

Fact Sheet

Importance of Literacy



Literacy Levels in BC



- Over 500,000 British Columbians have significant challenges with literacy. (16% of British Columbians are at Level 1 literacy or below.) ⁽²⁰⁾
- Due in part to limited literacy skills, 45% of British Columbians aged 16 to 65 have difficulty in accomplishing some daily living tasks including filling out a form, comparison shopping and understanding instructions. (These are individuals who are at or below Level 2 literacy in the latest OECD international adult literacy survey.) ⁽²⁰⁾
- Due in part to limited numeracy skills, 52% of British Columbians aged 16 to 65 have difficulty in accomplishing some daily living tasks, including reading a scale, using information on a graph, creating a budget and calculating dosage for children's medicine. (These are individuals who are at or below Level 2 numeracy in the latest OECD international adult literacy survey.) ⁽²⁰⁾
- Overall, higher levels of education are associated with higher level of skills, but results indicate that a proportion of those with higher levels of education score at the lowest level of skill and some with lower levels of education perform at the highest level of skills. ⁽²⁰⁾

Literacy Matters for the Economy



- Investment in education and skills training (human capital) is three times as important to economic growth over the long run as investment in machinery and equipment (physical capital). ⁽⁹⁾
- The average literacy score in a population is a better indicator of growth than the percentage of the population with very high literacy scores. ⁽⁹⁾
- If a country is able to improve its average literacy score by 1%, it is estimated that it will generate an increase in labour productivity above 2 % and a higher relative per capita GDP of 1.5%. ⁽⁸⁾
- It's estimated that investment over 5 years to raise the skills of all BC adults to the minimum level required for full participation in a knowledge economy and information society would result in a strong rate of return. This return would be seen through increased income tax revenue and decreased spending on Employment Insurance, Social Assistance and Workers Compensation. ⁽¹²⁾

Literacy Matters for Work



- “Almost 600,000 working British Columbians - over one quarter of those currently employed - do not have the minimum literacy and essential skills required to successfully participate in a knowledge economy.” ^(11, p.6)
- Having strong literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills is positively connected to being part of the labour market. It is also associated with being employed and earning higher wages. ⁽¹⁴⁾
- Individuals with higher literacy levels have higher earnings. They also have more growth in earnings, over time, than individuals with lower levels. If an individual experiences literacy growth, they tend to see increased employment and earnings over the same period. If an individual experiences a loss of literacy skills, they tend to see decreased employment and earnings. ⁽¹⁵⁾
- Literacy is vital for workplace health and safety. For example, failure to comprehend written or verbal instructions due to low literacy and language skills could result in improper handling of dangerous equipment or hazardous materials, inability to respond effectively to emergencies, or dispensing improper medications or medication at incorrect doses. ⁽²⁾

Literacy Matters for Health



- Sixty percent of Canadian adults don't have the skills to manage their health literacy needs. ⁽⁵⁾
- Someone at the lowest level of literacy is more than twice as likely to be in poor health as someone who is in the highest levels. ⁽¹⁾
- “Both literacy and health literacy are related to health outcomes, and those with lower levels are more likely to experience negative health outcomes.” ^(18, p. 4)

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Literacy Matters for Justice



- People with low literacy levels may find it difficult to comprehend legal directives and process. This may limit their access to justice. ⁽³⁾
- Offenders are three times more likely than the rest of the population to have literacy problems. ⁽³⁾
- “Studies show literacy programming can be a successful component in preventing criminal involvement for youth, for reducing criminal involvement for youth already involved in crime, and for increasing employment and reducing recidivism in offenders.” ^(7, p.2)

Literacy Matters for Aboriginal People



- In British Columbia, 54.6% of Aboriginal off-reserve adults between the ages of 16 and 65 have literacy levels below Level 3 (compared to 45.4% of the non-Aboriginal population). ⁽²⁰⁾
- The difference in literacy levels between Aboriginal off-reserve and non-Aboriginal adult populations is even greater at higher literacy levels, with 8.2% of Aboriginal off-reserve adults at Levels 4 and 5 and 15.7% non-Aboriginal adults at those same levels. ⁽²⁰⁾
- In BC, while the high school graduation rate for Aboriginal adults is higher than other provinces and has increased since 2006, it is still significantly lower than the graduation rate for non-Aboriginals. Using data for BC adults aged 20 to 24 in the 2011 National Household Survey, 40.7% of First Nations adults in this age group living on reserve had not graduated, compared to 25.4% of First Nations adults living off reserve, 18.5% of Metis adults, and 7.2% of non-Aboriginals. ⁽¹⁷⁾

Literacy Matters for Newcomers



- Immigrants in BC aged 16 to 65 have lower average scores than the Canadian-born population for literacy and numeracy. ⁽²⁰⁾
- BC is the only province where the proportion of recent immigrants at the highest numeracy levels (4 or 5) is larger than that for the Canadian-born population. ⁽²⁰⁾

Literacy Matters for Families



- Research provides strong evidence for the contribution parent-child interaction makes to children’s literacy and language development. ⁽²²⁾
- Regardless of socio-economic background, children whose parents read books to them in their early school years had better reading test scores at age 15. ⁽¹³⁾
- Family literacy programs have a significant impact on children’s cognitive skills, including language, literacy, and numeracy. They can also positively affect children’s motivation, their behaviour, and their self-esteem and self-confidence. ⁽⁶⁾

Literacy Matters for Children & Youth



- In the 2012/13 school year, 32.5% of BC kindergarten children were vulnerable in one or more of the following measures of child development: physical health, language and cognitive development, social competence, emotional maturity and communication skills, and general knowledge. ⁽¹⁶⁾
- 16.4% of BC students who started Grade 8 in 2007/08 did not complete high school within 6 years. ⁽¹⁶⁾
- Students with weak reading and writing skills are less likely to complete high school. ⁽¹⁰⁾

Literacy Matters for Seniors



- On average, seniors have lower literacy skills and less prior education than other Canadians. ⁽⁴⁾
- There is a general tendency for literacy skills to decrease with age. But, this effect differs for individuals with different levels of schooling. ⁽¹⁹⁾
- The literacy profile of seniors may change in the future through a ‘generational effect’ in that individuals in the baby boom generation may have stronger literacy skills than the generation preceding them. ⁽²¹⁾

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