

FEBRUARY 9, 2024

Submission to the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2024 Federal Budget





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Association of Early Childhood
Educators Nova Scotia (AECENS)
aecens.ca



Association of Early Childhood
Educators of Ontario
aeceo.ca



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Canadian Child Care Federation
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Canadian Mental Health
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Children's Communication Lab,
University of Waterloo
uwaterloo.ca/childrens-communication-lab



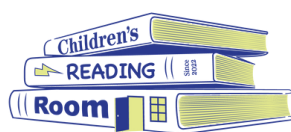
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Children's Reading Room
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Decoda Literacy Solutions
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Early Childhood Development
Association (ECDA) of PEI
ecdaofpei.ca



ELLA - Early Language and
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Further Education Society

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The Gord Downie and
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gritLIT Readers & Writers Festival
gritlit.ca



Hearing and Speech Nova Scotia
hearingandspeech.ca



International Dyslexia Association
Ontario (IDA Ontario)
idaontario.com



Kids Can Fly
kidscanfly.ca



Lab for Infant Development and
Language (University of Waterloo)
uwaterloo.ca/lab-infant-development-language



Let's Talk Science
letstalkscience.ca



Literacy Lambton
literacylambton.org



Maggie's Place Family Resource Centre
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The Prince Albert Literacy Network

Prince Albert Literacy Network/Tutor
Learner Connections
princealbertliteracy.ca



Read To Me!
readtome.ca



The Reading Partnership
readingpartnership.com



Resilient Kids Canada
resilientkidsca.org



Saskatchewan Early
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Saskatchewan Literacy
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saskliteracy.ca



Scouts Canada
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South Winnipeg Family
Information Centre
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St. John's Christian
Nursery School
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Storybooks Canada
storybookscanada.ca



Today's Family
todaysfamily.ca



Toronto Foundation for Student Success

Toronto Foundation for
Student Success
tfss.ca



Trico Changemakers Studio
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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Language Sciences
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UBC Language Sciences
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United for Literacy /
Litt ratie Ensemble
unitedforliteracy.ca



Vibrant Communities Calgary
enoughforall.ca



Yarmouth County
Learning Network
ycln.ca



The Young Canadians
Roundtable on Health
sandboxproject.ca/ycrh-home



YWCA Canada
ywcacanada.ca



Recommendations

We support the continued building of a Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system and the passage of Bill C-35, entitled “An Act respecting early learning and child care in Canada.” Together, we are working towards a Canada in which all children have access to quality early learning and childcare programs and services that support their development and enable them to reach their full potential. Strong literacy skills are integral to children, youth, and adults fully thriving today and into the future.

To enable the ELCC system’s success in supporting child development and helping children 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 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 and language skills;
- Strengthen additional pathways to children’s literacy for families that do not yet participate in early learning and childcare programs; and
- Include data on the effectiveness of the ELCC systems in 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. We also welcome the opportunity to continue to partner with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities on creating high-quality, culturally-strong early learning and childcare, and note that at this time these recommendations do not pertain to the distinct work being undertaken with respect to the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework.

Introduction

From TikTok to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to the Senate, discussions about reading are widespread.^{1–3} Why? Because too many children aren’t learning to read well, and low literacy puts Canada’s future at risk. When only 14 per cent of 15-year-olds in Canada can comprehend lengthy texts and critically evaluate multiple sources of information, Canada will struggle to lead in an increasingly complex, knowledge-intensive world if bold, systemic action isn’t undertaken.⁴

Literacy — of which reading and language skills are foundational elements — is critical to allowing us to separate fact from fiction, share essential information, make informed decisions, and work effectively. It is at the root of emotional, social, political, and economic resilience.^{5,6}

Moreover, reading is a right⁷ — and it’s currently denied to far too many children in Canada, with over a million children failing to read at grade level.⁸ And what’s at stake isn’t just reading, it’s “an equal right to the future”⁹ for children and for Canada.

