“National Strategy for Early Literacy” – A Summary

Context
- Report prepared by The Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network

The Case for Early Literacy investment
- The costs of low literacy run in the billions of dollars annually and include: opportunity costs (increased unemployment, lower GDP, lower individual incomes due to reduced academic achievement); remedial costs (health care and criminal justice costs, special education and social assistance); intergenerational costs (when parent literacy challenges are passed on to the next generation)
- Improving literacy skills is fundamental to elements of public policy because: literacy skills drive economic growth, labour market outcomes, productivity growth and innovation; increase the return on public investment in education and health; they are important for participation in the democratic process and for social engagement
- Reducing the percentage of Canadians with low literacy skills (presently 42%) by just one percent would increase labour productivity by 2.5 %, and an increase of $18 billion to our GDP.
- The foundation for literacy skills is laid in childhood, and Canada has lacked a strategy of action on this issue.
- One in four children entering grade one are significantly behind peers and poorly prepared to learn
- Returns on early childhood investment range from $2.00 to $ 8.74

Barriers to Literacy Improvement
- Access to high quality early childhood education and child care programs
- Access challenges to libraries and community programs, particularly for vulnerable children
- Inability of many schools to identify and deal with children who lag behind their peers
- Insufficient teacher preparation

Recommendations
1. Encourage and assist initiatives that facilitate children’s language and literacy development from a very young age:
   - Implement initiatives that help parents to understand the importance of their child’s language and literacy development and to engage in activities that support this development.
   - Build this guidance and support system around existing community resources that support early literacy such as hospitals, health clinics, libraries, schools, and early learning centres.
   - Facilitate the development of a system of high-quality, centre-based, enriched early learning and care programs for preschool children.
• Ensure that pre-service and in-service training programs for early learning specialists provide a strong background on early language and literacy development.
• Implement universal screening programs to identify important sensory and cognitive challenges at an early age (e.g., vision, hearing, language development, etc.) together with the appropriate intervention programs.
• Develop targeted, evidence-based initiatives to improve outcomes for children in families where neither English nor French is spoken and for Aboriginal Canadians.
• Support initiatives that improve the literacy skills of adults.

2. Ensure that appropriate teaching strategies, shown through rigorous, evidence-based research to be effective in developing strong literacy skills, are used in all Canadian classrooms.

• Enhance Canada’s teacher training programs to ensure that all graduating teachers understand: a) how children learn to read; b) what instructional methods are effective for ensuring that children acquire strong reading skills; c) how to identify a child’s specific literacy weaknesses; and d) what interventions are appropriate to address each weakness.
• Enhance in-service training programs and within-school support services to develop such understanding and skill development among current teachers.
• Ensure that each school and school board puts in place an explicit literacy assessment, instruction, support, intervention and monitoring process, implementing the three-tier model.
• Ensure that all children acquire fundamental literacy skills through an evidence-based instructional program that must include systematic, direct, and explicit instruction, supporting the acquisition of essential alphabetic, code-breaking skills, and the development of strong oral language, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and reading comprehension skills.

3. Encourage community engagement and support for ongoing literacy development throughout the year.

• Develop and advance community-based family literacy programs.
• Encourage programs that engage community volunteers to work with young students within the school.
• Support community-based programs for students in at-risk communities. Programs that engage local sports teams and businesses can be particularly effective.
• Develop summer learning programs for at-risk children.
• Encourage paediatricians and family physicians to work with childcare providers and literacy specialists at the community level to promote literacy locally, as well as within their practices.

This report has been prepared by Dariel Bateman, Co-Executive Director, Calgary Reads. A copy of the full report can be found at www.cllrnet.ca.