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The Next Step: Literacy Programming in Manitoba

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Introduction

The Province of Manitoba has reported that in 2013, according to the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), there were 192,600 Manitobans who had literacy levels so low — only level 1 or level 2 — that they could not participate fully in life, and that this number represented 16 percent, or one in every six, of Manitoba’s population aged 16 to 65 (Manitoba 2013/2014: 4). The literacy problem in Manitoba is roughly on a par with that in Canada as a whole (Statistics Canada 2013: 16–17).

Not enough is being done to rectify this problem, especially at the federal level but also provincially. This is the case, in particular, for those with very low literacy levels, which in most cases means those who are among the very poor.

Manitoba has developed a new strategy, with a literacy component, which is intended to move low-income people into the labour force. This strategy may prove beneficial for a particular category of low-income people. But the needs of many low-income Manitobans with low literacy levels are still not being met.

Meeting those needs would be a valuable next step. It would build on the many positive anti-poverty initiatives put in place in recent

years by the provincial government. These include: the building of 1500 units of social housing and another 1500 units of affordable housing since 2009, the commitment to add another 500 units of each by 2017 (Brandon 2015), and the very substantial investment in improvements to public housing complexes (Silver et al. 2015; Silver and Young 2015); the introduction of the Rent Assist Program, which will produce significant benefits for low-income renters (Manitoba 2015a); the substantial investments in effective alternative educational initiatives in low-income areas, such as the Merchants Corner complex in Winnipeg’s North End (MacKinnon and Silver 2015); the ongoing investment in the creation of more childcare spaces, and better conditions for childcare workers (McCracken and Prentice 2014), and the commitment by the Premier to move to “universally accessible” childcare in Manitoba, “the only Premier ever to make this promise” (Prentice and Ferguson 2015); the continued growth of the very effective Neighbourhoods Alive! program (Wiebe 2014); and the endorsement of many aspects of the community-based, anti-poverty plan, *The View from Here 2015: Manitobans call for a renewed poverty reduction plan* (Bernas and MacKinnon 2015), to

name just a few examples. These are positive initiatives, and need to be acknowledged as such. But much more remains to be done.

A logical next step would be public investment in the creation of a community-based literacy program, to meet the needs of those many Manitobans whose literacy levels are so low that

they cannot participate fully in society. Doing so would be an important component of an anti-poverty strategy. The costs of such an initiative would be relatively low (Silver 2014: 4). The costs of not investing public dollars in a community-based literacy strategy are comparatively much higher, as a great deal of evidence makes clear.

The Costs of Low Literacy

Economists have estimated that low literacy levels cost the Canadian economy billions of dollars annually (Gulati 2013; Alexander 2012; McCracken and Murray 2010; Sharpe et al. 2009). Those with low literacy skills suffer poorer health and add disproportionately to the costs of the health care system (Rootman and Ronson 2005). Low literacy drives up social assistance costs — Judith Maxwell and Tetyana Teplova (2007: 37) have found that 65 percent of social assistance recipients in Canada have low literacy skills. There is a strong correlation between low literacy levels and incarceration — 70 percent of inmates entering federal custody have less than grade 8 literacy levels (Office of the Correctional Investigator 2012).

There is a gendered and racialized character to the literacy problem. Many women with low levels of literacy are living in poverty and are raising children on their own (Provincial Council of Women 2012: 21; Roger 2011). The children of parents with low levels of literacy are more likely themselves to experience low levels of literacy (Manitoba 2008a: 2). In this way literacy problems contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Conversely, improving parents', including single mothers', literacy levels improves their children's educational outcomes, which can counter the intergenerational

transmission of poverty. For this among other reasons, accessible adult literacy programming is particularly important.

For Aboriginal people, levels of educational attainment continue to be lower and the incidence of poverty continues to be higher than for the population as a whole (Lezubski 2014: 119–122). Aboriginal people are disproportionately likely to leave school before grade 12, and many want to upgrade their educational levels as adults (Silver 2015; Silver 2013). Therefore, they particularly benefit from effective and accessible literacy programming. The same is the case for newcomers. Large numbers of newcomers are arriving in Manitoba, many from war-affected countries where basic education has not been possible, and so they too are disproportionately in need of accessible literacy programming.

