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# The First Rung on the Ladder:

Community-Based  
Literacy Programming in  
Public Housing Complexes

By Jim Silver

JULY  
2014

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## About the author

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# Executive Summary

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. Also, adult literacy is family literacy: when parents are engaged in improving their education, including literacy, their children benefit, educationally and otherwise. Many are the benefits that flow from good literacy programming.

This paper examines the case of the Westgrove Literacy Program, located in Westgrove Housing in suburban Winnipeg. Westgrove Literacy

is a grassroots, community-based literacy program. 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.

Funding for this program was eliminated in June, 2013. The decision appears to 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. 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.

Evidence that would support a reinstatement of the funding for the Westgrove Literacy Program is, to date, not conclusive. However, this paper argues that when considered in the context of 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 evidence is sufficiently suggestive to warrant the continued 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 adult education.

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.

# The First Rung on the Ladder: Community-Based Literacy Programming in Public Housing Complexes

Important gains have been made in Manitoba in recent years in the areas of adult literacy and education, and the redevelopment of public housing. These initiatives are expressions of a progressive and forward-looking philosophy, and they have laid a foundation upon which further gains are possible.

These initiatives are consistent with the abundant evidence that adult literacy and adult education programs can have positive and even transformative effects for low-income individuals and communities. This is especially the case when such programs are delivered on-site in low-income communities. Location matters. Also, adult literacy is family literacy: when parents are engaged in improving their education, including literacy, their children benefit, educationally and otherwise.

There is, conversely, much evidence that low levels of literacy and of educational attainment produce large costs, not only for affected individuals but for society as a whole.

This paper examines the case of the Westgrove Literacy Program, located in Westgrove Housing, a public housing complex in suburban Winnipeg. Westgrove Literacy is a grassroots, community-based literacy program. This

type of literacy programming serves the crucial function of being the first rung on the literacy and education ladder for many members of this low-income community, and potentially for members of other, similarly low-income public housing communities.

Funding for Westgrove Literacy, initially provided by the Province of Manitoba's Adult Learning and Literacy (ALL) branch, was terminated in June, 2013. The decision appears to be inconsistent not only with the evidence of the many benefits of literacy programming, but also with recent initiatives undertaken by the Province of Manitoba via the new *Adult Literacy Act* and Adult Literacy Strategy, which came into effect in 2009. It appears also to be inconsistent with recent very positive developments promoted by Manitoba Housing in other public housing complexes. Westgrove Literacy continued to operate during the 2013–2014 academic year, but with reduced and temporary funding and reduced hours of instruction.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to evaluate the relatively short experience of students at the Westgrove Literacy Program, in an attempt to determine whether or not the program produces enough benefits to warrant a continuation of its

funding; and to consider whether similar grassroots, community-based literacy programs might usefully be located in other suburban Manitoba Housing complexes.

In what follows I describe briefly the Westgrove Housing complex and Westgrove Literacy Program, and then describe the high costs imposed upon society generally by low literacy levels, and the significant gains made in recent years in low-income Manitoba Housing complexes because of public investment in on-site services, including adult literacy and education programs. I then discuss the methods used to evaluate the work of the Westgrove Literacy Program, and evaluate that evidence in an attempt to reach conclusions about the value of this particular grassroots, community-based literacy program, and about such programs more generally.

### Westgrove Housing Complex

Westgrove Housing is a 54-unit Manitoba Housing complex in the most westerly reaches of Winnipeg, just off Roblin Boulevard and within sight of the perimeter highway. Almost all residents of this suburban public housing complex are low-income. The majority are people of Aboriginal descent. Many residents are on social assistance of some kind. Many are single parents. Many have low literacy levels. In demographic and socio-economic terms, Westgrove Housing is very similar to other public housing complexes in Winnipeg (Cooper 2012; Silver 2011).

An interesting feature of Westgrove, however, is its *suburban* location. It is a small, low-income enclave in one of the highest income areas of Winnipeg, and it is removed from many of the services that low-income families typically rely upon.

Further, Westgrove is, in many important respects, quite segregated from the surrounding, better-off Westdale community. Residents frequently express discomfort about leaving the housing complex. Westgrove Community School

works hard and effectively to build positive relations with residents of Westgrove Housing. But enrolment at the school is reported to have declined significantly in recent years, and some who work in Westgrove Housing believe that among the reasons is that parents in relatively affluent Westdale move their children because they do not want them attending school with public housing children, a majority of whom are Aboriginal. Residents of Westgrove Housing also claim that their children rarely become involved with sports teams in the neighbourhood, because they just don't "fit in."

The result is that not only is Westgrove Housing far removed from most of the services that its residents need, because of its suburban location, but also it is quite cut off from the surrounding, relatively prosperous and decidedly non-Aboriginal community of Westdale.

