

**British Columbia's Public Libraries:  
Addressing the Challenge of Adult Literacy**

**A Joint Submission of  
the BC Library Trustees Association and the BC Library Association  
to the All Party Select Standing Committee on Education**

**Background:**

The British Columbia Library Trustees' Association (BCLTA), founded in 1977, represents the boards and trustees that govern local public libraries. The organization represents 69 library boards and over 650 library trustees who volunteer their time on library boards throughout the province. BCLTA's mission is "to develop and support library trustees to advance public library service in BC."

The British Columbia Library Association (BCLA), founded in 1911, represents over 800 members, including library trustees, librarians, and library personnel, as well as corporate, government, school and academic libraries; publishers and library supply companies. Part of BCLA's mission is to initiate and coordinate projects to improve library services and information access in BC and encourage continuing education for library staff through workshops, seminars and conferences. BCLA's Literacy Interest Group works to foster greater collaboration between libraries and other literacy agencies and to ensure that BC's library community remains informed of literacy initiatives within the province and beyond.

Public libraries are greatly valued and highly respected public institutions that provide a vital service for everyone. Local governments in every jurisdiction of BC recognize the value of strong public library services in their communities and provide significant local tax support for operations. Over 98% of BC's citizens are served by public libraries through 238 different service points providing over 424,000 total hours of service annually.

Premier Gordon Campbell has described public libraries as "the front lines of the effort to make British Columbia the most literate place in the world". Starting in 2005/2006, the Province of British Columbia has increased funding for libraries to provide broadband to every community library, increase access to online journals and establish a provincial OneCard system and virtual reference desk that is open to anyone anywhere in British Columbia.

BC's public libraries welcome the All Party Select Standing Committee on Education's investigation of effective strategies to address the challenge of adult literacy. This brief will highlight examples of how BC's public libraries are contributing today to meeting this challenge, particularly among the province's Aboriginal peoples, English-as-a-second language adults and seniors. It will also include several recommendations around how the Provincial Government can

support the work already being done in communities to improve literacy rates for all British Columbians.

### **Working with Aboriginal Peoples to Encourage and Support Literacy and Learning:**

There are many examples of public libraries working collaboratively with First Nations communities, with mutual respect and mutual involvement, to promote and support literacy and learning.

One such collaboration involves the **Lillooet Public Library** and **St'át'ímc First Nations Tribal Council**. A St'át'ímc presence has been maintained on the Lillooet Public Library Board for most of its more than 15 years of providing library service to the Lillooet area.

In addition to a number of staff at the library having taken language courses in the St'át'ímc language, the library hires First Nations university and high school students as summer interns. The library strives to create a welcoming environment for First Nations people by hiring First Nations staff, inviting First Nations authors to share their stories, providing access to a First Nations collection, displaying First Nations art, and providing a St'át'ímc presence on the library web site. This section of the web site was created and is maintained by the student interns, with the permission of the St'át'ímc First Nations Tribal Council.

One of the many issues the library faces is making library services accessible and relevant to reserve communities outside of town. The Library has offered computer literacy training at local reserves, using a portable laptop lab available from the Public Library Services Branch, with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Children's Services Outreach activities include story times provided in classrooms; as well, visits to the library from the on-reserve preschool children for story time are encouraged. The *Blue Box* program involves filling recycling boxes with preschool materials for children and teachers and delivering these to the on-reserve preschools. The *Summer Reading Club* offered at the library each year is attended by children registered at the summer camp program at the Lillooet Friendship Centre. The *Book About Me* program encourages children to write and illustrate their own biographies. In addition, the library has started translating children's books into the St'át'ímc language, and these books are distributed to families through public health nurses as part of the 'Baby Bin' given to new mothers.

With the help of Public Library Services Branch and the British Columbia Library Association's First Nations Interest Group, the Lillooet Public Library is currently consulting with community members about future library services that could be offered on-reserve. For more information, see the Lillooet Public Library's web site at: [www.lillooetlibrary.ca](http://www.lillooetlibrary.ca)

## **Working with English-As-A-Second-Language Adults to Encourage and Support Literacy and Learning:**

There are many examples of where public libraries assist English-as-a-second-language adults to learn English and develop the skills required to find employment. All public libraries in BC provide materials for adults learners - from learning to read and form letters of the alphabet, to intermediate or advanced adapted novels; “read-along” sets of a novel with accompanying CD or cassette; stories written by other learners, workbooks in basic arithmetic, grammar, job search, shopping and other life skills, to list but a few. Adult-interest graphic novels and comics are a recent, popular addition to library collections. While these materials can also be of use to the ESL adult, specific ESL materials - audio-visual materials; foreign language dictionaries (e.g. Punjabi-English; Vietnamese-English, etc); texts that are consistently used in the community college ESL programs; TOEFL exam preparation materials are also now core items in public library collections. Many public libraries also provide materials specifically for ESL or literacy teachers and tutors. Library staff are also knowledgeable of the various literacy programs being offered in their community and often refer people to other agencies or organizations.

It is important to acknowledge that many ESL adults are already literate in their first language and public libraries are also supporting literacy and learning in that first language by providing collections in languages other than English.

Many public libraries in the Greater Vancouver area offer “Conversation Circles” where ESL adults can come together to practice English with their peers while supported by a Librarian who leads the conversation and helps learners build their vocabulary. **Richmond Public Library** ([www.yourlibrary.ca](http://www.yourlibrary.ca)) and **Burnaby Public Library** ([www.bpl.bc.ca](http://www.bpl.bc.ca)) are but two examples of libraries that offer these programs. In addition, **Surrey Public Library** ([www.spl.surrey.bc.ca](http://www.spl.surrey.bc.ca)) has a Language Lab at its Strawberry Hill Branch where learners can learn English at their own pace using the latest in self-teaching software and audio CD kits. Space is available in some libraries for Learning Centres or meetings with a tutor. Burnaby Public Library works in partnership with Vancouver Community College and the Adult Learning Centre at Burnaby’s Kingsway Branch is the busiest centre in the Lower Mainland.