When we do not provide ready access to literacy programming for Manitobans whose literacy levels are so low that they cannot participate fully in life, we are wasting a precious resource — the creative and productive potential of particularly large numbers of the people of this province. In doing so we are pursuing a course that does not make good economic sense. We all suffer for the failure to provide accessible literacy programming to those in greatest need.

The Federal Approach to Literacy Programming

In the 1980s and early 1990s literacy advocates were successful in raising awareness of literacy as an issue in Canada. A National Literacy Secretariat was established in 1988, and by 1992 literacy coalitions that supported front-line literacy programming had been formed in every Canadian province and territory (Hayes 2013a: 1–2).

This national literacy infrastructure began to be dismantled in 2006, seemingly as a conscious policy direction of the new federal government. The National Literacy Secretariat was eliminated that year, and funding cuts to literacy programming followed. Federal spending on the Adult Literacy and Essential Skills Program dropped from \$31.1 million in 2006–2007, to \$12.2 million in 2012–2013 (Hayes 2013b: 40), a reduction of more than 50 percent. In 2014 funding to national literacy coalitions was cut, forcing some to cease operations. For example, Essential Skills Ontario issued a news release in May, 2015, announcing that they would soon close their doors. “This decision follows changes in the federal government funding priorities away from work supporting adult literacy and essential skills programming across Canada” (Essential Skills Ontario 2015). The cuts to core funding for national literacy organizations are consistent with

similar cuts to national and provincial organizations — women’s and Aboriginal organizations are examples — that advocate on behalf of those who are among the poorest and most marginalized. The announcement in May, 2015, that the federal government had underspent funding on various social programs by some \$97 million, and that this amount included underspending a third of the federal literacy budget (CBC 2015), is just the latest iteration of a consistent pattern since at least 2006 of cuts to literacy programming, and particularly to literacy programming for those in poverty.

Of the funds invested in literacy programming, a growing proportion is now being directed to training, with an attempt to align literacy funding with labour market outcomes and to support those most job ready in making the transition to the paid labour force. Funding for family literacy and programming for community-based initiatives appears to have been squeezed out. As Margerit Roger (2011) has put it: “Since 2006, the national literacy agenda has shifted so significantly toward work-focused programming that literacy for family, social or political participation has all but disappeared from our educational discourse.”

Labour Market Agreements (LMAs) with the provinces were replaced by the Canada Job Fund starting in 2014. It appears this will reinforce the shift to businesses and job readiness, and away from community programming for those with very low levels of literacy. “The Canada Job Fund favours employer determined training.... No incentive exists for training non-employees....The

ultimate outcome will likely be ...training for existing employees [and] lack of opportunities for the unemployed” (Hayes 2015a: 3). The squeezing out of funding for community-based literacy programming further marginalizes those mired in complex poverty. As the *Ottawa Citizen* reported, “The federal government is abandoning adults with low literacy and essential skills” (Pearson 2014).

The Manitoba Approach to Literacy Programming

On the surface, it appears that Manitoba has taken a different approach to literacy. In 2009, Manitoba became the first province in Canada to produce an *Adult Literacy Act*, followed by an Adult Literacy Strategy and Program. The 2015 Provincial Budget increased funding to adult literacy and Adult Learning Centres by 2.5 percent, despite difficult fiscal restraints, and Manitoba appears to be the only province in the country that has budgeted increased funds for literacy and adult education (Hayes 2015b). These are positive steps.

Nevertheless, the Province is still not meeting the demand for literacy programming that targets those many Manitobans whose literacy levels are particularly low and who, as a consequence, remain mired in poverty. To meet this demand requires a full commitment to community-based literacy programming. Recent data make it clear that this is not being done to the extent that is needed.

