

# Literacy In Nunavut

According to the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)<sup>1</sup>, study released by Stats Canada on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2005, more than half of Nunavut's working-age population struggles with serious literacy challenges. Many Nunavummiut don't have the literacy skills needed to thrive in today's society.

Only people who were fluent in English and French took part in the IALSS survey and while Stats Canada acknowledges the results may reflect the fact that English and French are second languages for most Nunavummiut, the results still reveal serious challenges that must be addressed.

Many Nunavummiut also have difficulty reading and writing in Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun. According to a survey done by the Nunavut Bureau of Statistics<sup>2</sup>, only 64% of the Inuit surveyed stated they could read and write Inuktitut Syllabics very well or relatively well. Only fifty-three percent stated they could read and right well or relatively well in Inuktitut/Inuinnaqtun using Roman Orthography.

There are some Nunavummiut who have difficulty reading and writing but work in fields that don't require those kinds of skills. Within their own context are able to function quite well. There are however, many people who want the choice of going on to further education or into other trades and professions.

There are different degrees of literacy and therefore participants who took part in the IALSS survey were tested and their literacy skills were gauged on a skills spectrum ranging from 1 (least skilled) to 5 (highly skilled).

On this scale, **level 3 is the minimum skill level considered necessary to meet the challenges of today's society.** This idea of 'minimum skill level' recognizes that the demands of our knowledge-based society and economy are changing faster than ever before and the minimum literacy skills required to meet these challenges is evolving.

Among the major findings from IALSS are the following:

## In Nunavut.....

- Approximately 50% of those surveyed in Nunavut scored at level 1 in document, prose, & numeracy.

- 88% of Inuit scored below level 3 in prose literacy and almost 30% of non-Inuit scored below level 3 in the same category.
- Over 80% of Nunavut's youth between the age of 16 and 25 scored below level 3. This is particularly alarming as youth have the most time to contribute their knowledge and skills in their jobs, within their families and in their communities.
- Over 60% of those who are employed in Nunavut have scores below level 3. This has serious implications for the employees and employers. Employees with low literacy levels have higher absentee rates, have more accidents on the job, are less likely to be satisfied with their jobs, and are more likely to make mistakes.<sup>3</sup>

## In Canada...

- Four in ten working age adults, about 9 million people, scored below the literacy level experts say is necessary to cope with increasing demands in today's society.
- Low literacy is a serious challenge in every jurisdiction across Canada. Even in the highest performing provinces or territories, 3 out of 10 Canadians (16 yrs and over) struggle with very serious literacy challenges.

## Why is literacy such a serious issue?

Literacy levels have a significant impact on individual health and well-being. It can also have a significant impact on our overall social and economic well-being.

- According to IALSS, people who scored at Level 1 (the lowest level of proficiency) in document literacy had a much lower employment rate than those at higher levels of proficiency. The survey also showed a clear link between high literacy levels and higher employment earnings.
- IALSS also showed that people with higher literacy levels have higher levels of involvement in volunteerism and community activities.
- Low literacy levels contribute to the poor health of our citizens by eliminating them from consideration for higher paying jobs. Low paying jobs limit people's options in housing, food, clothing, and transportation. Low literacy also makes helpful lifestyle information, which often comes in print from the newspapers, pamphlets, food and medicine labels, and books, inaccessible. Those who live in remote communities are at the

<sup>1</sup> Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. 2005



greatest risk. Lower incomes, poor nutrition, inadequate housing, overcrowding, and higher rates of single parent families all serve to set the stage for poorer levels of health.<sup>4</sup>

## Who has low literacy skills and why?

There are many reasons why people have not developed a solid literacy foundation:

- Poor first language acquisition.
- Never having attended school.
- Quality and amount of language instruction in the school.
- Special learning needs that weren't addressed.
- Social and economic disadvantage such as poverty and overcrowded housing.

It's very important to note that people with low literacy skills are not the "problem". They are workers, parents, and community members, doing the best they can with the resources and opportunities available to them. We have a lot to learn from people who navigate the world without the literacy foundation others take for granted.

## Why do we still have such a serious literacy problem?

There are a number of factors associated with the low levels of literacy. In Nunavut most resources for adult education have been targeted toward skills-based and management level training. This is often in reaction to the political and economic pressure to get people into jobs as quickly as possible in order to meet the rapidly growing demand for in particular, government workers, those working in the trades, and those in the mining sector. To those outside of the adult education field this seems to make sense however those working in the field understand that we need to concentrate more on addressing basic literacy issues.

Some of the other factors include:

- The lack of a comprehensive system or vision in place to address adult literacy in Canada. Despite its importance, literacy programs and services are inadequately resourced, operating on short-term funding.

We still have no national system or strategy, and have assigned few resources to solving the problem. Literacy only receives about \$50 million annually from the federal government<sup>5</sup>. Compare this to postsecondary education, which receives about \$15 billion in federal investments.

- Increasing demands of the information society. These demands continue to escalate and therefore so do the skill levels statisticians say are necessary to participate successfully.
- The lack of analysis and recognition of the root causes of low literacy and other forms of educational disadvantage.

## What can we do to improve literacy levels in Nunavut?

Literacy is a complex issue, interconnected with a number of other complex issues. Rather than recognizing and addressing this complexity, literacy policies and funding have attempted to look for quick-fix solutions, with little success. Work on the Nunavut Adult Learning Strategy is currently underway. Once in place, the strategy will address many issues at a territorial level however the issue of long-term, sustainable funding will need to be addressed in partnership with the Federal Government.

---

<sup>2</sup> [Language Data from the 2001 Nunavut Household Survey](#). Nunavut Bureau of Statistics.

<sup>3</sup> Bloom, Michael, Burrows, Marie, Lafleur, Brenda, Squires, Robert. [The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy Skills in the Workplace](#). The Conference Board of Canada. 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Korhonen, Marja. [Literacy and Health: The Importance of Higher-Level Literacy Skills](#). National Aboriginal Health Organization. 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Although this investment provides crucial capacity-building and other supports to the field, these federal dollars are not for actual delivery.

