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Submission to the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2022 Federal Budget

PREPARED BY THE CANADIAN CHILDREN'S LITERACY FOUNDATION ON BEHALF OF:



ABC Life Literacy Canada
abclifeliteracy.ca



Association of Early Childhood
Educators of Nova Scotia
aecns.ca



Association of Early Childhood
Educators of Ontario
aeceo.ca



Bookmates
bookmates.ca



Calgary Reads
calgaryreads.com



Canada West Foundation
cwf.ca



Canadian Child Care Federation
cccf-fcsge.ca



Canadian Children's Literacy Foundation
childrensliteracy.ca



Centre for Family Literacy
famlit.ca



The Children's Book Bank
childrensbookbank.com



Children First Canada
childrenfirstcanada.org



Children's Healthcare Canada
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Decoda Literacy Solutions
decoda.ca



Dolly Parton's Imagination Library
imaginationlibrary.com/ca



Early Childhood Development
Association of PEI
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**Elementary
Literacy**

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elementaryliteracy.ca



Early Literacy and Learning
Alliance (ELLA) - Waterloo Region
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**Ensuring
Full Literacy**

Ensuring Full Literacy in a
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L'alphabétisation,
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Further Education Society
Strengthening Communities

Further Education Society of Alberta
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Hearing and Speech Nova Scotia
hearingandspeech.ca



Let's Talk Science
letstalkscience.ca



Maggie's Place Family Resource Centre
— Colchester
maggiesplace.ca



Malvern Family Resource Centre
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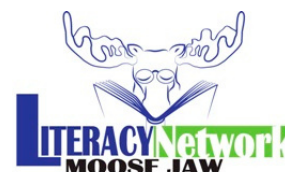


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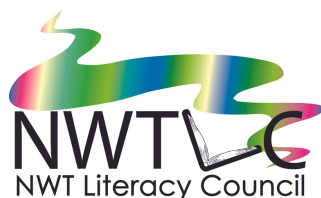


Moose Jaw and District Literacy Network
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Nunavut Bilingual Education
Society (NBES)
nbes.ca



NWT Literacy Council
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PEI Literacy Alliance
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Read to Me
readtome.ca



Saskatchewan Early Childhood
Association
seca19.wildapricot.org



Saskatchewan
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Storybooks Canada
storybookscanada.ca



The Reading Partnership
readingpartnership.com



THE UNIVERSITY
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Language Sciences
Research Excellence Cluster

UBC Language Sciences
Initiative
languagesciences.ubc.ca

Recommendations

We support the continued building of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system that ensures all kids get off to the best possible start. To enable the ELCC system's success with regard to quality, accessibility, and affordability, we recommend that improved children's literacy be one of the system's goals.

Improved children's literacy can be supported within the ELCC system through:

- training for *all* early childhood educators on why and how to develop children's early literacy skills;
- strengthening additional pathways to children's literacy for families that do not yet participate in early learning and child care programs; and
- measuring the effectiveness of early learning and child care on literacy development.

We stand ready to assist the Government of Canada and its provincial, territorial, and Indigenous partners in implementing these recommendations.

Introduction

In times of turmoil, the importance of literacy skills becomes irrefutable. Literacy allows us to separate fact from fiction, share critical information, make informed decisions, and work differently. It is at the root of emotional, social, and economic resilience.^{1,2}

By making improved children's literacy a foundational priority in the ELCC system, we have an opportunity to make transformational change that addresses a key challenge in this country: over one million children in Canada do not have the literacy skills they need to reach their full potential.³

Many of these children are starting their reading journey behind and staying behind.⁴ Pandemic disruptions are making the situation worse.^{5– 13}

It is not enough to assume that because early literacy practices – such as reading, storytelling, singing, playing, and talking with kids – are so fundamental to early learning, *any* early learning and child care system will lead to significant improvement in children's literacy skills. This is not the case.

Currently, there are significant gaps in Canada's approaches to supporting early literacy development, and these gaps won't be remedied by doing more of the same at a larger scale. That's why we must intentionally and effectively embed evidence-based early literacy strategies into the new Canada-wide ELCC system. A focus on improved children's literacy is essential to developing a high-quality system so that all those who shape a child's world have access to the training and resources they need to build children's early literacy skills.

