Library is matching. These funds will be spent on resources for adult learners, as well those for English-as-an-Additional Language (EAL) learners.

In addition to literacy collections, libraries are vital access points for electronic and internet resources. According to a study regarding the value of public libraries in Canada, library patrons place a high value on access to the internet and subscription

¹ Craig Alexander, *Literacy Matters: A call for action* (TD Bank Financial Group, n.d.), 10. http://www.td.com/corporateresponsibility/community/literacy_matters.pdf (accessed June 8, 2008)

based electronic collections and databases.² These electronic resources contain everything from magazine and newspaper articles to language learning programs. The information contained in these resources – including authentic learning materials – can be used to support quality literacy instruction.

Rural libraries, as much as those in urban centres, are currently providing resources to literacy programs. The *Programs Using Lifelong Skills in Education* in Minnedosa benefit from their local library's children's and audio visual collections in support of their family literacy programs. Similarly the *Portage Learning and Literacy Centre* has identified some of their local library's electronic resources as being of particular benefit for their EAL students.

Services and Programs

Expertly trained library staff provide services such as the purchasing and cataloguing of materials and the development of finding aids provided both electronically and in person. These services further extend the value of libraries' collections, making them accessible to as broad an audience as possible. Library staff also provide instructional expertise related to the use of technology. This service ranges from basic computer instruction to information search techniques for both the internet and the numerous subscription-based electronic resources made freely available by many libraries.

Other programs provided by public libraries cover a wide range of topics, from instructional to more leisure-based offerings. Some programs such as the English

² Leslie Fitch and Jody Warner, *Dividends: The Value of Public Libraries in Canada* (Toronto: Book and Periodical Council, 1997), 27. <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/dividend/contents.htm> (accessed June 8, 2008).

Conversation Circles hosted by Winnipeg Public Library are targeted to adults (in this case EAL) learners; others such as searching for health information on the internet are simply excellent opportunities for adult learners to engage with new information in a welcoming environment and at no cost. Public libraries also offer tours and basic introduction to library use for any number of adult literacy and EAL groups.

The value to adult learners of libraries' provision of free access to technology and the internet cannot be understated. Public libraries are recognized as valued partners in the provision of internet access as demonstrated by the fact that in Manitoba over one-fifth of the federally-funded Community Access Program (CAP) sites are located in public libraries (51 of 237 sites).³ Through their association with programs such as CAP, and through their own spending on new technologies libraries play a key role in mitigating Manitoba's digital divide, providing access to individuals that may otherwise find themselves locked out of the educational and economic opportunities available through the internet and other electronic applications.

As adult learners proceed through their levels of formal education their use of technology and the information found on the internet become increasingly important. For adult learners who have completed their education, access to technology continues to be integral to their successes, particularly with respect to their employment search efforts.

Physical Space

The physical space offered by libraries to non-profit organizations can serve as a valuable asset to literacy programs that require locations to hold their classes and other instruction. Libraries also provide study space to individuals on an informal basis. There

³ Industry Canada. "Manitoba," in *Welcome* [Community Access Program homepage], (2008), <http://cap.ic.gc.ca/pub/index.html> (accessed June 8, 2008).

are at least 135 public libraries located throughout Manitoba and over 25 libraries situated in post-secondary institutions, representing a significant capital investment to be utilized by literacy programs and the individuals they serve. In particular, public libraries provide access to meeting rooms, seminar and tutorial spaces, and instructional computer labs at little to no cost. Adult literacy organizations such as the *Interlake Adult Learning Association* in Gimli regularly benefit from access to free space provide by their local library. More than just places to read and study however, libraries today are civic centres in our communities – the living rooms of the community – and some of the few public spaces remaining where all are welcome.

Libraries Support Lifelong Learning

Where does an adult learner go after the successful completion of their program of study at an Adult Learning Centre or other organization? Where are they able to put the new literacy skills they have acquired to use, and, more importantly, expand upon those skills? Where can they find support for passing on the value of literacy to their children? Public libraries, and, to a lesser extent, those associated with post-secondary institutions, provide the means for adult learners to keep their literacy skills “fit” for life.⁴ One Ontario survey reported that 92% of respondents considered public libraries “ ‘either important or fairly important’ ” in supporting the educational pursuits of adults following the completion of formal schooling.⁵ As overwhelming an endorsement as this was a decade ago, the contribution libraries continue to make to lifelong learning is even more important now.