### The Westgrove Literacy Program

The Westgrove Literacy Program was established in the Fall of 2009, funded by the provincial government's Adult Learning and Literacy (ALL) program. The cost of the program for the 2012–2013 program year — the year ALL terminated funding — was \$44,700, 88 percent of which paid the wages of the part-time instructor and his part-time teaching assistant/community connector. In other words, it is an inexpensive program. The Literacy Program is managed by Family Dynamics, a community-based, non-profit social agency that, among other things, runs Resource Centres in five other Manitoba Housing complexes in suburban Winnipeg locations.

Westgrove Literacy is a grassroots, community-based literacy program that is physically located in the Westgrove Resource Centre. Classes are held in a small room that was originally two bedrooms on the second floor of what was, before becoming the Westgrove Resource Centre, a single, three-bedroom housing unit. When Westgrove Literacy was funded by ALL, classes

met four mornings per week. For the 2013–2014 academic year, following the termination of ALL’s funding, Westgrove Literacy was kept alive with short-term project funding, and classes were cut to three mornings per week. Most of the adult students are resident in Westgrove Housing; four are residents of another Manitoba Housing complex in which Family Dynamics operates a Resource Centre.

Westgrove Literacy was initially established because Westgrove’s Tenant Advisory Committee — a community body consisting of and driven by Westgrove residents — identified the opportunity to learn to read and write as the community’s highest priority. In other words, the demand for a literacy program came from the community itself, as was the case, for example, in Lord Selkirk Park, a large inner city public housing complex (Silver 2013). There is a hunger in low-income public housing complexes for on-site educational opportunities. Indeed, in three of the other five suburban housing complexes in which Family Dynamics operates, Resource Centre staff have said that, based on their observations and on what tenants have said to them, there is sufficient demand to warrant the establishment of formal Adult Literacy Programs (personal communication, Maureen Barchyn, June 13, 2014).

### The High Costs of Low Levels of Literacy

Not investing adequately and consistently in literacy programming is expensive — to individuals and to society generally. For example, a recent study by Sonya Gulati (2013: 4), a senior economist with the Toronto-Dominion Bank, calculates that “poor educational outcomes are costing the country hundreds of billions of dollars in lost opportunity.” Craig Alexander (2012: 14), a TD Bank Vice-President and senior economist, observes that while it is “virtually impossible” to determine a precise number, raising all those with level 2 literacy scores to level 3 would produce

an estimated \$80 billion boost to the Canadian economy. Mike McCracken and T. Scott Murray (2010: 4–5) produce estimates of the costs associated with improving literacy levels, and the benefits arising from such improvements, and conclude that the investment needed to do so would produce so many economic benefits that the payback period would be a mere 4.8 months. Craig Alexander (2012: 12) refers to evidence that in 2003 the average income of Canadians with strong literacy skills was \$42,239, while the average income of those with poor literacy skills was \$20,692 — less than one-half. As regards Aboriginal people — the majority of residents in Westgrove Housing are Aboriginal — Sonya Gulati (2013: 14) found that almost two in three First Nations people in urban Saskatchewan with at least level 3 literacy were employed, whereas for those with less than level 3 literacy only one in three was employed. Level 3 literacy is what is deemed necessary for full participation in Canadian society (Manitoba 2010–2011). Improved literacy leads to higher rates of labour force participation — twice as high in the case of urban Saskatchewan. It is known that Aboriginal people have, on average, lower formal educational levels and lower employment rates than the population at large, and Andrew Sharpe and his colleagues (2009: xi-xiii) calculate that eliminating this educational/employment gap would increase Canada’s economic output by \$401 billion and Canada’s tax revenues by \$39 billion over the 25 year period, 2001–2026. Improving literacy is central to this process, because improved literacy levels enable people to move from social assistance into the paid labour force. We all benefit when that happens.

There are other social and economic costs to low literacy levels. There is evidence that low literacy levels correlate with low levels of participation in voluntary community activities, and reduced participation in the political process, including voting (Maxwell and Teplova 2007: 20–21). Craig Alexander (2012: 14) argues

that such findings imply “that literacy is tied to the building of strong communities and social institutions. It is also likely related to the conduct of a well-functioning democracy, since individuals with higher literacy are more likely to understand the issues and participate in discussion and debate over the appropriate course of public policy.” United Nations Resolution 56/116, adopted in 2002 at the start of the United Nations Literacy Decade, states that literacy “is an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century.”

International literature also suggests that women, in particular, benefit from exposure to literacy programs. For example, Amelia Marsteller (2012: 10) identifies “one of the most difficult to quantify but certainly most valuable results of female literacy: solidarity among women.” This is confirmed by the experience at Westgrove Housing. Most of the participants in the Westgrove Literacy Program are women, and their involvement in the program has built a stronger sense of community among them.

Literacy also affects health, and health costs. Irving Rootman and Barbara Ronson (2005: 567) find that “people with lower literacy levels tend to be less aware of and make less use of preventive services. They are less likely to seek care, they have higher rates of hospitalization and they experience more difficulties using the health care system. Research also suggests a link between low levels of literacy and increased health care costs.” A recent Manitoba report echoes this finding: “Research indicates a strong relationship between a person’s literacy level and his/her physical wellbeing. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has stated that higher literacy and numeracy help to reduce demands on health systems” (Manitoba 2008a: 4).

