
Responses from Political Parties Regarding Early Literacy in Canada

October 4, 2019

In Canada, there is a belief that all Canadians can read; however, while most can read, not everyone can read well enough to realize their economic potential.¹ We, the undersigned, share a deep concern that far too many Canadian children are falling behind in their journey to become capable and confident readers. With each passing day, those who struggle with literacy in their earliest and most formative years are at greater risk of being further left out of Canada's social, economic and political life in adulthood.

In support of the full development of Canadian capital and a first-class competitive economy, we urge you to review the recent research which has shown *that a one per cent increase in average literacy scores leads, over time, to a three per cent increase in GDP per capita and a five per cent increase in labour productivity. In Canada, that could mean another \$50 billion per year in GDP.*²

It is **essential** that the **Government of Canada acts quickly and effectively with the provinces and territories to promote literacy during early childhood**. Expenditure on literacy should be considered an investment in a skilled future workforce, sustained economic growth, fuller employment, and increased social justice – paying long-term dividends for national harmony and prosperity in Canada as a whole.

WHY IS THIS SO IMPORTANT?

- ▶ By talking, reading and interacting with their infant children, particularly during the **first 1,000 days of a child's life**, parents provide a sound and positive foundation on which to build as the child grows through formal education and adulthood. Early child development sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, and health. The experiences children have in early childhood shape the brain and the child's capacity to learn, to get along with others, and to respond to daily stresses and challenges.³
- ▶ For 80 per cent of children, simple immersion in reading and books will lead to independent reading by school age.⁴
- ▶ Canada ranked eighth out of 15 countries evaluated by the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) on the percentage of adults with adequate literacy skills. The assessment found that the percentage of adults with inadequate literacy skills (48 per cent) has increased significantly over the previous decade.⁵
- ▶ Forty-eight per cent of adult Canadians have low literacy skills that fall below high school equivalency and affect their ability to function at work and in their personal lives. Seventeen per cent function at the lowest level, where individuals may, for example, be unable to read the dosage instructions on a medicine bottle.⁶

¹ What Now? Busted: 11 enduring literacy myths, Canada West Foundation, Policy Brief September 2019.

² Schwerdt and Wiederhold. *Literacy and Growth: New evidence from PIAAC*. 2019. cwf.ca and DataAngel.ca Coulombe, S. Tremblay, J.F and Marchand)

³ McCain MN, Mustard JF, Shanker S. *Early years study 2: Putting science into action*. Toronto, ON: Council for Early Child Development; 2007.

⁴ *How to Make Your Child a Reader for Life*, Paul Kropp, Random House Canada, 2000

⁵ OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, 2013 Statistics Canada; OECD; The Conference Board of Canada

⁶ OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, 2013 Statistics Canada; OECD; The Conference Board of Canada

On September 17, 2019, we asked each political party four questions regarding early literacy in Canada. We received responses from the Liberal Party of Canada, the New Democratic Party of Canada, and the Green Party of Canada, which are included in this document, below. The Conservative Party of Canada, the People's Party of Canada, and Bloc Québécois have yet to provide their responses.

How does your party intend to respond to declining literacy rates in Canada?

Liberal Party of Canada

Over the past four years, our Liberal government has made a number of significant investments in child care and families, including: the Canada Child Benefit; the Early Learning and Child Care Framework (ELCC), which invested \$7.5 billion dollars to create tens of thousands of new child care spaces around the country; and a commitment to develop an additional 40,000 high quality and affordable learning spaces each year, rising to 100,000 by 2030. Earlier in this campaign, we also announced that a re-elected Liberal government will help by: Creating up to 250,000 more before and after school spaces for kids under ten; putting \$800 back into the pockets of the average Ontario family of four — every year — by lowering parents' fees by ten per cent across the country; and dedicating a target of ten per cent of the new spaces to provide more child care options for parents who work overtime, late shifts, or multiple jobs so they can count on help when they need it most. We will get this done by nearly doubling the current level of federal support provided to provinces and territories for child care.

Our party does believe that we must constantly be looking to improve literacy rates, for all ages, and we believe the additional investments and commitments we have made with provinces and territories ensure the federal government does its part to provide adequate funding for education in a variety of areas, including literacy.