The numbers for Adult Learning Centres (ALCs), which offer the mature grade 12 diploma to adults who have not previously completed high school and which have proved to be very effective (Silver et al. 2006), appear to be positive at first glance. As shown in Table 1, funding for

ALCs was 29 percent higher in 2013–2014 than it had been in 2003–2004; the number of graduates grew by 6 percent over that same period; while the number of Aboriginal graduates was 29 percent higher than was the case in 2005–2006.

However, if we consider the most recent period, the five years from 2009–2010 to 2013–2014, we can see that funding for ALCs has scarcely grown at all—less than 2 percent over five years, which is a decline in real terms. The number of students enrolled, courses completed and graduates has declined during this most recent period, although the number of Aboriginal graduates has continued to grow, albeit at a slower rate. It seems reasonable to conclude that, despite the continued need, this particularly important and effective part of Manitoba’s adult education system has stalled.

The trend in funding for literacy programming over the five year period 2009–2010 to 2013–2014—these data have only been publicly available since 2009–2010—has been similar to the trend for Adult Learning Centres. Total funding has declined, in both nominal and real terms, and the number of literacy organizations funded and students enrolled has declined, as shown in Table 2. Indeed, the number of stu-

TABLE 1 Adult Learning Centres

Year	Agencies Funded	Total Funding	Students Enrolled	Courses Completed	Number of Graduates	Aboriginal Graduates
2013–2014	39	\$16,804,900	8409	11,752	1329	568
2012–2013	39	16,851,000	8389	12,255	1425	562
2011–2012	39	16,678,000	9007	12,246	1356	530
2010–2011	41	16,458,000	9281	12,855	1438	531
2009–2010	43	16,543,000	9070	12,743	1456	491
2008–2009	43	15,402,000	8056	10,703	1231	435
2007–2008	41	14,810,000	7929	10,792	1174	423
2006–2007	42	14,435,000	8300	11,170	1260	419
2005–2006	41	14,075,000	8446	12,041	1238	441
2004–2005	43	13,529,000	8749	11,807	1229	N/A
2003–2004	48	13,057,000	9715	12,258	1254	N/A

SOURCE: Annual Reports, Manitoba Adult Literacy Strategy and Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba, 2003–2004 to 2013–2014.

TABLE 2 Literacy

Year	Agencies Funded	Total Funding	Number of Students
2013–2014	34	\$2,586,200	2254
2012–2013	36	2,642,000	2387
2011–2012	37	2,554,000	2508
2010–2011	41	2,593,000	2773
2009–2010	42	2,610,000	2886

SOURCE: Annual Reports, Manitoba Adult Literacy Strategy and Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba, 2009–2010 to 2013–2014.

dents enrolled has declined sharply, by 22 per cent, from 2009–2010 to 2013–2014.

In addition, there are wait lists at existing literacy programs. For example, in Winnipeg’s low-income North End, community-based programs offering literacy programming are limited to part-time operations, even though they have wait lists of people wanting to improve their literacy levels, and even though at least some of them have applied for (and been denied) funding to move to full-time operations. Similarly, a growing need in the North End for English as an Additional Language programming is going unmet, because the funding for such programming is not available (Banasiuk 2015).

In suburban Manitoba Housing complexes that do not have literacy programming — which

is most of them — there is a demand from residents for literacy programming (Barchyn 2015).

Part of the problem is that the Province of Manitoba’s recently adopted Adult Learning Strategy is not really a “strategy.” It is little more than a list of five components — adult literacy programs, adult learning centres, workforce development/employment focus, English as an additional language, and Aboriginal focus. There is no vision; there are no targets or timelines. And in particular, there is no commitment to a community-led and community-based approach to literacy programming.

Further, the Adult Learning and Literacy branch was recently relocated to the Department of Multiculturalism and Adult Literacy from its previous home in Education and Advanced Education. The move away from Educa-

tion and Advanced Education seems to suggest that adult literacy and adult education are not important parts of Manitoba's education strategy, and not important parts of the Province's anti-poverty strategy.

The evidence suggests that there has not been a strong commitment to community-based literacy programming aimed at those many Manitobans whose literacy levels are particularly low.