The alternative — not investing in improved literacy and educational outcomes — has negative consequences. For example, low literacy

skills contribute to people’s being trapped on social assistance — it is estimated that 65 percent of social assistance recipients in Canada have low literacy skills (Maxwell and Teplova 2007: 37). Seventy percent of inmates entering federal custody have less than grade 8 literacy levels (Office of the Correctional Investigator 2012), which means it is likely that prior to incarceration, they were neither in school nor the labour market, making them particularly vulnerable to the opportunities created by criminal activity. The correlation between low literacy levels and incarceration is costly, for everyone: the Parliamentary Budget Office has recently calculated that the average cost of incarcerating a man in a provincial jail in Canada is \$84,225 per year, and in a federal cell is \$147,467 (Mallea 2011: 121–23).

In addition, low levels of literacy and educational attainment are major factors in perpetuating the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Jane Gaskell and Ben Levin (2012: 12) report that “Socio-economic status (SES) is the single most powerful factor associated with educational and other life outcomes, as has been found in virtually every important study of these issues, over time, in every country where such studies have been conducted.” In other words, poverty correlates with and almost certainly contributes causally to poor educational outcomes. And poor educational outcomes, in turn, lead to more poverty; the children of parents with low levels of literacy are more likely themselves to experience low levels of literacy and education (Manitoba 2008a: 2). The international evidence is that parental involvement in children’s education is a particularly powerful force for children’s academic success (Flouri and Buchanan 2004), and the better a parent’s literacy level, the more likely it is that the parent will be involved in her/his children’s education. Britain’s National Literacy Trust (2011: 2) reports that parents’ involvement in their children’s literacy has important long-term effects: “The earlier parents become involved in their children’s literacy practices, the

more profound the results and the longer-lasting the effects. Children learn long before they enter formal education.” Therefore, improving parents’ literacy levels improves their children’s educational outcomes. Adult literacy is family literacy. Failure to provide adult literacy programming adversely affects children, and produces negative and costly intergenerational effects. The problem of low literacy and education reproduces itself, and feeds the reproduction of poverty. “The universal pattern is: the higher the level of poverty, the lower the level of educational attainment; low levels of educational attainment, in turn, increase the likelihood of poverty” (Silver 2013: 2).

### Literacy in Manitoba

Literacy programs are essential if the very poor are to break out of the poverty-education cycle. The provincial government appears to have recognized this and acted upon it. The steps they have taken have laid the foundation for gains in adult literacy and education. The *Adult Literacy Act* came into force in January, 2009, and is the first of its kind in Canada. The *Act* requires the creation of an Adult Literacy Strategy and Adult Literacy Program, both of which are now in place. This has created a solid foundation for improving adult literacy in Manitoba.

But there is a long way to go. In 2010–2011, the Manitoba Adult Literacy Program provided funding to support literacy programming for 2773 adults in Manitoba. Yet, approximately 285,000 adults in Manitoba between the ages of 16 and 65 years have literacy levels at stages 1 or 2, when a stage 3 level of literacy is what is deemed necessary for full participation in Canadian society (Manitoba 2010–2011). This means that less than 1 percent of those adults in Manitoba who are in need of literacy training are enrolled in programs supported by the Manitoba Adult Literacy Program.

Literacy programming is especially necessary in low-income Manitoba Housing complexes,

and the evidence is strong that such programming is best delivered on-site.

### On-Site Provision of Services and Programs at Manitoba Housing Complexes

We know from recent studies that for public housing complexes, the on-site location of services is beneficial. For example, Lindsay Larios and her colleagues (2013) held 11 focus groups with a total of 100 residents of Manitoba Housing complexes in different areas of Winnipeg. They found that many residents of social housing are reluctant to leave their housing complexes to access various services. “Many participants spoke about the stigma they felt in their neighbourhood and from some social service providers due to living in social housing. For some, stigmatization and the negative stereotypes surrounding social housing kept them from involving themselves in the wider community outside of their housing complex” (Larios et al. 2013: 18). Sarah Cooper (2012: 28) found the same: “because of the challenges faced by many tenants on a day-to-day basis, as well as the stigma of living in public housing, many tenants leave their complex as little as possible.” In many cases, and especially for those in housing complexes outside the inner city, the result was that the residents of social housing are not gaining access to the services they need. “The cost of transportation and the lack of neighbourhood programs were apparent barriers to accessing basic health and social services for those living outside the inner city” (Larios et al. 2013: 18). All of this is consistent with the experience of residents in Westgrove Housing. What works best, Larios and her colleagues (2013: 20) found, “was having Manitoba Housing facilitate a process that brought resources and programs into their communities.”

