



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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The First Rung on the Ladder: community-based literacy programming in public housing complexes

A wealth of evidence—both global and local—confirms the value of literacy, and the importance of programs that promote literacy. This is especially the case for low-income individuals and communities, for whom gains in literacy can be transformative.

Manitoba has embraced this truth by laying the groundwork for real gains in literacy—in the form of Canada's first Adult Literacy Act, and an Adult Literacy Strategy. Manitoba has also made important investments in public housing, including investments in Adult Learning Centres and adult literacy programming, located on-site in some public housing complexes. The on-site character is important: location matters. There is good evidence that the on-site delivery of adult education and literacy programs in public housing complexes is producing significant benefits, for individuals and for these low-income communities. This can be seen especially in Lord Selkirk Park and Gilbert Park, Winnipeg's two largest public housing complexes, where real gains have been made in recent years because of community engagement and provincial government investment—including investment in grassroots, on-site educational initiatives.

Promotion of adult literacy is also important because adult literacy is family literacy: when parents are engaged in improving

their education, including literacy, their children benefit. Parents are able to help children with homework, and to read to them before bed, activities important for child development and parent-child attachment. Additionally, when adults are engaged in education there is a “spinoff” effect—they bring their cousins or siblings or neighbours to join them in the literacy program. The benefits that flow from good literacy programming are many, and they spread rapidly in communities where literacy programming is established.

All the more puzzling, then, is the case of the Westgrove Literacy Program, located in Westgrove Housing in suburban Winnipeg. Westgrove Literacy is a grassroots, community-based literacy program operated by Family Dynamics. This type of literacy programming serves the crucial function of being the first rung on the literacy and education ladder for many of the members of this low-income community. It is the starting point for changes that can benefit individuals, their families and the broader community.

Yet provincial funding for the Westgrove Literacy Program was eliminated in June, 2013. The decision appears to

there is an alternative.

CCPA-MB
205-765 Main St.
Winnipeg, MB
R2W 3N5

phone

(204) 927-3200

email

ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

website

[www.policyalternatives.ca/
manitoba](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/manitoba)

blog

www.policyfix.ca

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@ccpamb

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be inconsistent not only with the global and local evidence of the many benefits of literacy programming, but also with Manitoba's recent initiatives promoting adult literacy, and with the very positive on-site developments promoted by Manitoba Housing in public housing complexes like Lord Selkirk Park and Gilbert Park.

The decision to cut this funding seems especially problematic given that approximately 285,000 Manitobans have literacy levels below what is deemed necessary for full participation in Canadian society. To say that 285,000 Manitobans have literacy levels this low is to say that these individuals and their families are not able to participate fully in, or to enjoy the benefits of, life in Manitoba. We are failing to invest adequately in the development of our most important resource—our people. The termination of funding for the Westgrove Literacy Program is one small instance of that underinvestment in people.

Evidence that would support a reinstatement of the funding for the Westgrove Literacy Program is, to date, not fully conclusive. But it is strongly suggestive. Attendance in the program is strong; many of the adult learners are making significant gains; some are now moving into volunteer positions or even into paid employment as the result of the skills and confidence that they are gaining in the literacy program; almost all have clear aspirations for further education and employment. And participation in the literacy program is contributing significantly to breaking down the social isolation so common in public housing complexes, and building a stronger sense of community.

Given what we know about the high costs of illiteracy, and what we know about the considerable success of adult education initiatives in other Manitoba Housing complexes, the failure to fund Westgrove Literacy on a permanent basis seems counter-productive. The evidence of gains being made by those who are attending is sufficiently suggestive to warrant not only

the continued funding of the Westgrove Literacy Program, but also the extension of adult literacy programs to other suburban Manitoba Housing complexes where we know there is a demand for adult education.

This year funding has once again been patched together—as the result of considerable effort—to extend the work of Westgrove Literacy for one more year, but it is temporary funding only. This kind of year-by-year funding makes the program insecure, prevents the continuity of programming that would draw ever more members of the community into the literacy program, and imposes a large and unnecessary burden of ongoing fund-raising work on those who are promoting the program.

What we need is the permanent funding of the Westgrove Literacy program and the extension of adult literacy programs to other suburban Manitoba Housing complexes where we know there is a demand for this service. Doing so would make possible a full evaluation of a multi-site adult education initiative, which could then test fully the hypothesis—warranted by the suggestive evidence in Westgrove and the abundant evidence elsewhere—that such an initiative would improve the lives of adults living in these complexes, and the lives of their children and the community in general, and would produce economic and social benefits for all of us.

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Jim Silver is the Chair of the University of Winnipeg's Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies, located on Selkirk Avenue in Winnipeg's North End, and is a long-time Board member of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba. The full report of the same title can be found at www.policyalternatives.ca/offices/manitoba

CCPA-MB
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R2W 3N5

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