



# **Federal Literacy Facts**

*An update on literacy-related developments at the national level*

**Movement for Canadian Literacy**

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## ***New Government, New Priorities: What does it mean for literacy?***

Canada's new Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, has announced a set of renewed priorities for the country. Among these are cleaning up government; lowering taxes; strengthening the justice system; implementing a renewed childcare initiative; and improving healthcare. Although indirectly linked to justice, health, and families, literacy itself is clearly not pinpointed as an immediate government priority.

Nevertheless, there is still reason to hope that the community's work over the past few years will not be wasted. Compared to a few years ago, literacy has a much higher national profile as a public policy issue. This is due to our efforts as a community to develop meaningful policy advice and action plans; to statistical releases that point to the need for action; and to intergovernmental recognition of literacy as a priority. There is also a growing awareness of how literacy connects to a broad cross-section of federal responsibilities, including immigrant settlement, Aboriginal issues, health, and more.

Post-election transition will have an impact on the community's efforts to secure literacy advances, and also on the results of those efforts. This update explores the possible impact.

## **Reuniting Skills and Social Development**

As one of his first acts, Prime Minister Harper chose to reintegrate Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) with Social Development Canada. For the past few years, literacy has called HRSDC home. There is no question that the merger of these two departments means that literacy will have to compete with many other policy priorities for the new Minister's attention. The bright side may be that the merger ends the three-year separation of social policy and skills policy.

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## ***New Minister of Human Resources and Social Development***

Diane Finley has been named the new Cabinet Minister responsible for literacy as she takes the top job at Human Resources and Social Development Canada – a department that rejoins Human Resources and Skills Development Canada with Social Development Canada.

Ms. Finley represents the riding of Haldimond-Norfolk, a largely rural riding in southwestern Ontario. After being elected in 2004, she served as the Conservative Party critic for Agriculture and Agri-Food. In private life, she held a number of senior positions, including one in the education sector as an administrator in the University of Western Ontario's French Immersion school. She has also worked in the health care, transportation, agricultural equipment manufacturing, publishing and aviation fields. While with the Laidlaw group of companies, she launched and built Canada's largest private ambulance services company.

In Cabinet, Ms. Finley will also serve as the Vice-Chair of the Cabinet Social Affairs Committee. You can find more information about the new Minister at [www.dianefinley.ca](http://www.dianefinley.ca).

In other developments, Alan Nymark has been appointed Deputy Minister for the department. Mr. Nymark was formerly the Deputy Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development. As the leading official in a very large portfolio, he will have an important role in informing and carrying out Ministerial directions.

The Parliamentary Secretary for the new department is Saskatchewan MP Lynne Yelich. Parliamentary Secretaries support the Minister in a variety of ways, pinch hit in Parliament, and act as a link to Parliamentarians.

*(New Government, continued)*

In a department dedicated specifically to labour market development, the social benefits of literacy – including its impact on everything from health to justice to citizenship – tended to be downplayed. Because of jurisdictional considerations, the federal government may continue to see literacy primarily as a lever for labour market development. But with literacy once again housed in a federal department with a mandate to advance Canada's social prospects as well as its economic prospects, there may be more opportunities to broaden that perspective. This is especially true since the rationale for the merger is to ensure "integrated policy development".

**How will federal transition impact on past commitments to literacy?**

Recently, there have been some important federal commitments in support of literacy. Here's a partial list of some key initiatives, and where they stand.

**\$3.5 billion for skills agenda**

November's federal economic update targeted \$3.5 billion for initiatives to enhance Canada's workforce, including literacy and essential skills upgrading. The bulk of this money was intended to fund new Labour Market Partnership Agreements (LMPAs) negotiated with the provinces and territories. In December, multi-million-dollar agreements were signed with Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. All of these agreements included investments for literacy and essential skills. However, the \$3.5 billion was never approved by Parliament. We understand that before these funds can flow, the allocation will have to be re-introduced by the new government. Given Conservative Party platform promises, many believe that this commitment will be honoured.

**Increased funding for the NLS**

In the February 2005 federal budget, the government committed \$30 million over three years to the National Literacy Secretariat. As these funds were approved by Parliament, we understand that they should continue to flow. MCL will continue to monitor how the transition impacts on the NLS, and report back to the community.

**Literacy Action Plans developed by the community and presented to the government**

Last Summer and Fall, the government held cross-country consultations and asked for community action plans to inform a comprehensive literacy strategy. Many local and provincial groups submitted plans. In addition, MCL worked with other national literacy organizations to deliver a *10-year Results-Based Literacy Action Plan*. In November, a multi-sectoral national committee endorsed and built on these action plans in the report *Towards a Fully Literate Canada: Achieving National Goals Through a Comprehensive Pan-Canadian Literacy Strategy*. Although the community's recommendations were not acted on before the election, the need for action and the community's vision remain strong. Links to the 10-year Action Plan and the Committee report can be found at under government relations at [www.literacy.ca](http://www.literacy.ca).

**Conservatives on the record for literacy**

During the campaign, MCL wrote to each of the Party Leaders to ask where they stood on literacy. Here's how the Conservatives responded to our questions about a comprehensive strategy: "A Conservative government would look forward to discussing the blueprint for action on literacy with you and reviewing your proposals to address this issue." We will take them up on this commitment.

Here's more of what the Party had to say:

*"The Conservative Party of Canada is committed to working cooperatively with the provinces and municipalities to ensure that all Canadians have the literacy skills required to meet the challenges of the knowledge based economy of the 21st Century."*

And this: *"The Conservative Party will work co-operatively with the provinces to develop a plan to address literacy at all ages. We recognize that only by working with all levels of government will we develop a plan to address the pressing issue of literacy in this country."*

The Party also promised to encourage their members to meet with representatives of grass roots literacy organizations in their ridings. We encourage local literacy programs to follow up on this offer! Look to [www.literacy.ca](http://www.literacy.ca) for the full text of the Conservative Party's response to MCL's questions.