Bringing resources and services into public housing complexes was recommended by Professor Tom Carter in the long-term plan that he prepared for Manitoba Housing, at their re-

quest, in 2009. Doing so, Carter argued, would strengthen families and build communities, and everyone would benefit. “In a broad sense the mandate of Manitoba Housing is all about ‘*Strengthening Families and Building Communities*,’” Carter wrote, and to this end “housing with support services must be a priority,” and Manitoba Housing “must broaden its working partnerships and be more proactive in the community” (Carter 2009: iv and iii).

### The Gains Being Made as the Result of this Strategy

To its credit, Manitoba Housing has been doing just that. Their commitment to bringing services to Manitoba Housing complexes, and becoming more proactive in strengthening families and building community, is embodied in their long-term plan, *Homeworks! A Housing Strategy and Policy Framework for Manitoba* (Manitoba Housing 2009), and they are acting on that commitment. For example, Sarah Cooper (2012) has studied the six suburban Manitoba Housing complexes in which Family Dynamics runs resource centres — one of which is Westgrove Housing. In each of these communities the resource centres have been effective in engaging residents in community decision-making, providing a safe space where a trusting ear can be found, and providing programs and necessities identified by the community. The resource centres are places where relationships are built, social isolation is broken down, and conflicts are resolved (Cooper 2012: 13–19). The results are positive. Cooper (2012: 1) concludes that “the impact that the resource centres have had on the individuals, families and communities in each of the complexes is significant.” The same was found in Lord Selkirk Park, where a recent evaluation reported that the Lord Selkirk Park Resource Centre is “highly successful” and is having a “profound impact in the lives of neighbourhood residents” (Keyser 2012: 2). These communities have, to at least some extent,

been democratized by the changes promoted by the resource centres, whose philosophy is rooted in resident engagement. Residents are no longer passive recipients of their fate; now many are engaged in determining the character of their communities and of their personal futures. As residents become more engaged in their communities, their self-confidence grows, and they begin to think about new possibilities.

In this way a foundation has been laid for moving those residents who may choose to do so, into adult literacy and education programs. This is what happened in Westgrove, when the Tenant Advisory Committee — a version of which is established in each of the Family Dynamics communities — determined that the next stage in the journey upon which their community has embarked should be the establishment of an adult literacy program, where residents who choose to do so could improve their reading and writing abilities, and use these improved educational skills to become more independent.

### The Benefits of Adult Literacy and Adult Education in Low-Income Communities

We know from what is happening in other Manitoba Housing complexes in Winnipeg that residents are keen to take advantage of educational opportunities. Consider the case of Gilbert Park and Lord Selkirk Park, which are larger Manitoba Housing complexes located in northwest Winnipeg (Gilbert Park) and the heart of the North End (Lord Selkirk Park). In these two public housing complexes — in both of which Manitoba Housing has made substantial, and as it turns out, productive, investments — residents are actively pursuing educational opportunities. At Gilbert Park Sarah Cooper (2013: 21) found “high rates of educational engagement (e.g., people attending or going back to upgrading programs, high school, college, university), and according to staff, people are accessing more educational resources now than before.” In Lord Selkirk Park this is

even more the case. Since June, 2009, 69 people have graduated with their mature grade 12 diploma from the Adult Learning Centre — called Kaakiyow Li Moond Likol — while the Lord Selkirk Park Adult Literacy Program, which is attended by those not quite ready for Kaakiyow, and which can therefore be seen as part of an effective “laddering” process — that is, a process by which people move forward in a step by step fashion, each step being the basis upon which the next step can be taken — is regularly full to capacity (Silver 2013). These adult education and literacy initiatives, along with the establishment right in Lord Selkirk Park of a Resource Centre and childcare centre, have produced a remarkable transformation in what had historically been a particularly troubled neighbourhood (Silver 2013; 2011).

What has happened in Lord Selkirk Park is not an anomaly; on the contrary, it is but one example of the emergence, especially in Winnipeg’s inner city, of adult education as a crucial part of an anti-poverty strategy that is changing individuals’ lives and building stronger and healthier families and communities. The innovative adult education programs established in Winnipeg’s inner city in recent decades have been exceptionally effective (Silver 2013). High school graduation rates in Winnipeg’s inner city are low (Brownell et al. 2010), but significant numbers of inner-city residents, and especially Aboriginal people, return to school as adults in order to improve their education and their lives. Graduation and employment for those in adult education are impressive. Urban Circle Training Centre, for example, has a success rate of 85–90 percent, by which they mean that 85–90 percent of their students graduate from one of their programs, and find a job in an area directly related to their training. The financial effects of moving people from social assistance to the paid labour force are considerable. Eleanor Thompson, the founder of Urban Circle, calculates that over the past 20 years Urban Circle has saved governments

\$53.5 million (Silver 2013: 13). Manitoba’s Adult Learning and Literacy itself has observed that “International Studies estimate that countries with 1% higher average literacy scores experience a 1.5% higher GDP per capita” (Manitoba 2008a: 2), at least in part because improved literacy skills enable people to be more economically productive.

