

FEBRUARY 10, 2023

# Submission to the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2023 Federal Budget



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



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[abclifeliteracy.ca](http://abclifeliteracy.ca)



Affiliated Services for  
Children and Youth (ASCY)  
[ascy.ca](http://ascy.ca)



Association of Early Childhood  
Educators of Ontario  
[aeceo.ca](http://aeceo.ca)



Bookmates Inc.  
[bookmates.ca](http://bookmates.ca)



Canada West Foundation  
[cwf.ca](http://cwf.ca)



Canadian Child Care Federation  
[cccf-fcsge.ca](http://cccf-fcsge.ca)



Canadian Children's Book Centre  
[bookcentre.ca](http://bookcentre.ca)



Canadian Children's Literacy Foundation  
[childrensliteracy.ca](http://childrensliteracy.ca)



Centre for Family Literacy  
[famlit.ca](http://famlit.ca)



The Children's Book Bank  
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Children First Canada  
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Children's Healthcare Canada  
[childrenshealthcarecanada.ca](http://childrenshealthcarecanada.ca)



Children's Reading Room  
[childrensreadingroom.org](http://childrensreadingroom.org)



Dolly Parton's Imagination Library  
[imaginationlibrary.com/ca](http://imaginationlibrary.com/ca)



Early Childhood Development  
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ELLA - Early Language and  
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Ensuring Full Literacy in a  
Multicultural and Digital World  
(SHRCC Partnership Grant)  
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[firstbookcanada.org](http://firstbookcanada.org)



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Strengthening Communities

Further Education Society of Alberta  
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[hearingandspeech.ca](http://hearingandspeech.ca)



Inverness County Literacy  
[invernesslit.com](http://invernesslit.com)



Kids Can Fly  
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Let's Talk Science  
[letstalkscience.ca](http://letstalkscience.ca)



Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick  
[nbliteracy.ca](http://nbliteracy.ca)



Literacy Lambton  
[literacylambton.org](http://literacylambton.org)



Literacy Nova Scotia  
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Lloydminster Learning Council  
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[maggiesplace.ca](http://maggiesplace.ca)



Malvern Family Resource Centre  
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Manitoba Child Care Association  
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Moose Jaw and District Literacy  
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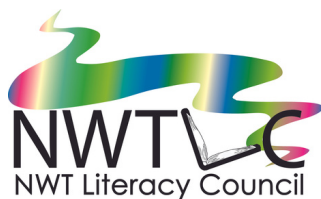


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Mount Pleasant  
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[mpnh.org](http://mpnh.org)



Nunavut Bilingual Education  
Society (NBES)  
[nbes.ca](http://nbes.ca)



NWT Literacy Council  
[nwtliteracy.ca](http://nwtliteracy.ca)



Offord Centre for Child Studies  
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Ontario Library Association  
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Pediatric Chairs of Canada  
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Learner Connections  
[princealbertliteracy.ca](http://princealbertliteracy.ca)



Read To Me!  
[readtome.ca](http://readtome.ca)



Resilient Kids Canada  
[resilientkidsca.org](http://resilientkidsca.org)



Saskatchewan Early Childhood  
Association  
[seca19.wildapricot.org](http://seca19.wildapricot.org)



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South Winnipeg Family  
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Storybooks Canada  
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United for Literacy  
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UBC Language Sciences  
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[languagesciences.ubc.ca](http://languagesciences.ubc.ca)



The Reading Partnership  
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[ycln.ca](http://ycln.ca)



YWCA Canada  
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## Recommendations

We support the continued building of a Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system in which all children in Canada have access to quality early learning and child care programs and services that support their development and enable them to reach their full potential.

Developing strong literacy skills is a key component of children's development and is critical to children reaching their full potential. Therefore, to enable the ELCC system's success, we recommend that the Government of Canada, in collaboration with its provincial and territorial partners, further embed foundational policies that support improved children's literacy within a high-quality, affordable, accessible, and inclusive ELCC system.

Improved children's literacy should be advanced within the ELCC system through partnering with provinces and territories to:

- Enable early childhood educators to access quality training that includes the *why* and *how* of developing children's early literacy skills;
- Strengthen additional pathways to children's literacy for families that do not yet participate in early learning and child care programs; and
- Include data on the effectiveness of the ELCC system's at improving children's literacy development as part of the broader ELCC data strategy.