The Province's New Approach

The needs of those whose literacy skills are quite strong, but who are not now in the labour market, are about to be addressed in what may prove to be a positive anti-poverty initiative. The provincial government has recently developed a strategy aimed at moving people who have barriers to employment, including but not limited to those on social assistance, into the paid labour force. The Province is committed to increasing the paid labour force by 75,000 people. Part of meeting this target involves re-targeting training resources to those who are not now in the labour market and who have barriers to employment. Social assistance programming is now part of the Department of Jobs and the Economy, in order to symbolize and facilitate this commitment. The current provincial approach to literacy appears to have been folded into this broader strategy.

The Training and Employment Skills Development Program, located centrally on Lombard Avenue in downtown Winnipeg, is the means by which this is to happen. The Skills Development Program “assists people with training to gain access to the labour market” (Manitoba 2015a: E4). There is a commitment to “support parents on Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) with young children” via Manitoba’s “Empowered to

Change” initiative. But it is clear that the target group is those who are close to being job ready. *Budget Paper E: Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion*, which is part of the provincial government’s 2015 Budget, adds that “Empowerment for Change sessions have been engaging parents, with children between the ages of two and five, *who have been assessed as having employment potential* (my emphasis) (Manitoba 2015a: E5).

The Province’s “Strategy for Sustainable Employment and a Stronger Labour Market,” described as the “Action Plan” for the first of the seven priority areas in *AllAboard: Manitoba’s Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion Strategy*, also provides a particularly strong emphasis on moving EIA recipients who are deemed to be almost job-ready into the labour market:

\$3 million was added in Budget 2013 to enhance training and pre-employment programming and develop wrap-around supports to ensure income assistance recipients can move into sustainable employment and achieve financial independence. EIA participants who are able to work can successfully move into sustainable employment and away from future welfare

dependency when the right services and supports are in place to assist them. These supports and services include:

- a new service model with single window access to provincial workforce development services, including a “one stop” service centre in Winnipeg (Manitoba 2015b: 4).

The one-stop service centre is the Training and Employment Skills Development Program on Lombard Avenue in downtown Winnipeg. A wide range of supports have been brought together in one place to provide the “wrap-around supports” needed to move 75,000 people into the paid labour force, including people who have barriers to employment. According to provincial government analyses, a significant proportion of

single mothers face fewer employment barriers than other Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) case categories. A 2012 analysis found that one-third (33 percent) of single-parent EIA cases had no identifiable barriers aside from limited education or labour market attachment (Hajer 2015). It is people with such minimal barriers to employment who will be targeted by this strategy. Included amongst the wrap-around supports to be offered is a full-time, short-term course in literacy.

The provincial government’s commitment to and strategy for moving people with barriers to employment into the paid labour force is an important part of their overall anti-poverty strategy, and although still in its early stages, it appears that it may be a positive initiative.

The Missing Piece

Noticeably missing from this strategy, however, is funding for decentralized, community-based literacy programming, located where it is easily accessible for those with the lowest literacy levels, which generally speaking means those most likely to be living in poverty. The importance of locating services close to where low-income people live has been made very clear in recent research publications, which have found that if services are not made available in their neighbourhoods, low-income people will not make use of those services (Larios et al. 2013; Cooper 2012). It is likely that few of those most in need of literacy services will make use of a centralized downtown location in the heart of Winnipeg's downtown business district. And it is clear that the literacy services offered there — full-time, short-term programs whose purpose is to prepare people for immediate entry into the labour force — are not intended for those many tens of thousands of people whose literacy skills are much lower than that. In fact, it is doubtful that moving people quickly into the labour force can meet the needs of those who have been out of the labour market for some time, or who have never been in the paid labour force. The experience has been that it takes time for people in

low-income communities to develop the degree of trust, and of self-confidence and self-esteem, needed to succeed.

The new provincial strategy might well be seen as a form of “creaming” — targeting expenditures and services to those among the poor who are the least disadvantaged, and who are the closest to being able to escape poverty. As meritorious as this strategy is for the purposes it is intended to serve, it does not address the needs of the very poor, those with the lowest literacy levels. Community-based literacy programming will better serve their needs.

