

# **Role of the Public Library in Literacy Development**

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Winnipeg Public Library Board**

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*Presented at a public forum hosted by the Province of Manitoba, to seek input for its development of an Adult Literacy Strategy.*

## Role of the Public Library in Literacy Development

As the Chair of the Winnipeg Public Library Board, I am pleased to appear before you today to stress the important role that public libraries play in the drive to improve literacy skills.

First let me compliment the Province on its coordination of the Manitoba component of the recent Pan-Canadian Interactive Literacy forum. I was privileged to attend the Pan Canadian Interactive Literacy Form. I learned so much. To hear first hand the comments by eloquent Canadian leaders from education and various corporations such as Charlie Coffey, David Asper, and Susan Aglukark as well as adult learners who spoke about their experiences with improving their literacy skills. All of these experiences had a lasting impact on me and give me the inspiration about what I can do about adult literacy and why it is so important. We are also pleased that the Province has appointed a Minister, (the Honourable Diane McGifford) responsible for literacy, has passed The Adult Literacy Act that will take effect on January 1, 2009, and is providing this public consultation to receive input on the development of an adult literacy strategy.

We support the position articulated by the Manitoba Library Association in its brief to your committee, on the key role that libraries can and do play in support of literacy initiatives: that libraries “add value to adult literacy programs;... provide the means by which adult learners can engage in life-long and intergenerational learning; and...both generate and enhance social participation rates among their users”.

My goal today is to share some insight on the wide range of roles the **public** library, and specifically Winnipeg Public Library, plays in literacy: as providers of materials for both learners and tutors; as partners with other organizations involved in literacy; as places where tutors, learners and independent literacy students can meet; as facilities with access to technology; and providing staff expertise in helping customers find what they need, whether in electronic format or in hard copy.

Although your literacy strategy will focus on adult literacy, we must stress the importance of family literacy as the essential foundation for adult literacy. In one's lifetime literacy begins at an early age and continues unless circumstances prevent it.

One of the key goals of Winnipeg Public Library is “to provide the public with collections, services and programs in all branches with an emphasis on literacy and life-long learning”. Here is a list of literacy services at Winnipeg Public Library:

Winnipeg Public Library system, a network of 20 branches, provides a wide variety of services to children, families and the literacy community.

- The library provides literacy material for adult learners at all its locations. It also has other tutor and learning materials, including materials used in teaching, newspapers, numeracy books, hi-lo books and magazines (high interest, low vocabulary).
- The library provides material for adults learning English as another language (EAL). This section is also used by EAL Literacy adult learners who have limited literacy skills in their original language and are in the process of learning English. Branches also provide books in the home languages of EAL students and their extended families, so that they can improve and maintain literacy in their first language.
- The library promotes directly to new immigrants and adult learners through outreach visits, and by providing tours to community-based literacy programs that bring their adult students to learn more about joining the library and how to use its many resources.

- (From the Library's newsletter) "Through the support of campaigns like CanWest Global Foundation's Raise-a-Reader initiative, the Library is able to provide free community space where tutors and students can work together toward improving literacy skills."
- The library participates at many community events and fairs by providing staff resources and displays that promote reading and learning at the library, especially when the event is literacy based.
- Family literacy materials: each branch has a children's collection that includes storybooks for babies, toddlers and preschoolers. For recreational reading branches have a large selection of beginning reading books, non-fiction and novels.
- Early years' programs: to encourage early years literacy, the library has Story Times for preschoolers, Baby Rhyme Times for babies and parents, Times for Twos for toddlers and parents, the Books for Your Baby program, Story Programs for Families, and the Parent Pack program.
- The summer Read Aloud Program, as described in the Library's May/June 2008 newsletter, has, since 2001, "successfully engaged young, emerging readers in a shared reading experience with teen volunteers. The program strives to maintain a one-to-one ratio between children ages 6-10 and volunteers who are 13-17 years old." The program is now funded by The Literacy for Life fund.

#### **Literacy for Life Fund**

Adult literacy is very much part of family literacy. Established five years ago, the Literacy for Life Fund is a joint project of The Winnipeg Foundation, Literacy Partners of Manitoba and Winnipeg Public Library. The fund's goal is to strengthen the community through family literacy opportunities. *From Winnipeg Foundation website:* "The Fund has received strong support from the Province of Manitoba and received initial endowment-building support from the National Literacy Secretariat."

- Every year, Winnipeg Public Library promotes Family Literacy Day as a unique opportunity to support literacy initiatives in our community. The Library donates all the fines and fees it collects on that date to the Winnipeg Foundation's Literacy for Life Fund. By encouraging people to return their overdue materials and pay off any fines, the Library makes annual contributions to the **Literacy for Life Fund**. In return, the Library receives grant money for the purchase of various collections for branches, and for programs, with a focus on parent-child literacy programs.
- With grants from **The Literacy for Life Fund**, the library has, for example, purchased a new collection of dual language books for children (stories in English and another language, including Spanish, Arabic, Urdu and more) and materials in other languages. Through the grant, the library has also purchased a number of books and tapes in Aboriginal languages as well as adult learning materials.

#### **Embarking on new projects:**

Please note the variety of partnerships that the WPL is participating in.

Kathleen Williams, WPL's Outreach Coordinator, told the Board that her division will also be embarking on a number of projects...conceived through meetings with organizations and government agencies. They will also require consultations with internal staff. Some of these timelines will carry into next year:

- 1. Literacy for Life - Learning Centres system-wide. A working group has been formed, to conduct a needs assessment of the EAL and Literacy communities and to examine WPL

collections. We **have received a significant grant from Literacy for Life for this project.** This is a system-wide initiative that will result in direct and positive changes in the branches.

