

Literacy in Québec—The Challenge Remains

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has released a new portrait of adult skills levels in developed countries, a decade after the last literacy survey was published. Data for Québec confirm that the challenge remains, since one person in five still finds it very difficult to understand and use written text.

This represents more than one million Québec adults between the ages of 16 and 65. Québec ranks tenth on this issue among Canadian provinces and territories. The proportion of people with low literacy skills remains the same as that in the 2003 survey, thereby confirming the concerns of adult education networks.

For several years now, organizations in the literacy community have emphasized to the Québec government the need to prioritize the fight against illiteracy and the improvement of literacy skills. It is high time that we get to work on this : the OECD survey clearly demonstrates that low literacy skills are putting a significant percentage of the population at risk of social and economic exclusion.

The OECD's portrait of literacy reiterates several findings, including the fact that a person's access to employment, economic situation, and even health, are directly related to his or her level of literacy skills. People with low literacy skills are therefore at risk of being excluded from the labour market and of living in poverty. As a result, a significant number of our fellow citizens in Québec find themselves in a very vulnerable situation.

This is an unacceptable situation that urgently calls for a major effort. Last spring, representatives from several organizations in the field of adult education and training gathered together for a forum agreed to call upon the Québec government to adopt a structured action plan to fight illiteracy and improve literacy skills. The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation recently echoed these concerns and sounded the alarm about the situation, appealing for a wide-spread mobilization of political authorities and civil society stakeholders.

Ten years have passed since the last literacy survey and the proportion of people with low literacy skills remains unchanged. Over the course of same decade, literacy communities have had to struggle with either budget reductions or stagnation in their funding. Moreover, at both the federal and provincial government levels, there is an extremely narrow view of the problem and of possible solutions. It is very clear that we must invest resources equal to the challenge as well as adopt a long-term structural vision.

We now have an up-to-date portrait of the multiple challenges in relation to literacy and low literacy skills, and the community is mobilized. It is therefore appropriate that the government make this a priority, so that the results of the next decade are more positive than those of the last decade. For nearly 20% of the adult population, facing this challenge is a matter of respecting their rights and a determining factor in ensuring their full participation in the political, economic and social life of Québec.

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