Yet funding and programming for community-based literacy continues to be squeezed, as it has been for the past five years, with the notable exception of the 2.5 percent increase in Manitoba Budget 2015. This is the case both federally and provincially, as shown above. The new emphasis on those who are very close to being job-ready and who will have access to wrap-around supports in a centralized location does not establish more community-based literacy programs in the many low-income neighbourhoods in Winnipeg and other urban centres in Manitoba where it is most needed and where the demand for such programming exists. Nor does it provide the funds to

move part-time literacy programs into full-time operations to meet the needs of those already on wait lists. The continued absence of a commitment to community-based literacy programming is a glaring omission if the intention is to create an effective provincial adult literacy strategy.

Large numbers of people who are far from job-ready and who are among the very poor could, with the right programs in place, improve their own and their children's and families' circumstances. When a parent acquires basic literacy skills she can read to her children at bedtime.

She can read the notes that come home from her children's school. She can read the newspaper. Her children are likely to do better in school as a result, and her reach into her surrounding world is likely to widen. Self-confidence and self-esteem can grow. Engagement in the community is likely to increase, and volunteer opportunities open up. In many cases employment becomes a future possibility. But even when employment is not the ultimate outcome, the benefits of literacy are many, as a large body of literature attests (Silver 2014).

The Next Step: Building a Better Foundation

What we need is the *foundation* to a literacy strategy — the community-based literacy programs that are located where low-income people live, and that I have elsewhere called the “first rung on the ladder” (Silver 2014). It is important to have a centralized program with wrap-around supports for those on Employment and Income Assistance who, with just a bit of extra help with job planning and essential skills, can enter the labour force. But we also need a system that starts at ground level, and responds to the needs of those many whose literacy skills are far from job-ready. We need a grassroots, community-based, literacy strategy with basic literacy programming located within walking distance of all low-income communities, and we need funding to existing literacy programs that have wait lists, to enable those community-based programs to move from part-time to full-time to meet the demand for their services. We have seen in Lord Selkirk Park how exceptionally effective a community-based education strategy can be in a very low-income neighbourhood (Silver et al. 2015; Silver and Young 2015), and we have seen the less dramatic but still significant gains made in Westgrove Housing, another low-income community that has

benefitted from a grassroots literacy program (Silver 2014).

The provincial government has provided the lion’s share of the funding for these initiatives. Greater progress would be made if the federal government were to reverse the cuts to literacy programming that have been made since 2006.

A community-based literacy program, together with an Adult Learning Centre (ALC), ought to be located within reasonable walking distance of every low-income community in Winnipeg. This means the addition of literacy programs and ALCs in the inner city, but it would also mean literacy and adult education programs in the many suburban pockets of poverty as well, many of them associated with Manitoba Housing complexes, as well as in smaller urban centres across the province.

Building a stronger foundation for literacy programming in Manitoba will be a challenge for a provincial government that is coping with relatively large annual deficits, that is committed to maintaining existing services, and that has recently made significant anti-poverty investments, as indicated above. To make further public investments in the community-based foundations of a literacy program will be difficult in the absence of federal literacy funding.

The costs of funding community-based literacy programs of the kind described here could be much more easily managed if the federal government were to reverse the cuts to literacy programming that have been made since 2006. As is the case with so many aspects of an effective anti-poverty strategy — social housing is a good example (Brandon and Silver 2015) — the failure of the federal government to invest is a major impediment to progress.

But the creation of a community-based literacy program within walking distance of low-income neighbourhoods would produce benefits that exceed the costs well into the future. Doing

so would be consistent with other important steps taken by the provincial government to combat poverty, and would be consistent with the community-based philosophy that has characterized so many of Manitoba's successful anti-poverty initiatives. This is a logical next step in building a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy in Manitoba. And the costs of such an undertaking would be relatively modest — community-based literacy programs do a lot, even with limited funding.

The continued failure to invest in community-based literacy programming will serve to perpetuate a major factor in the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

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