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.^{10–18} As noted, only 14 per cent of Canadian 15-year-olds have future-ready literacy skills, and equally importantly, 18 per cent of Canadian students at 15 years old fall below the baseline standards set by the Programme for International Student Assessment (a trend that has been on the rise since 2009).¹⁹ Additionally, about a third of children are currently not meeting their province or territory’s grade-level reading standards throughout their educational journey.^{20–24}

These gaps in literacy skills often start early in children’s lives and persist. For many children who are behind, this lag is often due in part to substantial gaps in their early childhood learning with missed opportunities for the development of language and literacy skills.²⁵

Early literacy — sometimes referred to as “emergent literacy” or “pre-literacy” — can be defined in a multitude of ways,^{26,27} but fundamentally it’s everything a child knows about reading and writing before the child can read or write.²⁸ Early literacy and language development 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 include pointing at and naming objects, using words to describe things and tell stories, learning that written text conveys meaning, demonstrating an awareness of letters and sounds, and understanding the emotions of characters.²⁹

Early literacy skills are vital to ensuring children can thrive educationally, socially, and emotionally.^{30,31} The 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 10.³² Likewise, children 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.³³

We couldn’t agree more with the Government of Canada’s statement that “affordable early learning and child care is an investment in our social infrastructure, and it is also transformative economic policy. It gives children the best possible start in life, while supporting record women’s employment and helping to address the labour shortages which contributed to inflation.”³⁴

To ensure Canada is able to fully benefit from a Canada-wide ELCC system and to ensure ongoing benefits for social infrastructure, economic policy, and the labour market, Canada must implement strong early literacy policies that will pay dividends for generations. Currently, 49 per cent of Canadians lack the literacy, numeracy, and digital skills that are increasingly necessary to succeed in jobs in the knowledge economy.³⁵ A one per cent increase in adult literacy could create an annual economic benefit of \$67 billion for Canada,^{36,37} the equivalent of approximately \$1,800 more in the pockets of each Canadian every year.^{38,39} And adult literacy begins in early childhood with every \$1 invested in early childhood education yielding six times that amount in economic benefit.⁴⁰ This is a far greater impact than investments made later in a child’s education and in adulthood.⁴¹

Now is the time to turn our attention to ensuring that the recent and ongoing historic, transformational investments in ELCC also transform the perilous state of children’s literacy in Canada. Implementing strong early literacy policies is critical to ensuring a prosperous, democratic, and inclusive future for all Canadians. We look forward to partnering on continued efforts to grow and strengthen the ELCC system.

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.

Early childhood educators (ECEs) who are well-trained, valued, and fairly compensated are integral to the Government’s goal of continuing to “support the establishment and maintenance of a Canada-wide early learning and child care system where families have access to affordable, inclusive and high quality early learning and child care programs and services regardless of where they live.”⁴²

We are encouraged by wage increases for ECEs⁴³ and support for ECEs’ professional development by funding tuition for professional training courses, paid release time for practicing ECEs to attend training, and wage top-ups for ECEs who have undertaken further professional training.⁴⁴ These are critical steps toward creating a growing, qualified ELCC workforce, as is enshrining this progress through the passage of “*An Act respecting early learning and child care in Canada*” (“**Bill C-35**”).⁴⁵

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 childcare workers lack professional qualifications in early childhood education, and even when such training is obtained, the training often has gaps regarding how to assist children in their early literacy and language development.⁴⁶

There is substantial research underscoring how additional training on early literacy activities profoundly impacts educators’ confidence in fostering children’s language and literacy, which leads to gains in early literacy for children.^{47–52} ECEs who are skilled, knowledgeable, and well-supported in fostering young children’s early literacy and language development are more effectively able to provide “high-quality early learning and child care programs and services that foster the social, emotional, physical and cognitive development of young children.”⁵³ This, in turn, leads to a lifetime of greater well-being for children and greater prosperity for Canada.^{54,55}

Yet, currently, there are significant gaps in many ECEs’ knowledge and practices relating to early literacy. Through a survey of 1,100 ECE respondents across Canada, as well as extensive consultations with a broad range of stakeholders, the Canadian Children’s Literacy Foundation in partnership with the Canadian Child Care Federation found the following among participating ECEs:⁵⁶

- 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” identifying a concern with 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.