### Methodology

A number of methods were used to evaluate the Westgrove Literacy Program. First, I met at the Westgrove Resource Centre with the instructor and his teaching assistant/community connector, and two senior Family Dynamics staff members, for a preliminary and wide-ranging discussion of the Literacy Program. This initial meeting, together with a previous report prepared by Margerit Roger (2010), provided a good foundation for an understanding of the Westgrove Literacy Program. I then sat in on two classes, for a total of approximately four hours, to observe the classroom dynamics and especially the students’ engagement in the learning process.

Next, one of my senior students, Paula Okemow, conducted in-person interviews with eleven of the students at Westgrove, after first having attended, along with me, a Christmas dinner arranged for the students by the staff at the Westgrove Resource Centre. This enabled Paula to meet the students in person and to let them know that she would be conducting interviews in early January, 2014. The interview questions were approved by the University of Winnipeg Senate Ethics Committee as part of the approval process for the research project as a whole. Interviews lasted, on average, approximately 30 minutes each. The interview questions were quite open-ended, aimed at encouraging students to talk about their experiences at the Westgrove Literacy Program, and were intended especially to determine what students like and do not like about the Program, what, if

anything, they feel they are learning, how that learning is affecting their lives, and what they hope to do in future as a result of attending the Westgrove Literacy Program. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Three other sets of data proved useful. First, students had written letters to the Minister of Advanced Education and Literacy in June, 2013, when the termination of funding was announced, and these letters were made available to me. They contain useful comments about how students believed they were benefitting from the Literacy Program. Second, I was able to examine the 2013–2014 “Learner Analysis” document prepared by staff at the Westgrove Resource Centre for ALL in January, 2014. This document was based on written comments by and one-on-one interviews with, eleven students in the Westgrove Literacy Program. Third, Norm Koe, the instructor, sent me a detailed and candid assessment of the progress being made, or in a few cases not being made, by each of the students. This document included information about each student’s strengths and weaknesses in reading, writing and math, plus each student’s educational goals.

I prepared a draft paper based on my findings and in February, 2014 circulated it to six staff members at Family Dynamics for their comments. I then met with these six staff members at the Family Dynamics headquarters for a detailed discussion of the draft, and made changes based on their oral and written comments.

Finally, two meetings were held at the Westgrove Resource Centre later in February, 2014, one with the Westgrove Literacy Program students and Tenant Advisory Committee, and the other with the Westgrove Community Advisory Committee members. The Community Advisory Committee consists of representatives of various social agencies and other organizations that work in the Westgrove area. A draft of an earlier version of this paper was presented to each group, and a lively discussion followed in both

cases, the overall character of which was unanimously positive about the work of the Westgrove Literacy Program.

### Results of the Analysis

When ALL terminated the literacy program’s funding, students of Westgrove Literacy called for a community forum to express their opposition to this decision and to develop a strategy to reverse the decision. Twenty-eight people crammed into the small Westgrove Family Resource Centre on the morning of June 20, 2013. Students themselves wrote letters to the Minister of Advanced Education and Literacy, and read those letters to the crowd of 28 in attendance.

In most of the letters there was some combination of an expression of gratitude that the Literacy Program was there in the Westgrove community, a statement of the ways in which it is changing peoples’ lives, and the assertion that, if the Westgrove Literacy Program were not located right in the community, the cost of transport and childcare are such that those who are benefitting from the program would be unable to continue with their education (see sidebar).

The letters written by students suggest that *they* believe that the Westgrove Literacy Program is producing benefits — for themselves and for their children. Some of the letters indicate that students at Westgrove Literacy have specific educational goals, but that they would be unlikely to pursue their educational objectives if Westgrove Literacy were not located right in the Housing complex. The free childcare that is available is also an important part of the reason that at least some of the students are able to attend. There is some evidence of improved levels of self-confidence as the result of participating in the Literacy Program, and also some evidence of employment aspirations.

In January, 2014, Paula Okemow conducted one-on-one interviews with eleven of the adult learners at Westgrove Literacy. Selected com-

### **Selections from Letters Written in February, 2013, by Adult Students at the Westgrove Literacy Program Following the Withdrawal of Provincial Funding**

- The decision I made to upgrade my education is making a big impact in my life and my children's lives. They now see the value of an education. Upgrading my education also helped me get a job as a resource helper at the Westgrove Resource Centre. I can now start standing on my own two feet.
- I am trying to reach Canadian Language Benchmark Level 4. I hope to take a healthcare course when I reach Level 4.
- I used to be a student at the (Westgrove) Learning Centre, but now I have progressed to being the child minder for the children who need to come with their mums. I have five children of my own, who range from adult to elementary aged children. Working here has enabled me to be reintegrated back into the workforce.
- I need the school to stay here because I don't have money for daycare. The daycare at Westgrove is free. If the school is not here, I will not be going to school next September.
- The learning centre is an asset to the housing complex because I do not have to travel to go to school. The daycare they offer is necessary as I have three pre-school age kids. Attending the Westgrove Learning Centre has given me the confidence to finish my high school, which I felt I could not do before.