⁴ Manitoba Advanced Education and Literacy, *Adult Literacy in AManitoba. A Discussion Paper* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Advanced Education and Literacy, 2007), 2. http://www.gov.mb.ca/adultliteracystrategy/pdf/booklet_en.pdf (accessed June 8, 2008).

⁵ Fitch and Warner, *Dividends: The valued of public libraries in Canada*, 25.

The resources and services available at public libraries address the needs of individuals throughout their lifetime – from homework help, to job search assistance, to do-it-yourself guides, health research and materials for pleasure reading. These types of collections and services, along with libraries’ physical space are necessary supports for lifelong learning and the acquisition of advanced literacy skills, as well as for the transfer of those skills to new generations.

Supporting Lifelong Learning Through Collections

As outlined above, public libraries provide access to resources that serve adult learners during their time of formal education and as they go on to pursue lifelong learning. Individuals in municipalities that have a public library with services such as interlibrary loan are able to access a wide range of resources in a variety of formats to serve both their on-going educational and leisure needs. These resources are provided in most cases at no cost, making it possible for individuals to keep their literacy skills “fit” irrespective of economic capacity or geographic location.

Supporting Lifelong Learning Through Services

Beyond their collections, libraries offer a range of services to support lifelong learning. As previously discussed, these include both instructional and leisure programming, the expertise of professionals trained in the provision of information, and the availability of physical space in which to learn and study.

As essential as these offerings are currently they will become even more so as the shift towards a more service-based and knowledge-based economy continues to take place.⁶ The Canadian economy’s shift away from goods production requires a workforce with increasingly advanced literacy skills, so much so that keeping “fit” – or simply

⁶ Alexander, *Literacy Matters: A call to action*, 13.

retaining one's current level of literacy – is no longer all that is required for individuals' full economic participation. The literacy skills attained by adult learners will have to be continually improved and expanded upon throughout their life time.

The same can be said of the technological landscape and the related skills sets that it requires. Libraries provide access to both the physical infrastructure (i.e., computers, software, printers, etc.) and the instructional support and expertise required for individuals to make use of new technologies to their full benefit.

Lifelong Learning – The Next Generation

Public libraries also enable literacy skills and the value of lifelong learning to be passed on to new generations, often providing simultaneous reinforcement and promotion of adult literacy. Participation in family literacy programs offered at libraries – such as child and parent story times – serve to increase parents' participation in literacy-based programs and increase their own literacy skills, as well as contributing to their improved employment status.⁷ Family literacy programs, and the collections that support them, may not directly target adult learners but they do make vital contributions to the general advancement of literacy rates in Manitoba. Through their many years of providing these programs, public libraries have become sources of expertise in family literacy, particularly in the practice of engaging young children with literature and fostering a culture of learning within the family unit.

⁷ The Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills, *TOWARDS A FULLY LITERATE CANADA: Achieving National Goals through a Comprehensive Pan-Canadian Literacy Strategy* (Ottawa: Minister of State for Human Resources Development, 2005), 36. <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/towards/towards.pdf> (accessed June 8, 2008).

Socially Inclusive Institutions Support Social Participation

Libraries, and public libraries in particular, are recognized as socially inclusive public institutions where all are welcome. While libraries play a key role in supporting the literacy acquisition of adult learners, individuals also make use of libraries to increase their rates of social participation with respect to volunteerism, political participation and engagement other public institutions.

Increased literacy rates have been linked to higher levels of social participation. A study by the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States found that individuals with a “proficient” reading level volunteered at four times the rate of those whose reading level was “below basic,” and voted at rates over 30% higher. The same study found that “literary readers” were three times more likely to engage with museums, cultural events and the creation of original art; readers were also found to participate in sports and outdoor activities at higher levels.⁸ The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey made similar links with its finding that half of individuals with poor prose literacy were not engaged in volunteerism, nor did they participate in community organizations or other activities; this was in comparison with an eighty-percent participation rate among individuals with high prose literacy.⁹

Through their overall support of adult literacy, libraries can be said to play a key role in advancing individuals’ social participation generally. In addition, library collections can be accessed to increase individuals’ knowledge about their political and social environments, creating informed citizens better able to engage with their

⁸ National Endowment for the Arts, *To Read or Not To Read. A Questions of National Consequence. Executive Summary* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Art, 2007), 16-17. http://www.arts.endow.gov/research/ToRead_ExecSum.pdf (accessed June 8, 2008).

