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## Boost literacy and help tackle alienation and stagnation

By SHERRY CAMPBELL

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Tomorrow is International Literacy Day, when we take stock of how people worldwide are faring when it comes to their level of literacy.

According to UNESCO, some 774 million adults worldwide lack minimum literacy skills; one in five adults is still not literate and two-thirds of them are women; 75 million children are out-of-school and many more attend irregularly or drop out.

In Canada, the literacy trend is troubling and getting worse. The Canadian Council on Learning's recent report, *Reading the Future*, indicates nearly half of all adult Canadians (48 per cent) have low literacy skills and forecasts that number to grow by more than three million to 15 million by 2031.

While you're reading this article, one in six of your fellow Canadians cannot read the headline of today's newspaper. That's millions of Canadians who have trouble with everyday reading and writing requirements for life and work.

Other studies, including those from the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS), the Vanier Institute of the Family and TD Bank Financial Group, have shown that low literacy skills are directly linked to poverty, high unemployment, lack of civic participation and poor health.

According to the Canadian Public Health Association, an estimated 55 per cent of Canadians aged 16 to 65 lack the minimum level of health literacy to manage their health information needs on their own.

Only one to two per cent of the approximately nine million less-literate, working-age Canadians currently receive the support they need. These findings should be of concern to everyone who cares about Canada's future.

So what can be done? We need to place more importance on the value of a literate society.

A good start would be for governments and the private sector to commit more resources to the many literacy organizations that reach out to Canadians with low literacy levels who have been left behind, including those who dropped out of high school (this is especially a concern for youth living in isolated First Nations communities); immigrants struggling to adapt; street youth and those with developmental disabilities.

Next, we must promote greater co-operation between community partners who can reach out to Canadians struggling to improve their literacy levels and connect them to appropriate services. This is where agencies, school boards, unions and community organizations can make a difference.

At Frontier College, our emphasis is on working with community partners across the country to provide literacy services to as many Canadians as possible while building local community capacity to meet the needs of learners. Finally, we need to remove the sense of shame and stigma that many Canadians with low literacy levels live with if we're to encourage more Canadians to access the services they need.

The 2004 IALSS showed that raising the country's literacy skills by one per cent has been linked to an eventual 2.5 per cent rise in labour productivity and a 1.5 per cent rise in output per capita. The economy, while obviously important, is only one part of the picture. A literate society is one where fewer accidents happen because people can read safety manuals; where health isn't compromised because people can read the instructions on their prescription medications; where people can make it to appointments because they can read a bus schedule or street signs; and where more people are engaged in their communities because they can follow current events in the newspaper. In short, a literate society is one where millions of Canadians who struggle with low literacy levels can get the support they need to reach their potential.

Sherry Campbell is President of Frontier College, Canada's oldest literacy organization.  
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