We recognize and value the distinct work that is being undertaken with respect to the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework.¹⁴ At this time, we are not speaking to the applicability of these recommendations to the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework, though we welcome the opportunity to continue to partner with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities on creating high-quality, culturally strong early learning and child care.

Background

Early literacy – sometimes referred to as “emergent literacy” or “pre-literacy” – can be defined in a multitude of ways,^{15,16} but fundamentally it is everything a child knows about reading and writing before the child can read or write.¹⁷ Early literacy practices, including reading, storytelling, singing, playing, and talking with children, help a child learn to understand the world around them, form connections with others, and thrive. Examples of early literacy skills include developing awareness of words and sounds, pointing at and naming objects, understanding the emotions of characters in stories, and learning to hold and turn the pages of a board book.

Early literacy skills are vital to ensuring children and youth can thrive educationally, socially, and emotionally.^{18,19} The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has established the lasting impact that early childhood education has on literacy: language skills at age five are associated with literacy achievements two years later and with competent reading by age 10.²⁰ Likewise, kids who are read with regularly have stronger social-emotional skills at age five than those who aren't read with as often, even controlling for socio-economic status.²¹

Early literacy, in turn, benefits all Canadians. Currently 45 per cent of Canadians lack the literacy, numeracy, and digital skills that are increasingly necessary to succeed in jobs in the knowledge economy.²² A 1 per cent increase in adult literacy could create an annual economic benefit of \$67 billion for Canada,^{23,24} the equivalent of approximately \$1,800 more in the pockets of each Canadian every year.^{25,26}

Low literacy costs Canada as much as \$67 billion in lost economic opportunity annually, the equivalent of \$1,800 per year in the pockets of each Canadian.

Strong adult literacy begins in early childhood and starting to build literacy skills early delivers the best return on investment. Data show that every \$1 invested in early childhood education yields six times the economic benefit.²⁷ This is a far greater impact than investments made later in a child's education and in adulthood.²⁸

Detailed Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Train all early childhood educators on *why* and *how* to develop children’s early literacy skills.

We applaud the federal government’s pledge to “ensure that early childhood educators are at the heart of the [Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care] system, by valuing their work and providing them with the training and development opportunities needed to support their growth and the growth of a quality system of child care.”^{29,30} We recognize and value the extensive efforts and progress being made to advance professional development opportunities for early childhood educators (ECEs).

Well-trained ECEs are integral to ensuring that children start school ready to read and succeed. Research shows that while increased access to early childhood education is generally beneficial to children’s literacy outcomes at age 15 and beyond, children who attend *high-quality* early childhood education programs are more likely to have stronger literacy skills at age 15 than those in lower-quality programs, particularly for children in lower-income families.³¹ ECE training, knowledge, and skills are universally recognized as key drivers of program quality and, in turn, literacy outcomes.³²

Part of building a high-quality ELCC system is enabling a strong understanding among ECEs of *why* and *how* to support early literacy development. The Canadian Children’s Literacy Foundation, through extensive consultations with a broad range of stakeholders and through partnering on a survey with the Canadian Child Care Federation, identified significant gaps in ECEs’ knowledge relating to early literacy.

During a three-week period in September 2021, more than 1,100 ECEs, who were well-distributed throughout Canada and generally reflective of the ECE workforce, responded to this survey. The participating ECEs work in a variety of settings, including child care, kindergartens, and community centres that families attend together. The results are concerning.

Key Findings³³

Many ECEs self-report limits in their understanding of early literacy milestones and their confidence in supporting young children’s literacy and language development.

- Only 38 per cent report feeling “confident” that their professional training prepared them well to engage children in early literacy activities.
- Likewise, only 38 per cent report feeling “confident” in supporting the early literacy development of the children they work with.
- Only 25 per cent report having an excellent understanding of early language and literacy milestones for children under five.
- Only 35 per cent report feeling “confident” in identifying a concern with a child’s language development.
- More than 40 per cent report that they think early literacy exposure is only “moderately important” or “slightly important” to achieving developmental milestones around language and social-emotional development, whereas research shows it’s crucial.³⁴

Most ECEs surveyed are not able to fully support the early literacy development of the children in their care because of gaps in training and resources.

- Fewer than 50 per cent of report that they are engaging the children they work with in early literacy activities every day. More than 35 per cent report doing so once a month or less frequently.
- Though 72 per cent report talking to parents about ways to support their child's early literacy at home at least once a week, only about 36 per cent feel "confident" in sharing advice about ways to improve early literacy development.