⁹ Alexander, *Literacy Matters: A call to action*, 14.

communities. Library services such as general education programs, author readings, film screenings and free concerts provide opportunities for individuals to learn in an atmosphere that is both economically accessible and socially inclusive.

Manitoba Library Association Responds: Discussion Questions

What literacy-related competencies are necessary for an individual's meaningful participation in Manitoba in the year 2016?

The Manitoba Library Association believes high levels of prose and document literacy, as well as numeracy, will be increasingly essential for individuals' meaningful participation in the economic and social life of Manitoba in the year 2016.

The Manitoba Library Association also believes that information literacy skills, information searching skills, and technological competency will be essential for individuals to thrive in what is increasingly an information-based society. Information literacy has been defined as "skill in finding the information one needs...[including] the skills required to critically evaluate information content and employ it effectively as well as an understanding of the technological infrastructure on which information transmission is based."¹⁰ As stated, libraries are ideally equipped to provide support not only for individuals' core literacy needs, but particularly for skills related to the retrieval and critical evaluation of information.

What are the best ways to raise the literacy levels of all Manitobans?

The Manitoba Library Association believes the best ways to raise the literacy levels of all Manitobans are to increase funding to the province's primary and secondary education programs and to simultaneously support a learning culture beyond the school system – a culture in which libraries play a central role.

¹⁰ Joan M. Reitz, "Information literacy," in *Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science*, (Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2007), <http://lu.com/odlis/search.cfm> (accessed June 11, 2008).

The Manitoba Library Association believes the most effective way to achieve the latter is through the horizontal integration of literacy as a priority throughout provincial government departments. An example of this would be to establish “Literacy Secretariats” within departments whose goal it would be to identify the literacy related goals or challenges associated with a department’s mandate and develop related policies and programs.

The Manitoba Library Association believes that libraries should be recognized as essential partners in raising the literacy levels of all Manitobans, and also believes that government departments, industry and non-governmental organizations should be encouraged to augment their literacy programs through partnerships with libraries.

What are the best ways to raise the literacy levels of those with the greatest literacy needs?

The Manitoba Library Association believes that improving the literacy levels of those with the greatest literacy needs requires strategies and practices that address all the needs of the individual (i.e., health, security, housing, etc.). Effective learning can only take place when all of an individual’s basic needs are being met. Recognition of this fact provides additional support for the above suggestion of integrating literacy as a priority across government departments.

In addition, constructing literacy and learning as pleasurable and social processes is an important part of supporting individuals with low literacy levels, ensuring that they continue to improve their literacy skills upon completion of their formal education. As outlined above, libraries are uniquely positioned to offer lifelong learning opportunities that encourage individuals to increase both their literacy levels and their rates of social participation.

What should be the key goals and components of an adult literacy strategy?

The Manitoba Library Association believes that an adult literacy strategy should have 2 main types of goals: first, the improvement of indicators that are relatively easy to measure and can be directly linked to improved literacy levels (e.g.s., literacy scores, secondary school completion rates, etc.); and second, the improvement of indicators that are associated with higher literacy and education levels (e.g.s., employment levels, crime rates, health levels, etc.).

The Manitoba Library Association believes that key components of an adult literacy strategy include the development of increasingly learner-centric curricula and programming, support for the expansion of adult literacy programs throughout the province and an acknowledgement of partnerships as a sound practice for the provision of adult literacy programs. Such partnerships should include libraries so that adult literacy programs benefit from access to extensive resource collections, services and physical space. Libraries are responsive to requests and input regarding their collections and services. Literacy programs should be encouraged – or even required – to establish formal communication mechanisms with their local library or library system in order to influence the collection and services from which they will benefit.

In a literacy strategy, what are the key roles for government, industry, individuals and communities?

The Manitoba Library Association believes that government's key role in a literacy strategy goes beyond the funding of literacy programs. Government must work to coordinate the efforts of all players in the literacy landscape, including other levels of government, service providers, industry, individuals and communities. The TD bank's

Literacy Matters paper states the importance of coordinating the efforts of federal and provincial governments,¹¹ but of equal importance is coordination between provincial departments, as well as between the provincial and municipal levels of government.

