

BRIEFING NOTE FOR THE MINISTER: STANDING COMMITTEE REPORT ON RAISING ADULT LITERACY

PURPOSE

The purpose of this note is to inform the Minister of the June 12, 2003 tabling and issues related to a Standing Committee report on Raising Adult Literacy. As the report is critical of the government's literacy initiatives, the Minister may receive questions from the media and/or in Question Period.

CURRENT SITUATION

On June 12, the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities is tabling its report on *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need For A Pan-Canadian Response*. It is anticipated the Opposition and media will focus on three findings of the report:

1. The government is not doing enough or demonstrating leadership to address the national problem of illiteracy in Canada.
2. The social and economic costs of illiteracy are an estimated \$10 billion annually, according to the 1988 Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy report.
3. The federal and provincial governments should develop a pan-Canadian accord on literacy and numeracy skills development.

BACKGROUND

While recognizing provincial/territorial and private sector responsibilities, the Committee concludes that the federal government has not demonstrated leadership in this "national" problem. The first of 20 recommendations is that the Minister of Human Resources Development Canada meet with provincial/territorial labour market and education ministers to develop a pan-Canadian accord on literacy and numeracy skills development.

According to the report, this accord should:

- identify provinces and territories as having primary responsibility for education and labour market training;
- establish joint funding levels and funding duration;
- determine the means of delivery, set goals and establish methods for evaluating outcomes.

If a pan-Canadian accord is not possible, the committee states the Government of Canada should negotiate bilateral agreements with willing provinces/territories. In its dissenting opinion on the report, the Bloc Quebecois supports a bilateral approach as long as it has an "opting-out with compensation" provision.

The report also outlines the following:

- In 1988, a Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy estimated the annual cost to business of illiteracy in the workforce at \$4 billion and the cost to society at \$10 billion.
- In 1987, the National Literacy Secretariat was founded to fund literacy initiatives and provide an infrastructure to support literacy activities across Canada (resource centres, electronic networks and communication systems, provincial & territorial coalitions); all funded partially or entirely by the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS).
- 1997, the federal government increased to \$30 million the annual allocation of the NLS, and targeted the additional money to family literacy, workplace literacy and new technology.
- In 1999-2000, most provincial and territorial governments expanded policy statements on adult literacy or developed positions, if they did not already have one. However provision (i.e. funding) to learners did not increase in most parts of the country.
- The January 2001 Speech from the Throne pledged an increased commitment to skills and learning with a specific mention of literacy but no federal policy was announced.
- In the September 2002 Speech from the Throne, the federal government indicated that it would build on its investments in human capital, including literacy.
- Participants at the November 2002 National Summit on Innovation and Learning, adopted 18 priority recommendations one of which included the establishment of “a pan-Canadian literacy and essential skills development system, supported by federal, provincial and territorial governments. Establish programs to improve literacy and basic skills based on individual and community needs and interests.”

NEXT STEPS

A Question Period card is being prepared for the Minister. Questions & Answers are also being prepared in anticipation of possible media scrums. The official government response will be developed in the form of a Memorandum to Cabinet, which your officials have the lead on.

Until such time as the official government response is developed and approved by Cabinet, the following tactical approach could be considered in response to questions:

- Thank the Standing Committee for its work (the government will study the Report closely and respond officially to its findings and recommendations).
- Point out that the Committee acknowledged the more than \$30 million the federal government gives annually to the National Literacy Secretariat as well as the government’s targeted funding on family literacy, workplace literacy and new technology.
- Remind inquirers of the government’s Throne Speech commitment to build on our investments in human capital, including literacy.
- And reiterate that the government will continue to work with all partners to address the problem although provinces & territories have constitutional responsibility for education and private and volunteer sector organizations and employers also have a role to play.