

# Improving literacy is a 'tall order'

BY VERONICA RHODES, LEADER-POST    JANUARY 13, 2009

REGINA -- Developing a multi-faceted approach to increasing literacy among young Canadians will be the topic of discussion at an information session in Regina Wednesday.

The Canadian Language and Literacy Network is hosting the preliminary session in preparation for the National Strategy for Early Literacy. The network is planning to hold such sessions in every capital city in every province in order to gain information for the strategy, which will be aimed at improving young peoples' literacy skills.

"We are trying to address the question of what can be done to improve literacy outcomes for Canadian children and youth. It's a tall order. We're really looking for solutions for that," said Donald Jamieson, CEO and scientific director of the network.

"The meeting (Wednesday) is an attempt to engage the community here in working with us to try to define what solutions there might be. How can we change the situation that really doesn't seem to be improving from year to year."

According to Statistics Canada, more than nine million adult Canadians — four out of every 10 — struggle with language, literacy and numeracy problems.

Based on repeated research, the statistics have not improved in more than a decade.

The network engages practitioners, policymakers, and researchers across Canada to explore methods of improving literacy in the country. Jamieson said the network is in "the knowledge business" by bringing together people who do research with those who use research.

"We try to move people outside their comfort zone, get them talking to other people in other disciplines, in other sectors, sharing knowledge across those sectors and those disciplines, all for the benefit of children," Jamieson explained.

The strategy is to address the numerous factors that can affect literacy outcomes. Jamieson explained that for a child, what they learn from their family, what they encounter in daycare, what happens in school and what they learn from their peers can be influential in the future.

"There are a great many factors. It is a very complex thing. Improving outcomes is going to reflect this kind of multi-component system," he explained.

"The end point for the strategy, the question we have posed from the beginning is how good could the profile of literacy skills in Canadian 16-year-olds be if we got everything right? That's the first part of the questions — what should our targets be? What should we be shooting for? ... Everyone is not going to be a published author but what should the distribution of skills be if we did get everything right?"

Participants in Wednesday's session are expected to be those who have worked with the network before. However, it is just a preliminary meeting and Jamieson said another, more formal session will be held in Regina in March.

Work on the national strategy began two years ago and the goal is to have the plan completed by early summer, said Jamieson.

While he couldn't say for sure how it would be implemented, Jamieson said the network has been in discussion with provincial governments through the process.

"We will learn from different provincial governments ... There is much to be learned by what different schools do, what different boards do. Some people have better outcomes than others," he said.

"We want to harvest that, we want to learn from it. We want to share it, we want to make it available to people."

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