Such coordination would recognize the library resources funded by municipal and provincial departments. At the provincial level this includes the public libraries funded by Culture, Heritage, Tourism and Sport, the academic libraries funded by Advanced Education and Literacy and the educator's library and the province's school libraries funded by Education, Citizenship and Youth. Each of these provincial library services has a role to play in supporting adult literacy efforts in conjunction with the municipally funded Winnipeg Public Library system. It is imperative that their individual and collective efforts are leveraged in any literacy strategy.

Industry must recognize the benefits of increased literacy and begin to take responsibility for supporting and partnering with literacy programs. In addition, workplaces should continue to develop their own internal literacy programs. Larger businesses often offer in-house library services. These libraries should also be mobilized to support an increase in employees' literacy rates and information literacy skills. Finally, adult learners must take individual responsibility to improve their literacy by seeking out programs and resources – including those found in libraries. Libraries are ideally positioned to support the work of all the above groups which require access to study and teaching space, collections of resources and access to supportive experts.

What would be an ideal literacy promotion campaign?

The Manitoba Library Association believes an ideal literacy promotion campaign provides a balance between communicating the economic and social costs of low literacy

¹¹ Alexander, *Literacy Matters: A call to action*, 14.

levels and the benefits of literacy both to individuals and communities. Such a campaign must be broad in scope, reaching organizations, communities and individuals through as many levels of government as possible. Public libraries must be recognized as ideal suited to market literacy programs through library newsletters and library staff's contact with a large audience of potential program participants. The value of having library staff – who are viewed by the public as trustworthy experts – recommend and promote literacy programs cannot be understated.

Should literacy be a high public policy priority?

The Manitoba Library Association believes that literacy and its promotion should be a high public policy priority. As has been noted, “it is hard to identify any other single issue that can have such a large payoff to individuals, the economy and society.”¹² A concerted and comprehensive strategy to support adult learners and improve Manitoba's literacy rates will pay both economic and social dividends for the province. This strategy must recognize the importance of libraries in supporting both formal literacy acquisition and the informal maintenance of literacy fitness and social participation.

How should we measure progress of the literacy strategy?

The Manitoba Library Association believes that there a number of ways to measure the progress of the literacy strategy, and that an evaluation of the strategy's effectiveness will include:

- a marked improvement in IALS literacy levels scores
- an improvement in secondary school completion rates;
- an increase in library usage statistics, including measures such as the number of library card holders, program attendees, etc.

¹² Alexander, *Literacy Matters: A call to action*, 17.

- an increase in the number of formal partnerships between literacy organizations and libraries and/or library systems

Taken together, increases of these measures would reflect an improvement in the basic literacy skills and education levels of Manitobans, as well as indicate increases in support for lifelong learning and social participation.

Conclusion

A study released by the Urban Library Council in the United States detailing libraries' impact on economic development recognized libraries ability to “contribute capacity to local strategies that seek to strengthen human capital, reduce service costs to complementary local agencies, and broaden the reach of local partner organizations.”¹³

Manitoba's Adult Literacy Strategy exemplifies the type of initiative which the province's libraries are ideally positioned to support, through existing collections, services and physical space all having the potential to compliment adult literacy spending, in addition to supporting lifelong, intergenerational learning and social participation.

Recommendations for an Effective Adult Literacy Strategy

In light of these key contributions, the Manitoba Library Association recommends the following be included in the forthcoming adult literacy strategy.

1. A stated recognition of the added value that libraries' existing infrastructure of collections, services and physical space constitute for organizations that provide literacy instruction.

¹³ Urban Libraries Council, *Making Cities Stronger: Public Library Contributions to Local Economic Development* (Urban Libraries Council, 2007), 6.
http://www.urbanlibraries.org/files/making_cities_stronger.pdf (accessed June 8, 2008).

2. That Adult Learning Centres and other organizations involved in providing literacy instruction, and particularly those who apply for funding under the Manitoba Adult Literacy Program, be encouraged to include planned partnerships with a library or library system as part of their funding agreements.
3. That the province's library community – and the Manitoba Library Association specifically – be consulted throughout the development of the literacy strategy in order to offer its expertise related to collections development and services and programs, as well as to ensure that mutually beneficial partnerships with the province's literacy community are established.

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