NDP Party of Canada

Decades of Liberal indifference and Conservative cuts have left our country's education systems in chaos. Year after year teachers and school boards are asked to do more with less. The equation for student success isn't fewer teachers with less time and smaller budgets, teaching more and more students in bigger classrooms.

The way to improve student outcomes is to ensure that our schools and our children have the resources and the support they need.

How will your party support children in their early years to improve school readiness?

Liberal Party of Canada

See Question #1

NDP Party of Canada

A New Democrat government would invest over \$1B in our first year in office on a national affordable early learning and child care system. Our plan would ensure that no matter where they live or what they do for a living, parents will have access to safe, affordable, and accessible child care. Our plan will focus on early learning because we know that when children get the learning supports they need early in life they're being set up for a lifetime of success. Liberals have been promising national early learning and child care since 1993 and they've broken that promise every single election. Liberals have a lot of pretty words about the importance of child care during the election, but everyday Canadians can't count on empty talk for childcare.

What is your party's plan to end child poverty?

Liberal Party of Canada

We will continue the work we have already started with the National Poverty Reduction Strategy, which committed Canada to achieving a 20% reduction in poverty by 2020 and a 50% reduction by 2030, established an Official Poverty Line, and set up a National Advisory Council on Poverty. As it stands, child poverty is now its lowest rate since the new MBM measure was established by Statistics Canada, and this will continue to decline as we implement the Poverty Reduction Strategy. The Poverty Reduction Strategy brings together \$22 billion in anti-poverty investments that have helped lift more than 850,000 Canadians out of poverty, including almost 300,000 children, but we recognize that there's still more to do, and we'll continue to explore all options to help Canadians working hard to join the middle class.

NDP Party of Canada

In 1989 NDP Leader Ed Broadbent stood in the House of Commons and called for the elimination of child poverty by the year 2000. Thirty years later and we're no closer to that goal. Every single election for the past thirty years, Liberals have promised to end poverty, and every single time when the election is over, they immediately abandon that promise. While the Liberals solution to poverty is nothing more than empty talk and broken promises, the Conservative have gone out of their way to make things worse with big cuts to services. Unlike Liberals and Conservatives an NDP government would take concrete action to end poverty. We'll establish a national school-nutrition program to ensure that every single child from coast to coast to coast has access to a healthy meal, because kids can't focus on learning on an empty stomach. Our New Deal for Families also includes head-to-toe public healthcare – including pharmacare and dentalcare – because we know that healthcare and poverty are directly linked.

Will your party pledge to invest in Early Childhood Development starting when children are born?

Liberal Party of Canada

The Liberal Party intends to continue the work we have already begun on investing in Early Childhood Development. Recognizing the importance of improving access to high-quality, inclusive, and affordable child care across Canada, we will create a secretariat to work across federal departments and with provinces and territories to establish best practices and consistent quality standards in child care. We will also give more support to our early childhood educators, by investing at least \$25 million per year to ensure they are better paid and trained to take care of our kids. Under the ELCC framework, we have invested in the Early Childhood Education Bursary Fund and the Workforce Development Bursary Fund, to provide greater training for early learning and child care professionals and increase the quality of child care.

These investments over the last four years focus specifically on supporting learning and development in the earliest years of life.

NDP Party of Canada

The first five years of a child's development are some of the most important in ensuring healthy development. That's why it's so important to ensure that early learning and developmental supports are in place right from birth. Unfortunately, the Liberals and the Conservatives have either failed to invest or have cut funding for these essential programs. Kids can't be expected to get ahead if their government won't give them the support they need. Unlike Liberals and Conservatives, Jagmeet Singh's New Deal for families invests in the supports and services that our families and children deserve – like early learning and child care, health care, and education.

Our investments in health care, education, and social services will ensure that children and families have access to the best possible start in life.

Green Party of Canada Statement

Greens believe it is time to put the interests of our children at the centre of decision-making. Greens will appoint a federal Children's Advocate to ensure that children's rights are protected. Far too many children are in care. Far too many children are in poverty. And far too many of those children are Indigenous. Every Canadian child deserves equal services, from early childhood education to adulthood.

Of all Canada's social problems, child poverty may be the most shameful. In 1989, the old-line political parties voted unanimously to end child poverty by the year 2000. Despite recent improvements, far too many Canadian children still grow up in poverty. Child poverty rates are especially high among Indigenous Peoples, single-parent households headed by women, and new Canadians. Canada now ranks a dismal 25th out of 38 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development in terms of relative child poverty rates.