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

## Introduction

The right to read<sup>1</sup> is currently denied to far too many children in Canada, with over a million children failing to read at grade level.<sup>2</sup> And what's at stake isn't just reading, it's "an equal right to the future."<sup>3</sup>

Literacy – of which reading is a foundational element – is critical to allowing us to separate fact from fiction, share critical information, make informed decisions, and work effectively. It is at the root of emotional, social, and economic resilience.<sup>4,5</sup>

Yet recent data shows 30 per cent of six-year-old children aren't reading at grade level. For children in low-income households that percentage jumps to 40 per cent.<sup>6</sup> For many children who are behind, the lag is due to substantial gaps in their early childhood learning opportunities.<sup>7</sup> And children who are behind at age six are more likely to stay behind throughout their learning journey into adulthood.<sup>8</sup>

While children's literacy in Canada was in peril before the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic's disruptions and their knock-on effects have made the situation dire.<sup>9–17</sup>

Fortunately, the monumental work underway to build a high-quality, inclusive, accessible, and affordable ELCC system has the potential to transform children's literacy in Canada. Research shows that while increased access to any early childhood education is generally beneficial to children's literacy

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outcomes at age 15 and beyond, children who attend *high-quality* early childhood education programs are even more likely to have stronger literacy skills at age 15 than those in lower-quality programs, particularly for children in lower-income families.<sup>18</sup>

We applaud the significant progress in advancing a Canada-wide ELCC system and look forward to partnering on continued efforts to grow and strengthen the ELCC system. Implementing strong early literacy policies is critical to ensuring that the recent and ongoing historic, transformational investments in ELCC also transform the perilous state of children’s literacy in Canada.

We recognize and value the distinct work being undertaken with respect to the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework.<sup>19</sup> At this time, we are not speaking to the applicability of our 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,<sup>20,21</sup> but fundamentally it is everything a child knows about reading and writing before the child can read or write.<sup>22</sup> Early literacy practices, including reading, storytelling, singing, playing, and talking with children, help children 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.<sup>23</sup>

Early literacy skills are vital to ensuring children and youth can thrive educationally, socially, and emotionally.<sup>24,25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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 socioeconomic status.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> A one per cent increase in adult literacy could create an annual economic benefit of \$67 billion for Canada,<sup>29,30</sup> the equivalent of approximately \$1,800 more in the pockets of each Canadian every year.<sup>31,32</sup>

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*Adult literacy starts at birth. Every 1% increase in adult literacy adds \$67 billion in GDP, the equivalent of \$1,800 per year in the pockets of each Canadian.*

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Strong adult literacy begins in early childhood, and starting to build literacy skills early delivers the best return on investment. Data shows that every \$1 invested in early childhood education yields six times that amount in economic benefit.<sup>33</sup> This is a far greater impact than investments made later in a child’s education and in adulthood.<sup>34</sup>

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## Detailed Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: Work with provinces and territories to enable early childhood educators to access quality training that includes the *why* and *how* of developing children’s early literacy skills.**

A growing, qualified workforce of early childhood educators (ECEs) is at the heart of a successful high-quality, accessible, affordable, and inclusive Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care system. Building such a workforce requires “valuing the work of early childhood educators and providing them with the training and development opportunities needed to support their growth.”<sup>35</sup> Fair wages and effective training are important drivers of ELCC program quality and, in turn, of literacy outcomes for children in Canada.<sup>36,37,38</sup>

We commend the tremendous work underway to provide fair wages and benefits to ECEs and to implement workforce strategies that advance the Canada-wide ELCC plan. This work includes progress on policies that enable further professional training and development for ECEs, including training related to early literacy. Several jurisdictions have recently introduced new or enhanced professional development support for ECEs by providing funds for training courses, paid release time for attending training, and wage top-ups for ECEs who undertake further professional training.<sup>39</sup> Training on early literacy development is often available as part of this funded training.<sup>40</sup>

These are critical steps toward creating a growing, qualified ELCC workforce. However, there is still far more work to be done to ensure ECEs can more fully support children on their reading journeys and help them reach their full potential. Many child care workers lack professional qualification in early childhood education<sup>41</sup> and, even when such training is obtained, the training often lacks adequate training regarding 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 many ECEs’ knowledge and practices relating to early literacy. A September 2021 survey of 1,100 ECEs, who were well-distributed throughout Canada and generally reflect the ECE workforce, found the following:<sup>42</sup>

- Only 38 per cent reported feeling “confident” in supporting the early literacy development of the children they work with.
- Only 25 per cent reported having an excellent understanding of early language and literacy milestones for children under five.
- Only 35 per cent reported feeling “confident” in identifying a concern with a child’s language development.
- Fewer than 50 per cent reported that they are engaging the children they work with in early literacy activities every day. More than 35 per cent reported doing so once a month or less.
- Only 10 per cent reported having participated in any professional development related to early literacy, compared with over 99 per cent of respondents who would like to.