### **Selected Comments by Adult Students at Westgrove Literacy, Taken from Interview Transcripts, January 2014**

- I think it's great. It brings a lot of us here. It brings us purpose. We bring it home to our children and our households.... It's an awesome program.
- It took me out from a very dark spot, this school did. It took me out of a very ugly spot. I can see my future, I can see hope. It's all right here.
- Very, very good. Life changing....I got a job in Westgrove in the elementary school. I work in the lunch program.
- When I sit in class here, I feel more confident. Things are starting to click in my mind, in my brain. That is the part that I like.
- The program is good for a single mother like me....I am learning and I enjoy learning.
- With me coming here rather than staying at home doing nothing, I think it's a positive thing for me....[It's] upping my confidence that I can do something.
- It helps me in my routines in the morning. I get up and get my kids ready for school.
- [My kids] are on cloud 9. They think I'm doing something good for myself....They are very happy.

ments from these interviews are shown above. These comments suggest that the students themselves believe that the program is very good, and

that they are deriving benefits from their participation. The evidence suggests that students believe that their lives are being changed in posi-

## Selected Comments by Adult Students at Westgrove Literacy, Taken from “Learner Analysis for Adult Learning Centres and Adult Literacy Program,” January 2014

- I’ve gained more confidence, my self-esteem went up. I feel more positive about myself. I’m able to understand better.
- When I get notes from the school I can read them.
- We all work together as one group. We’re very close and have become like a family.
- I can understand the mail I get now.
- I am reading better; I can read the newspaper.
- If I need to write a note at work, I can do it now.

tive ways — self-confidence is growing, children are benefitting, students are learning.

Similarly positive results were found in the Learner Analysis conducted by Westgrove Resource Centre staff for Adult Learning and Literacy in January, 2014. Eleven students took part in the Learner Analysis. The “Survey” component asked students to respond on a scale of zero to five, with five being “always” and zero being “never,” to statements such as: “The schedule and workload of the program fit with other commitments and responsibilities in my life,” and “My teacher(s)/ instructor(s) discuss my personal learning goals with me and help me to plan how to reach these goals,” and “I feel that I am meeting my learning goals at the program.” In nine of the twelve categories, all of the students answered “always.” Selected comments in response to other questions in the Learner Analysis are shown above.

The Learner Analysis produced results similar to those produced in the interviews, and in the letters written by students in June, 2013. The students *themselves* believe that they are benefitting from their attendance at Westgrove Literacy. Some are able to read and write in particular settings, including — very importantly — reading notes that come home from their children’s school, as well as reading newspapers and mail that arrives at their homes. Some value the relationships developed with other students. Some

believe that they are gaining in confidence and self-esteem. This is especially significant because lack of confidence and self-esteem is a major problem for many people in poverty (Silver 2011), and becomes a barrier to positive change.

When ALL terminated funding for the Westgrove Literacy Program, it offered three reasons for doing so: first, that attendance was a problem; second, that some of the students were newcomers who needed English as an Additional Language (EAL), and EAL students should not be taught in the same program as non-EAL students; and third, that students at Westgrove Literacy were failing to progress.

The second reason, whatever its pedagogical merits, seems not to take account of the extent to which attendance at the Westgrove Literacy Program is building a sense of community among students — as shown by students’ comments above. This is an important factor in public housing complexes where social isolation can be a problem (Silver 2011). Especially important is that this community building is occurring among students from different ethnic and national backgrounds. Some of the students in the Literacy Program are Aboriginal; some are newcomers who have arrived from war-affected parts of the world; some are Muslim, most are not. Even if there is evidence to support the claim that it is pedagogically advantageous for EAL students

to be taught in a different program than non-EAL students, as ALL has argued in cancelling the funding, it might well be argued in response that in a grassroots, community-based program such as Westgrove Literacy, the benefits of the community-building that the program inspires are worth whatever pedagogical limitations the grassroots model may produce.

However, for the first and third reasons above — that is, that attendance was a problem, and that students were failing to progress — there is reasonable evidence to suggest that these problems are being overcome. That is suggested by the students' own comments in their June 2013 letters, in the January 2014 interviews with Paula Okemow, and in the January 2014 "Learner Analysis," as shown above. Further evidence comes from the instructor at Westgrove Literacy.