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.⁵⁷

To help address these gaps in knowledge, confidence, and practice, it is essential that all ECEs receive science-aligned professional training on:⁵⁸⁻⁶¹

- 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 and language development, including integrating hands-on STEM activities where applicable;
- Available information and resources about early literacy and language development that can be incorporated into current programming; and
- Strategies for talking with families about how to support early literacy and language development at home.

This training should be developed and delivered in a manner that provides the best evidence on how children develop language and literacy skills. This training must also reflect and value the diverse linguistic and cultural contexts of the educators, children, and families who are part of the ELCC system.⁶²

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 childcare programs.

"The quality of the home learning environment is the single greatest influence on children's literacy proficiency at age five," according to the OECD.⁶³ And while the home learning environment is important for all children, it's especially determinative for our youngest children and the 46 per cent of children in Canada who aren't yet in childcare.^{64,65}

Bill C-35 recognizes the importance of supporting the diverse needs of families and children at different ages and stages of development, declaring: "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."⁶⁶ We commend the recent commitments to ELCC innovation that support early learning in a diversity of environments and address the diverse needs of children, including through building families' skills.^{67,68} These critical investments are essential to enabling families to create nurturing, supportive, and enriching home learning environments in which they engage in early literacy and language practices.

In order to ensure the ELCC system is flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of children and families, we recommend additional investments in programs and services that help families to develop strong early literacy and language practices at home, including sustainable funding for professionals and organizations delivering those supports to families.

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.”⁶⁹ Examples of early literacy and language activities that support a strong home learning environment include sharing books and stories, 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 and language activities with their children before they enter primary school.^{70,71} This gap in the home learning environment is having devastating — but avoidable — consequences for children’s reading progression.⁷²

Proven strategies for advancing early literacy and language include healthcare-based early literacy counselling, training for parents on raising readers, home visitation programs, non-formal education programming, community-based family literacy programs, library programming, and book-gifting initiatives.^{73,74} These evidence-based programs and services would be more widespread and effective if there were more dedicated efforts around knowledge mobilization of best practices for early literacy and language support.

Only about 36 per cent of ECEs felt “confident” in sharing advice with families about ways to improve early literacy and language development, notwithstanding that 72 per cent of ECEs reported talking to parents at least once a week about ways to support their child’s early literacy at home. 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. 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 National Advisory Council on Early Learning and Child Care 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 in improving children’s literacy development as part of the broader ELCC data strategy.

To ensure the ELCC system is most effectively investing in the foundational skills needed to foster lifelong literacy, Canada needs to improve the collection of data on child and youth literacy, with a particular emphasis on the impact of ELCC.

There is widespread agreement that data on children’s literacy is limited, especially for young children.⁷⁵ 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.

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.”⁷⁶ 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.

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”⁷⁷ to further understand the impact of ELCC on children’s literacy development.

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

Over the last three years, the Government of Canada, alongside its provincial and territorial partners, has made meaningful and impressive progress in building an effective and enduring Canada-wide ELCC system. These successes are thanks in part to bold commitments and deep collaboration.

In this spirit, we have great confidence that we can and must boldly approach literacy — from birth to adulthood — with a commitment to the large-scale transformation of Canada’s literacy crisis. A prosperous and democratic Canada in an increasingly complex world requires a robust, thriving, Canada-wide ELCC system that more effectively fosters children’s language and literacy skills from an early age.

The Government of Canada, in collaboration with its provincial and territorial partners, can meaningfully improve children’s literacy by further embedding foundational policies that support improved children’s literacy within the ELCC system. This requires additional specialized early literacy and language training for early childhood educators, increased investment in community-based literacy programs that support the home learning environment, and better longitudinal data on literacy from birth to adulthood.

Together, we can develop and deliver a world-class ELCC system that enables Canada’s children to become the most literate in the world, laying the foundation for a generation of innovative leaders and compassionate citizens who will shape the future of Canada.

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