

The State of Literacy in Canada

Where we are

Literacy is defined as “the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written text to participate in society, achieve one’s goals and develop one’s knowledge and potential.”

Compared to other OECD countries, Canada performs at the OECD average in literacy and below that average in numeracy. Canadians have higher problem-solving proficiency using technology than the OECD average.

However, the data is disturbing when investigating beyond averages, demonstrating inequality in skills distribution.

- Canada’s literacy proficiency is polarized. High proportions of the population are found at both the high and low ends of literacy and numeracy proficiency – about one in seven Canadians are at the high and low ends.
- Between one in seven and one in five Canadians have very low proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in a technology rich environments.
- Canada has the *most polarized* distribution of proficiency in digital problem-solving compared to other OECD countries. More than twice as many Canadians are at the lowest level of digital problem-solving compared to the highest level.
- Overall, the proportion of adults at the lowest levels of proficiency has increased slightly since the last version of the international survey.

Literacy demands continue to increase as government funded supports decrease for Canadians with lower literacy skills.

Why that matters to Canadians

Our world is transforming rapidly. Trends such as globalization, digitalization and demographic change are transforming jobs and the way societies function and people interact. In this environment literacy skills matter. Those with very low literacy levels may struggle with everyday tasks at work, in the home and in the community.

Literacy skills are a tool. They enable people to access and analyse information, to problem solve and think critically. In technology-rich environments, the challenges facing those with lower proficiency in literacy and numeracy contribute to the “digital divide.”

The development of literacy proficiency depends on its use. The more people engage in various reading, writing and numeracy practices at home, in education and training programs and at work, the more likely they will increase their overall proficiency.

When people have low literacy skills, they are more likely to experience unemployment and precarious work, lower incomes, poorer health, and poverty. They are less likely to trust others and to be engaged in their community and society.

Some may experience additional barriers: new Canadians, single parents, people living with disabilities, seniors, Indigenous peoples, women, or people with criminal records.

Many with low literacy skills are uncomfortable disclosing their low literacy skills and asking for help. Low literacy has a strong social stigma, especially in the workplace. As the impact of technology in the labour market grows, workers without the confidence and learning skills to adapt may be left behind.

Adults with low proficiency are just as motivated and interested in education as those with higher proficiency. However, they are much less likely to access education and training opportunities due to financial and time constraints. Also, Canadians with low-proficiency and less than high school education have much less access to employer-sponsored training compared to Canadians with postsecondary education.

Education is key to reducing the gaps in skill levels. For example, newcomers and Indigenous people with higher education levels do as well as non-immigrants and non-Indigenous people with the same level of education.

People who have low skills are most vulnerable and challenging for literacy providers to reach. But literacy is a set of skills that can be improved with education and skills upgrading. Strengthening literacy skills is not a panacea but is an important step towards improving quality of life.

We need to remove barriers to learning and skills development for all Canadians, including:

- People who do not use digital communication, and those with infrequent and interrupted access;
- workers who have no access to employer and government supported training;
- language minority adults, including Indigenous peoples; and,
- people who are disadvantaged and marginalized.

Why it matters to Canada

Strong literacy and essential skills lead to a strong economy, civic engagement, and a healthy population. Although overall Canadians' skills are above average, we need a vision to ensure everyone has the learning and skills to respond to the challenges and opportunities of a complex and rapidly changing world.

Human Rights: Literacy is a human right recognized by international declarations signed by Canada.

Civic Engagement: People's belief that they can engage in, understand and influence political affairs rises with increased education and skills. Among Canadians with less than a high school diploma, just 32% report this belief, compared to 60% of people who have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher.

Economy: High literacy in Canada helps build an educated and skilled workforce which contributes to the country's economic growth. Opportunities for workplace learning ensures that workers' skills are current in today's economy, supports those with lower literacy and skills to learn, and creates personal and financial prospects toward overall well being.

Work: Canadians with low literacy skills are twice as likely to be unemployed than those with higher level literacy skills. Approximately 45% of Canadians in precarious or "no contract" work have not attained an educational credentials and struggle with job security.

Digitalization: The digital problem-solving gap and increasing numbers of Canadians with low literacy are serious concerns as more services, jobs, and learning opportunities are provided online.

Health: Canadians with the lowest levels of literacy are more than twice as likely to be in poor health compared to Canadians with higher literacy skills.

Poverty: In Canada, 46% of adults at the lowest literacy levels live in low-income households. Only 8% of adults at the highest literacy levels live in low-income households.

Lifelong Learning: Literacy skills can help us to learn easily and efficiently, and to feel confident in our ability to learn new skills and information. Adults with stronger skills are more likely to take part in work-related training and adult education programs.

Family: Reading to children before they start school helps develop their language skills and their interest in reading and learning in general. Children of parents with higher education levels have higher literacy levels.

Canadians agree

Canada's quality of life and standard of living are enhanced by everyone having the skills to be successful at home, at work and in the community.

In 2017, Frontier College commissioned a nationwide Environics Research survey on public opinion about literacy in Canada. Results from 1,500 adult respondents confirmed that Canadians care deeply about literacy:

- 90% agree that strong literacy skills are essential to attaining a high quality of life
- 87% believe that more should be done to improve literacy in Canada

Let's act together to make Canada a fully literate society

How?

- **A national literacy policy** to ensure consistency and commitment to advancing literacy programming in Canada. While the provinces and territories deliver literacy programming, the federal government has a vital

role to play in setting a national framework and honouring Canada's international commitments. The federal government can support coordination across government and with other orders of government and stakeholders to ensure we make the most of everyone's potential.

- **Federal funding for literacy** to foster innovation, share best practices and support accessible and affordable literacy programming for all adults who need it. The current federal government has taken steps by negotiating with the provinces and territories to provide literacy and essential skills training to the employed and unemployed. But much more can be done to enhance literacy levels in the family, at work and in the community particularly for Indigenous people, those living in poverty, people living in Official Language minority communities, and those new to Canada.
- **Implement Canada's international commitments on adult education** including UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action (2015), Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education (2015) and Bélem Framework for Action (2009).
- **Conversations about lifelong learning** to enable all adults to learn in a safe and supportive environment to reduce stigma and ensure success. We must increase access to technology and the learning and tools to use technology. Workplace literacy programs, family literacy activities, community-based programs, and financial and social supports will give everyone the opportunity to learn.

This document was created by a national network of people, researchers and organizations committed to adult literacy.

Further Reading

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