In his December 2, 2013, "report on the progress of learners at Westgrove" (personal email communication), instructor Norm Koe reported that as of that date, there were 15 adult learners enrolled at the Westgrove Literacy Program. Of these, during the Fall term of 2013, one had perfect attendance, two attended 95 percent of classes, and another six attended between 71 percent and 94 percent of classes. In sum, nine of 15 students, or 60 percent, attended at least 70 percent of the time, and eight of these attended more than 75 percent of the time, or three in every four classes. Of the remaining six, two had health and personal issues; one lost her glasses and could not read without them and for some time could not afford a replacement pair; and one learner has a child experiencing anxiety issues when left in childcare, which affects her attendance. Given that these are adult learners, most struggling with low incomes and many of them single parents, and given what we know about the day-to-day challenges faced by those coping with complex poverty (CCPA-Mb 2009; Silver *f/c*), these attendance rates suggest that the adult learners at Westgrove are exerting an effort to achieve educational goals.

This is confirmed by Mr. Koe's report. Three of the 15 adult learners are preparing to take their GED, and a fourth hopes to attend an Adult Learning Centre to earn her mature grade 12, while another two are working on Stage Two of the Certificate in Literacy and Learning. Three other adult learners have their grade 12, although two of them earned a "modified" grade 12 and the other completed grade 12 in Somalia. They are now working toward a fully accredited grade 12 diploma. Therefore, each of these nine adult learners has specific educational goals, while a tenth adult learner has sufficiently improved her literacy skills and self-confidence that she was accepted into an employment preparation program in January, 2014. Of the remainder, two never went to school at all in their countries of origin, while a third went only to grade two, so their goal, at least immediately, is to become functionally literate in English. The remaining two learners are working to improve their literacy levels more generally.

Mr. Koe's evaluation of learners' progress is that seven of the 15 are making "very good" or "good" or "steady" progress, while about an eighth learner Mr. Koe reports that "Returning to school has built up her self-esteem and self-confidence. She now has a more positive outlook on life." Progress is reported as being slow in the remaining seven cases, although as mentioned above, in most cases this has to do with health or personal problems or, in one case, the loss of eye glasses.

Individual stories are another way to measure gains being made by involvement in the Westgrove Literacy Program. These stories were offered to me by staff at the Westgrove Resource Centre and Westgrove Literacy Program during formal interviews and informal conversation.

One learner developed the confidence to approach a local chain store and arrange with them a volunteer position. Volunteering experience together with improved literacy could be stepping stones taking her off social assistance and

## **A Summary of Gains and Benefits arising from the work of the Westgrove Literacy Program, Derived from the Student Analysis Conducted by Instructor Norm Koe**

- Attendance has improved—9 of 15 students have attended at least 70 percent of classes
- Students are progressing—7 of 15 students are making very good, good or satisfactory progress
- Some learners have found part-time jobs
- Some learners have taken on volunteer activities, which can be a stepping stone to employment
- Most adult learners have specific educational and career goals toward which they are working
- Seven adult learners are working toward an accredited grade 12, and an eighth has just earned entry to an employment program
- Many adult learners have experienced improved levels of self-confidence and self-esteem
- Women at the Westgrove Literacy Program have developed closer relationships and mutual supports
- Some adult learners are now:
  - reading to their children
  - reading notes coming from their children's school
  - going to and even participating in events at their children's school
  - reading newspapers
- Some adult learners are participating more in community activities
- All have recently voted—many for the first time—in an election

into the paid labour force. Other students are also taking on volunteer opportunities.

Another adult learner at Westgrove Literacy had been unable to read to her two older children prior to attending Westgrove Literacy. She now reads bedtime stories to her youngest child, and has gained the confidence to attend the parent-child meetings at her children's school. Parental support is a key element in children's educational success. This is especially important because, as a staff person at Westgrove Family Resource Centre observed, many parents in Westgrove Housing "completely step away from the school." This is an example of how "invisible barriers" go up around most public housing complexes (Silver 2011). Literacy and other adult educational programs delivered on-site make it possible to overcome those barriers.

The parent mentioned in the previous paragraph has sufficiently overcome those barriers that in September, 2010, she was awarded the Manitoba Council of the Federation Literacy Award by Premier Greg Selinger, "in recognition of her impressive achievements in literacy" (Keno 2011).

Yet another adult learner, a woman who only very recently started attending the Westgrove Literacy Program, has a *formal* qualification for a job that would produce a reasonable living, but in fact her literacy level is so low that she is unable to make use of that qualification. Norm Koe, the instructor at Westgrove Literacy, believes that before long she can improve her literacy level sufficiently that she could secure a job in the area for which she has been formally trained.

Mr. Koe — who in March, 2013 was awarded the Practitioner of Excellence Award by Literacy Partners of Manitoba, in recognition of his outstanding teaching skills — sees his job as instructor as including identifying students' strengths and directing them to opportunities that will develop those strengths. He defines his job broadly. For example, during a recent election campaign he included a unit on elections and their importance, and drove all the students to a polling station where they voted — many for the first time in their lives. In these various ways, the Westgrove Literacy Program appears to be making a positive contribution to this low-income community.