There is a huge gap between the early literacy professional development ECEs have received and what they want.

- Only 10 per cent report having participated in any professional development around early literacy, compared to over 99 per cent of respondents who would like to.
- 86 per cent of respondents felt they most needed professional development around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's early literacy and language development.

Recommendation

To help address these gaps in knowledge, confidence, and practice, it is essential that every ECE receive pre-service and in-service professional training on:

- why early literacy practices are important to all domains of children's development, including language, social-emotional, and brain development;
- age-appropriate milestones and the basics of identifying when there might be a delay that requires additional expertise;
- best practices for implementing activities that support children's early literacy development;
- available information and resources that can be incorporated into current programming; and
- strategies for talking with families about how to support early literacy development at home.

This training should be developed and delivered in a manner that reflects and values the diverse linguistic and cultural contexts of the educators, children, and families who are part of the ELCC system.

We, the signatories to this submission, welcome the opportunity to support the Government of Canada, and its provincial, territorial, and Indigenous partners, in implementing these recommendations to ensure that all ECEs receive the training they need to effectively support the development of children's early literacy skills.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen additional pathways to children's literacy for families that do not yet participate in early learning and child care programs.

The home is one of the key early learning environments, particularly for our youngest children. Research from the OECD shows that the home learning environment, which may include reading books, singing, and talking about a child's day, is highly influential on children's literacy proficiency at age five.³⁵

Yet only 51 per cent of parents in Canada report engaging often in early literacy activities with their children before they enter primary school.^{36,37} This gap in the home learning environment is having devastating – and avoidable – consequences for children’s reading progression.³⁸

There are several proven ways to support families in creating nurturing, supportive, and enriching home learning environments in which they engage in early literacy practices. In particular, we recognize the value of healthcare-based early literacy counselling, trainings for parents on raising readers, home visitation programs, community-based family literacy programs, library programming, and book-gifting initiatives.^{39,40} ECEs, and the models created for their professional development, can and should play an integral role in building the efficacy and accessibility of professional development on early literacy for all the professionals and organizations working with children and families.

Making improved children’s literacy an actionable item requires dedicated efforts around knowledge mobilization of best practices for early literacy support, including all those that support families directly, and sustainable funding for professionals and organizations delivering those supports to families.

We recommend that the Federal Secretariat on Early Learning and Child Care, as part of its mandate “to improve the quality, accessibility, affordability, inclusivity and flexibility of ELCC programs and services,” work collaboratively with literacy organizations to ensure all children are supported on their reading journey right from the start.

Recommendation 3: Measure the effectiveness of early learning and child care on literacy development.

We value the Government of Canada’s commitment to “work with provincial and territorial partners to build a strong baseline of common, publicly available [early learning and child care] data on which to measure progress, report to Canadians, and help continuously improve the system.”⁴¹

There is widespread agreement that data on children’s literacy is limited, especially for young children.⁴²

To ensure we are most effectively investing in the foundational skills needed to foster literacy, we need to improve collection of data on child and youth literacy, with a particular emphasis on the impact of early learning and child care.

Developing effective longitudinal measures for understanding the literacy progression of children from the early years through young adulthood is a key component of ensuring that investments in early literacy have a meaningful effect on literacy development. By establishing a robust measurement strategy, the social and economic case for investments in early learning and child care will become evident.

This is why we recommend that the Government of Canada, in partnership with provincial and territorial governments, develop effective measures of children’s literacy as part of its ELCC data collection and reporting framework.

Conclusion

Through the Government of Canada's historic progress toward a Canada-wide ELCC system, we collectively have the opportunity to build a more resilient, inclusive, and innovative Canada.

Fundamental to these aims is the establishment of improved early literacy as a goal of this new high-quality, accessible, and affordable system, enabling all those who shape a child's world to have access to the training and resources they need to build children's early literacy skills.

Let's not miss this tremendous, historic opportunity to develop and deliver a world-class ELCC system that enables Canada's children to get off to the best possible start and become the most literate in the world.

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ B.C. Centre for Disease Control. (2021, November 23). *BC COVID-19 Survey on Population Experiences, Action and Knowledge: SPEAK Survey Round 2 Results*. <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/bccdc/viz/BCCOVID-19SPEAKSurveyRound2/BCCOVID-19SPEAKresults>.

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