- 2. English as an Alternative Language (EAL) Family Storytime (pilot project) - family storytime orientations to draw new family users in from EAL communities. This pilot is being run in cooperation with Labour and Immigration Manitoba who also provided \$1400 towards books for giveaway for the project. The program involves on-site visits from a WPL Outreach Librarian for a library orientation, work on family literacy, the importance of reading, and some fun family storytime components. Participants will get a library card and be given books for their home library.”

#### **Princess White Dove Library**

Ms Williams recently told WPLB’s Community Outreach Committee:

“We continue to sit on the Integrated Team for Turtle Island Neighbourhood Centre, playing an active role in supporting their local community library, the 'Princess White Dove Library'. We provide significant collection and managing assistance, and we have recently been successful in securing an Urban Aboriginal Strategy grant for \$5000 towards its collections.”

#### **Winnipeg Public Library Board’s grants:**

Winnipeg Public Library Board has demonstrated its support for a greater partnership between libraries and adult literacy providers. Through its annual Community Outreach Language and Literacy awards, the Board has distributed small but meaningful grants to adult literacy programs that work in partnership with public library branches.

For example...

1. The **Stevenson-Britannia Adult Learning Centre** has developed a base collection of adult literacy materials for St. James-Assiniboia Library, to serve Stevenson-Britannia school’s adult literacy students, as well as other groups within the community. Many of the Learning Centre’s students struggle with literacy for a variety of reasons which include developmental delay, autism or special needs.
2. **Urban Circle Training Centre** has developed an Aboriginal Reading Circle project, in which Para-Educator program students evaluated and selected a collection of current Aboriginal children’s literature to be read with Aboriginal students at local schools and at St. John’s Library.
3. **Frontier College** in partnership with Millennium Library is implementing The Millennium Library Homework Club, an evening program designed to match volunteer tutors, provided by Frontier College, with children and youth who need extra assistance with reading, writing, math and homework. Each session also involves literacy activities in a fun environment.
4. **Victoria-Albert School**, in partnership with Millennium Library, is providing opportunities to enhance the literacy of newcomers and their parents. School staff reported that 83% of their families use English as an additional language and over 20% are newcomers for whom proficiency in English and literacy skills may still be developing.
5. **Library Board grants:** From outreach grants that WPLB awarded to library branch staff, the West End Branch staff enhanced their collection of materials for EAL customers. And the Millennium Library’s Readers’ Services staff is reaching out to adults and children living in transitional shelters or temporary housing.

#### **Our recommendations:**

1. Publications and pamphlets are often not respectful of low abilities. Applications for Manitoba Housing, social services, and daycare can be intimidating for those without the vocabulary. We recommend converting these documents to clear language, and providing a phone number and / or website listing so that applicants can get assistance in completing the forms.
2. There is a need for more childcare in adult learning centres. Childcare services are a great support for adult learners to continue their education journey.
3. There is a need for more supports for those in minimum wage jobs and shift work to sustain employment such as on the job training and opportunities to learn other skills.
4. Family literacy is very important to increase quality of life; it is a building block in lifelong learning. Libraries provide the opportunities for parents and children to learn together. For example, there is an opportunity to teach parents to do activities with their children. Libraries are not in competition with literacy programs and centres. We urge more partnerships between public libraries and literacy agencies for literacy initiatives.
5. Adult learners who return to increase their education often have learning difficulties. In my talking to a coordinator of an adult learning program she gave several examples of individuals with learning problems and they cannot access diagnostic assessment services. Why?

With a risk of repeating myself, re # 4 in your discussion paper, on what should be the key goals and components of an adult literacy strategy, the role of the public library should be recognized.

Public Libraries can offer:

- Partnerships with literacy agencies and tutorial programs;
- Opportunities for collaboration and planning;
- Access to materials and facilities during broad hours of service.

### **Summary**

We stress that we are not in competition with literacy centres and agencies, but see ourselves collaborating with them.

The public library plays a key role in lifelong literacy. The public library can play a key role in the Province's adult literacy strategy, which we see focusing on the Aboriginal community, new Canadians and those with socio-economic challenges.

In conclusion, the Winnipeg Public Library's 20 branches cast a wide net, offering materials, accessible locations at the neighbourhood level, comfortable space, wide-ranging services, keen staff, and accessible hours, all of which contribute to life-long learning.

*(Regarding the next steps of your process to develop an adult literacy strategy...:*

*"The consultation process will include public meetings, meetings with stakeholders, cross government discussions and the opportunity for submission of written input.*

*A report on "What We Have Heard" through the consultation process will be prepared. This report will contribute to the development of the literacy strategy.*

*Once the literacy strategy is developed, government will play a lead role in its implementation.*

*Continued collaboration of stakeholders will be necessary to ensure effective and relevant implementation and evaluation...")*

...We look forward to the next steps of building a literacy strategy and do hope you include public libraries in this process.

**I wish to acknowledge the assistance of:**

- **Rick Walker, Manger of Library Services, Winnipeg Public Library;**
- **Kathleen Williams, Winnipeg Public Library's Administrative Coordinator of Outreach Services;**
- **Paulette Chartrand, Department Head, Basic Education, Winnipeg School Division;**
- **And especially Heather Graham, Administrative Assistant Winnipeg Public Library Board.**

**Respectfully submitted,  
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