### The Foundational Character of the Westgrove Literacy Program

The Westgrove Literacy Program works with students whose literacy levels are particularly low and it does so in a local, community-based fashion. It emerged in response to the expressed needs of the local community, whose Tenant Advisory Committee identified educational opportunities as the community's first priority. The Westgrove Literacy Program can be thought of as the first rung on the literacy ladder, and so creates the foundation for further learning. This is an essential part of the literacy and learning continuum, but in Canada it is not as well developed as would be advantageous. For example, Judith Maxwell, former Chair of the Economic Council of Canada, has recently written about Canada that "the problem of low literacy skills is large and it is not going to disappear unless we reboot the learning system for adults with low literacy skills. And these people face serious barriers to learning — stigma, fear, inability to navigate the system, and poverty" (Maxwell 2010: ii). These are some of the barriers experienced in Westgrove Housing. Maxwell argues that the starting point is grassroots, community-based, informal learning programs. What she describes

as being foundational to a rebooted literacy system in Canada is what the Westgrove Literacy Program is doing.

It takes community programs to engage people on what matters to them, open their eyes to their own capacity to learn, help them gain the self-confidence they need to be able to consider a more formal learning program. Informal learning activities organized locally in response to local needs are therefore the foundational infrastructure for a literacy system (Maxwell 2010: ii).

Maxwell makes the case that those informal learning programs that work with community organizations — as the Westgrove Literacy Program works with the Westgrove Resource Centre — "can create a powerful lever for local economic and social development." Yet despite the potential of such partnerships, "the community organizations that could create the portals to literacy development are themselves marginalized, when they should be regarded as the essential resources for engaging more learners" (Maxwell 2010: iii). She refers to "the damage that is being done to the community-based informal learning system when adult education policies do not recognize the essential role that the informal programs play for recruiting the students who go on to the formal classroom programs offered by colleges and school boards" (Maxwell 2010: 9). Adults living in Westgrove Housing will *not* — with rare exceptions — go on to formal educational programs in the absence of a grassroots adult literacy program like Westgrove Literacy. But with the Westgrove Literacy Program in operation, seven adult learners are working toward an accredited grade 12, and an eighth has just earned entry to an employment program.

Maxwell offers the broad outlines of a strategy that ought to be further developed at Westgrove — locally-based, informal literacy classes as the portals, or the first rung on the ladder, to literacy development, and the foundation upon

which adult learners can develop the skills and confidence to move on to further opportunities. Among the components of such a strategy, Maxwell (2010: iv) argues, are integrating literacy programming with community-based social and economic development, so that “community-based organizations must become a valued and integral part of the provincial literacy effort,” and “creative targeting of programs to disadvantaged populations with unique needs — lone parents, immigrants...”

This is precisely what is happening in Westgrove Housing, with the creative partnership between the Westgrove Resource Centre and the Westgrove Literacy Program. Far from cutting its funding, the provincial government should be expanding the Westgrove Literacy Program, in a way that sees adult literacy and adult education as part of a *strategic* approach to combatting place-based poverty in public housing complexes.

Family Dynamics operates Resource Centres not only in Westgrove Housing but also in five other suburban Manitoba Housing complexes, each of which has characteristics similar to Westgrove. In three of these five Manitoba Housing complexes, Resource Centre staff have identified — based on their observations and one-on-one conversations with residents — a demand for adult educational opportunities.

While it must be acknowledged that the evidence in support of the benefits produced by Westgrove Literacy is by no means conclusive, it is at least strongly suggestive, and when combined with the very strong evidence of the costs of illiteracy, and the growing evidence of the benefits of adult education in other Manitoba Housing complexes, it can be argued that a reasonable conclusion is not only that the funding for the Westgrove Literacy Program with its associated childcare provisions ought to be ex-

tended, but also that similar adult literacy programs ought to be established in other suburban housing complexes in Winnipeg where we know that demand for such education exists.

Doing so would make possible a full evaluation of a multi-site, grassroots, community-based adult education initiative. Given the evidence at Westgrove and the very strong national and international evidence of the many benefits of improved literacy, a reasonable hypothesis might be that evaluation of such an initiative would find that it produces a wide variety of benefits for adults enrolled in such programs, and their children, and the communities of which they are a part. It is likely that a cost/benefit analysis would show that the benefits outweigh the costs. Were that found to be the case, benefits would accrue to society more generally.

The foundations for such a multi-site, grassroots, community-based adult education initiative are now in place. Manitoba Housing has embarked upon a new strategy in low-income, public housing complexes, bringing needed services and programs into these complexes, with very positive outcomes. Manitoba Adult Learning and Literacy has enacted the *Adult Literacy Act* and put in place the Adult Literacy Strategy and Adult Literacy Program, which came into effect in January, 2009. To build on the foundations created by these positive developments, the Westgrove Literacy Program should be funded in a manner that is adequate and consistent over time. The same should be done in the three other suburban Manitoba Housing complexes where the demand for such programming has been identified. These informal, grassroots, community-based adult literacy programs would then become what Judith Maxwell describes as “the foundational infrastructure for a literacy system.” When this is done, all Manitobans will benefit.

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