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Many of these findings were echoed by recent research from the University of Toronto on ECEs' self-efficacy and knowledge of early literacy instruction among both pre-service and in-service ECEs.<sup>43</sup>

To help address these gaps in knowledge, confidence, and practice, it is essential that all ECEs receive 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 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: Work with the provinces and territories to strengthen additional pathways to children's literacy for families that do not yet participate in early learning and child care programs.**

The home is a key early learning environment, particularly for our youngest children and the 48 per cent of children in Canada who aren't yet in child care.<sup>44,45</sup> Leading research from the OECD finds that "[p]arental involvement in children's learning and development begins at birth, by providing guidance, developing habits, imparting values, supporting learning experiences and sharing expectations. Children with involved parents tend to do better in reading and numeracy, have positive social and emotional social skills, and be more motivated to learn."<sup>46</sup> According to the OECD, the quality of the home learning environment is the single greatest influence on children's literacy proficiency at age five.<sup>47</sup>

Examples of early literacy activities that support a strong home learning environment include reading books, singing, drawing, going to the library, and talking about a child's day. Yet only 51 per cent of parents in Canada report engaging often in early literacy activities with their children before they enter primary school.<sup>48,49</sup> This gap in the home learning environment is having devastating – but avoidable – consequences for children's reading progression.<sup>50</sup>

We commend the recent commitments to ELCC innovation that support early learning in a diversity of environments and that address the diverse needs of children, including through building families' skills.<sup>51</sup> These critical investments are essential to enabling families to create nurturing, supportive, and enriching home learning environments in which they engage in early literacy practices.

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The Government of Canada has stated that “flexible early learning and child care programs and services that respond to the varying needs of children and families foster children’s development and are an important support for families and communities.”<sup>52</sup> In furtherance of the aim of building those programs and services, we recommend additional investments in programs and service that help families to develop strong early literacy practices at home, including sustainable funding for professionals and organizations delivering those supports to families. Proven strategies for advancing early literacy include 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.<sup>53,54</sup>

We also see a significant need for dedicated efforts around knowledge mobilization of best practices for early literacy support, including for ECEs and all professionals who support families directly – particularly because among those surveyed, 72 per cent of service providers reported talking to parents at least once a week about ways to support their child’s early literacy at home. Importantly, however, only about 36 per cent of ECEs felt “confident” in sharing advice with families about ways to improve early literacy development. This fact identifies a critical opportunity to help ECEs, who already have access to and influence with families, to grow their skills in order to make a good practice that they’re already doing that much more effective.<sup>55</sup>

To advance these shared aims in support of all children’s development, we recommend that the Federal Secretariat on Early Learning and Child Care and the newly appointed National Advisory Council on Early Learning and Childcare work collaboratively with literacy organizations to ensure all children are supported on their reading journey right from the start.

### **Recommendation 3: Work with provinces and territories to include data on the effectiveness of the ELCC system at improving children’s literacy development as part of the broader ELCC data strategy.**

We value the Government of Canada’s commitment to “work with provincial and territorial partners to build a strong baseline of common, publicly available [ELCC] data on which to measure progress, report to Canadians, and help continuously improve the system.”<sup>56</sup> Our recommendation is that data on the effectiveness of the ELCC program on literacy development be integrated into the government’s efforts to measure progress.

There is widespread agreement that data on children’s literacy is limited, especially for young children.<sup>57</sup> To ensure the ELCC system is most effectively investing in the foundational skills needed to foster literacy, we need improved collection of data on child and youth literacy, with a particular emphasis on the impact of ELCC.

We recommend that a key component of that data strategy is using the Federal Secretariat’s mandate of “funding and oversight for ELCC data and research projects [that] help to identify data gaps, monitor progress, [and] inform evidence-based policy development”<sup>58</sup> to further understand the impact of ELCC on children’s literacy development.

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Developing effective longitudinal measures for understanding the literacy progression of children from the early years through young adulthood is vital to ensuring that investments in ELCC have a meaningful effect on literacy development and, in turn, on children reaching their full potential. By establishing a robust measurement strategy, the social and economic case for ongoing investments in high-quality, affordable, accessible, and inclusive ELCC will become irrefutable and sustainable.

This is why we recommend that the Government of Canada, in partnership with provincial and territorial governments, develop effective measures of children’s literacy starting from the early years.

## Conclusion

A prosperous, democratic future for Canada requires a robust, thriving, Canada-wide ELCC system that enables all children in Canada to reach their full potential. A key part of that goal is supporting children as they develop strong literacy skills. Yet over one-third of children are not developing the necessary early literacy skills, which often has a lifetime of consequences. These substantial gaps in children’s literacy in Canada are avoidable through concerted action.

To help children develop the literacy skills they need to reach their full potential, we recommend that the Government of Canada, in collaboration with its provincial and territorial partners, further embed foundational policies that support improved children’s literacy within the ELCC system. This requires additional early literacy training for early childhood educators, increased investment community-based literacy programs that support the home learning environment, and better longitudinal data on literacy from birth to adulthood.

Let’s not miss this tremendous, historic opportunity to develop and deliver a world-class ELCC system that enables Canada’s children to reach their full potential and become the most literate in the world.

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