

Who Wants to Learn?

Summary of results from the national study "Patterns of Participation" EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to literacy education critical in Canada

Although Canadians as a group are more formally educated and literate than ever before, a significant percentage of Canadians lack the basic literacy skills that help with daily life and are required for many jobs today. According to Statistics Canada (1996):

- twenty-two percent of Canadians have serious difficulties with any type of printed material;
- A further 26 percent struggle with all but the most simple of reading and writing tasks.

The most shocking statistic may no longer be how many Canadians have low literacy skills, but rather how few are being helped by the country's current service delivery mechanisms.

- Only a small fraction (estimates range from 5 to 10 percent) of eligible adults have ever enrolled in a literacy or upgrading program.
- Among those who do enrol, dropout rates are high.

Follow-up research has typically been done with people who have either completed or dropped out of programs. Little is known about the experience of those who attempt to enrol but are unsuccessful. That's why, in 1999, ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation commissioned a study called "Patterns of Participation in Canadian Literacy and Upgrading Programs" to learn about the experience of people who contact literacy groups for help.

Who is seeking literacy and upgrading education?

"Patterns of Participation" interviewed more than 300 people who were seeking information about literacy and upgrading education across Canada (with the exception of French Canada and the Yukon).

- More than 80 percent identify English as their language of greatest fluency.
- Nearly half are employed.
- Nearly a quarter are receiving some form of social assistance.
- Close to half of potential learners live in households with annual incomes of less than \$20,000 a year.

A number of barriers to literacy

The "Patterns of Participation" study found that less than half of those who contact a literacy group actually enrol in a program and of those who do enrol, 30 percent drop out.

Program/Policy-Related Factors

- Forty-three percent of those who don't enrol cite program/policy-related problems such as not being called back by a program contact person, long

- waiting lists, inconvenient course times, wrong content or teaching structure, and unhelpful program contact.
- Of those who enrol but drop out, more than a quarter identify program/policy-related factors as the main reason for leaving programs. These factors include wrong program level, content or teaching structure and program cancellation.

Socioeconomic-Circumstantial factors

- Thirty percent of those who do not enrol cite socioeconomic-circumstantial factors as the main barrier.
- Almost half of those who do not enrol in literacy or upgrading programs cite money problems as a contributing factor for not enrolling.
- Of those with children, more than 40 percent of women and close to 20 percent of men cite childcare conflicts as a factor in their decision not to enrol.
- Women are much more likely to cite socioeconomic-circumstantial factors than men, reflecting women's lower incomes and higher degree of responsibility for childcare.
- Socioeconomic-circumstantial factors are an even larger factor in dropping out of programs. Fifty-six percent of those who drop out cite reasons such as job-related conflicts and family responsibilities, especially childcare.

Cognitive-Emotive Factors

- Contrary to popular understanding, cognitive-emotive reasons -- such as fear -- are least likely (15 percent) to be cited as the main factor for not enrolling. Older callers and those with lower levels of formal education are the most likely to cite cognitive-emotive reasons as contributing factors.
- A relatively low proportion of learners (6 percent) offer cognitive-emotive factors as their main reason for leaving a program, although worry or nervousness about being in a program is a contributing factor for more than a quarter of those who drop out.

Problem is systemic

In addition to the underlying problems of poverty, childcare issues and job conflicts, there are dramatic regional variations in models of funding and service delivery across Canada that make it difficult to provide quality programs and service.

Of the groups and programs who participated in this study:

- More than a third have no full-time staff.
- More than two-thirds have one or less full-time staff.
- Close to 40 percent are open less than 35 hours per week.
- Fifty-seven percent close for more than four weeks per year.
- High numbers use volunteers to cover critical teaching and referral work.
- Half do not provide special training for staff or volunteers who do referrals.

What it will take to solve the problem

Given the small fraction of people with low literacy skills who actually contact programs and all the socioeconomic-circumstantial difficulties they must overcome to do so, it is nothing short of tragic when they are not able to enrol because of policy- or program-related barriers.

But what will it take to change the picture of Canadian literacy and upgrading programs from one of low enrolment, high dropout, and precarious participation? Certainly, it is tempting to direct individual literacy organizations to revamp their approach or slash their waiting lists; but without increased program funding and significant infrastructural change, that may not be possible.

Some of the problems facing literacy education in Canada can be alleviated by immediate action and increased funding. Most solutions, however, require longer-term strategies, which include moving away from our current patchwork of assorted programs and services, toward a genuine system for adult basic education.

For public and private sector action

Determine ways to eliminate the barriers, including socio-economic factors, associated with limited enrolment and high drop-out rates:

- Study means of reducing/eliminating student waiting lists through addressing the financial and staffing issues associated with meeting the current and future demands for service.
- Assess resource requirements and means of providing access to all literacy and upgrading programs up to and including high school completion, regardless of learner's age.
- Consider program funding/support that allows for and requires best practices relating to (a) training of intake and referral workers; (b) assessment procedures and program evaluation; (c) effective follow-up with potential learners; (d) assessment of learner support-service requirements.
- Investigate provision of on-site childcare and/or promote partnerships with community-based childcare providers, to offer learners effective childcare options.
- Encourage a diversity of programming, delivery and support models, including workplace basic skills, family literacy programs, distance learning and specialized approaches geared to those in the critical school-to-work transition years (ages 16-24) and those over the age of 45.

For public sector action

- Determine methods of overcoming complex jurisdictional issues that contribute to the current patchwork of programs and services and that inhibit the emergence of a coherent strategy for adult basic education.
- Encourage the development of a process that allows ministers responsible for adult basic education to meet formally to establish goals, review progress and assess new information.

For literacy field action

- Discuss forming a strategic alliance of relevant stakeholders to take a national leadership role in advocating for national access standards and for an improved and stable infrastructure for adult basic education.
- Work to identify and advocate for best practice protocols for referral, intake, follow-up, program evaluation and integrated service delivery.