For many English-as-a-second-language adults, one of the most compelling reasons to learn English is to help ensure their child’s or, in many cases, their grandchild’s success in school. **Burnaby School District #41** recognized this and established seven **Parenting and Family Literacy Centres** which operate as free-of-charge drop-in programs for parents, grandparents and caregivers with children from birth to 5 years old. Burnaby Public Library has been a partner with the School District on this project since its inception.

The Parenting and Family Literacy Centres first opened in 2004 in response to data from the Early Child Development Mapping Project (HELP) indicating that a

large proportion of children living in neighbourhoods now served by the Centres enter school vulnerable in the area of language and cognitive development. They lack the vocabulary, sentence structure, phonemic awareness, experience with books and other basic skills that are required to be successful learners. Children who start behind generally stay behind.

The Parenting and Family Literacy Centres help parents to be more effective “first teachers” of their children by providing them with specific skills materials to increase their literacy behaviours. The Centres support not only emergent literacy but also opportunities for cross-cultural communication through hearing, reading and sharing stories.

All centres are in elementary schools and are open 10 months of the year for three hours each weekday morning. Most of the Parenting and Family Literacy Centres are located in areas of Burnaby that are isolated from existing library branches and services. Many families living in these neighbourhoods are unable to afford transportation to the public library and lack access to reading materials and other early literacy resources. Burnaby Public Library has been an active partner in the Parenting and Family Literacy Centres in Burnaby from the beginning. The Library provides rotating deposit collections of picture books for the Centres, presents training sessions for Centre facilitators, and lends thematic story time kits to the Centres to assist staff in the presentation of age appropriate story times. This year, the Library will expand its role by having children’s librarians visit the Centres monthly to connect with families in a more personal and direct way.

### **Working Intergenerationally to Encourage and Support Literacy and Learning Among Seniors:**

As with working with English-as-a-second-language adults, experience has proven that working with seniors in an intergenerational approach to literacy and learning is most effective.

One such example of this intergenerational model is *Community Connections for Success*, a family literacy project developed through the collaboration of a non-profit organization, **Houston Link to Learning**, and the **Houston Public Library** ( [www.houston.library.ca](http://www.houston.library.ca) ). The program grew out of concerns about trying to support literacy without addressing the broader issues related to literacy including poverty, social support and transportation.

The project includes a number of programs and services, which aim to create a community network and remove barriers to learning and education. These include a community kitchen, a community garden, a parent-child drop-in program held at the health centre, workshops for parents provided with free meals and child care, the ‘borrowing without rules’ program whereby people can

access library resources without due dates or fines, and a parent/child *Mother Goose* story time program.

In the community kitchen program, for example, participants work on reading and writing skills by using recipes, learning about nutrition, preparing shopping lists and so on. As part of the program, 'guest speakers' are invited to meet and eat with participants informally to discuss and learn about issues of interest to the group. Participants also prepare meals to take home to their families, thereby alleviating pressures around lack of time and money. Child care and family literacy activities are included in the program.

The success of *Community Connections for Success* has led to a new collaboration with Northwest Community College, and the project is now creating opportunities for participants to receive educational credits.

### **Effective Strategies Being Used Today by Public Libraries to Address the Challenge of Adult Literacy:**

The programs highlighted in this report, specifically the Lillooet Public Library's work with the St'át'imc First Nations Tribal Council, the Houston *Community Connections for Success*, and Burnaby School District #41's Parenting and Family Literacy Centres all model the same three strategies:

- **Working Collaboratively with other Community Agencies and Committees;**
- **Respecting and Involving Learners; and**
- **Working Intergenerationally**

The success of these initiatives demonstrates the effectiveness of these strategies and we would encourage the All Party Select Standing Committee on Education to visit the sites of these three programs to see first hand how the programs work and meet with representatives from the three programs so that they can share their experience.

### **Recommendations:**

**Support success.** Inconsistent funding is the primary hurdle for community collaborations such as *Community Connections for Success*. While the program has received some grant funding and in-kind support, these have been limited and as a result the program is run largely by volunteer support. BCLTA and BCLA recommend that the Government of British Columbia explore options for funding to nurture community networks and collaborations and provide ongoing funding to sustain these networks and collaborations.

**Fund to encourage long-term collaboration.** The current funding model is short-term and project based. This discourages long-term planning and collaboration. Collaborations are built on trust over time and it takes time to build those solid relationships.

**Consider community benefits and community satisfaction with programs when measuring outcomes.** Typically, funding for literacy projects is contingent on a readily measurable, “numerical” output. For example, a project’s success might be measured by the number of participants who become employed after a given time period. There are community benefits which need to be taken into account – the person who now feels more confident with print material or computers; the person who now feels more comfortable asking for help in a library; the person who experiences for the first time the pleasure in being able to read a picture book to his/her grandchild. Another important measure not currently considered is whether the community is satisfied with the program and whether the program is valued and seen as important by the community.

### **Conclusion:**

British Columbia’s public libraries are on the front lines of the effort to make British Columbia the most literate place in the world. Libraries have moved beyond the more traditional role of simply providing resources and are working collaboratively with other community agencies and committees, respecting and involving learners and working across generations. No one organization has all the answers to addressing the challenge of adult literacy. We can achieve so much more by working together than we ever can by working alone.

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