We can eliminate child poverty in Canada. We must start by recommitting to a vision of Canada as a just society built around a progressive, fair, and compassionate social safety network. Unlike the old-line parties, the Green Party believes reducing child poverty is not just about expanding the middle class; we must undertake real structural change to tackle the root causes of poverty. Poverty is a systemic problem that arises from low wages and insufficient income assistance, a precarious job market, a shortage of affordable housing and quality child care, and cuts in social programs. It is also tied directly to issues of bias and discrimination on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, and citizenship, as well as the ongoing legacy of colonization. Eliminating poverty requires systemic action on all these fronts with safe secure housing as a fundamental human right at its core.

The Green Party will establish a universal Guaranteed Livable Income (GLI) program to replace the current array of income supports, such as disability payments, social assistance and income supplements for seniors. Payment would be set at a "livable" level for different regions of the country. The negotiation to implement a livable income across the country would take place through the Council of Canadian Governments. Unlike existing income support programs, additional income would not be clawed back. Those earning above a certain total income would pay the GLI back in taxes.

Meanwhile, families need child care. Universal child care is fundamental for women's equality –the "ramp to equality in the workplace for women." Canada needs a plan – a road map to affordable child / care for all children. A Green government will collaborate with provinces/territories, local communities, Indigenous communities and the child-care sector to ensure that a comprehensive short-, medium- and long-term policy road map – based on the principles of universality, affordability, quality, inclusivity and equity – finally becomes a reality.

Canada must dedicate additional resources to making a universal, affordable, early learning and child-care (ELCC) system a reality. It cannot occur without public funding. Canada needs an ELCC system that contributes to a green Canada. Thus, a Green Party government's child care plan will provide the early educator jobs that sustain local communities. It will also recognize that sparsely and unevenly available child-care services force parents to take out-of-their-way routes to child care and work, often by car. Green Party plans for child care take into account not only parents' convenience but also climate goals. Location of child care must reflect the diversity of family needs and be placed along existing public transit routes, including neighbourhood schools, other local buildings, workplaces and transportation hubs.

The best evidence suggests that ELCC is best situated within the context of other policies that support families and children. A Green Party government will follow the example of Quebec and other countries, improving and strengthening maternity/parental leave by making it more inclusive, more flexible and better paid. Well-designed ELCC is also fundamental to meeting broader equity and social justice goals, for fighting poverty, as a foundation for children's life-long learning, and as part of the backbone of a thriving society. Quality child care yields high social and economic returns in the short and long term by: ● Supporting women's workforce participation, education and training. ● Strengthening children's health, development and well-being in the early years to provide a strong foundation for learning and living in later years. ● Strengthening inclusion and respect for diversity for children with disabilities, diverse ethnic and racial groups, newcomers and disadvantaged Canadians.

A Green Party government will immediately begin to ramp up federal child care funding to achieve the international benchmark of at least one per cent of GDP annually, adding an additional \$1 billion each year until this benchmark is reached with a mature ELCC system. We will eliminate GST on all construction costs related to child-care spaces.

Signatories Canada's Children Literacy Leaders

Mack Rogers	Executive Director	ABC Life Literacy Canada
Steady Collyer	CEO	Calgary Reads
Rose Vespa	Executive Director	Canadian Children's Book Centre
Ariel Siller	CEO	Canadian Children's Literacy Foundation
Scott Walter	Executive Director	Canadian Organization for Development through Education
Elizabeth Moreau	Director, Communications & Knowledge Translation	Canadian Pediatric Society (CPS)
Sharon Jennings	President	Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators, Performers (CANSCAIP); Canadian Children's Book Centre
Eric Walters	Former Teacher, Author, Speaker	CANSCAIP
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Dr. Suzanne Tough	Professor Principal Investigator	Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary All Our Babies/Families Cohort
Nora Briggs	Executive Director, North America	The Dollywood Foundation supporting Dolly Parton's Imagination Library
Jeanne Smitiuch	Director, Canada	The Dollywood Foundation of Canada supporting Dolly Parton's Imagination Library
Tina Thomas	Executive Director, Strategy & Innovation; Member	Edmonton Public Library
Kathilee Porter	Project Manager	Canadian Urban Library Council
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