



Read and reap



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Literacy in B.C. is undergoing a mini-revolution with communities speaking up for their needs and finding solutions. Freelance journalist **Lucy Hyslop** meets 350 learners and planners from all corners of the province — and uncovers a new wave of B.C.-made, community-driven optimism. **PHOTOS BY JEFF BASSETT**

Through a snow storm and over the perilous Kootenay summit pass on a foggy February morning sits a veritable United Nations group — spanning some five decades of immigration to Canada — in the valley town of Castlegar.

Enrolled in a literacy class in the library are Paramjeet Uppal, 24, who wants to improve her English after recently moving from the Punjab, Douangchai Seneyavong, 63, originally from Laos, who arrived as a refugee in 1983 and loves now being able to read the Bible, and 77-year-old Connie DeMelo, who left Portugal some 50 years ago.

Knowing only how to write her name (two words taught because without them she could not sign her immigration papers), DeMelo was forced to start learning how to read, at the age of 60, when her late husband became blind.

She begged the library for help. With tears welling up, DeMelo says, “I still choke up when I think about the day I first came. I knew nothing. I felt stupid. It makes me feel better now to be able to pay my own bills — God bless the Government!”

Farther north in Hazelton, the oldest surviving pioneer community in northwest B.C. but also one recently hit by an epidemic of teenage suicides, a group of volunteers — many

First Nations — is packing up fresh fruit and vegetables for people to collect in a ‘Good Food Box’ monthly drive. The pace is frenetic, and Dora Jack — who recently morphed from literacy-program participant to food-box coordinator — is frowning her brow at all the organizing she has yet to do.

Awareness that the program is promoting better health is rubbing off. “The nurse said I have to eat more vegetables and fruit,” recipient Douglas Sebastian mumbles.

Over in the Okanagan town of Vernon, the lunchtime rush is starting to calm down in the Upper Room Mission, and Willie Gagnon is well fuelled for showing off in the learning centre. Flanked by computers, he declares, “I am moving the mouse with my right hand, but I am actually a leftie.”

It is only his third time on a computer in his 60-plus years and his game of solitaire is going swimmingly. Without deviation from the cards, Gagnon quick-fires a snapshot of his life: How he spent five years in a coma following a car accident, and now struggles with eye-hand coordination.

Two teenagers taking shelter from the minus-nine January temperatures appear and start to browse through a pile of books. “Once in a while,” Amanda Allan, 19, explains, “I will use the books...I haven’t used the computers that much yet.” (That looks set to change: As she peers over Gagnon’s shoulder, his game seems to be holding her attention.)

“I tend to come here, eat and see friends, but I thought I would check it out today,” Allan says. Is the learning centre a good idea? “Yeah, it keeps people busy,” she stresses, “and

out of trouble.” That includes, as the homeless and organizers equally opine, those looking for drugs.

Her 17-year-old friend, Jennifer Yuzik, is keen to return soon, too, attracted by the opportunity for one-to-one guidance. “This is so worthwhile,” she beams, adding that she is thinking about finding a job. “I would like to work with kids. That,” she states, “would be really cool.”

Five-year-old Kate Corneliuson breaks from the Play and Learn parenting literacy program in a former school building in Kimberley. Asked why she enjoys reading, she replies, “Because it’s kind of boring but I like it. There are always pictures to look at and reading stuff to look at... Sometimes I read a book in bed — it’s so much fun.” From boring to fun, it seems, in less than three seconds.

Close by in Invermere, there is a thrum of activity at the seniors computing club. Georgina Pintaric, who emigrated from Croatia to Canada more than four decades ago, is trying to reach, via email, Chatelaine magazine. Fiddling around with the order of her question to one of the magazine’s experts, she is frustrated. “This is crazy!” she exclaims, “I have everything mixed up.” Next to her is volunteer peer tutor Joan Birkett, who is patiently helping her navigate the keyboard and diplomatically suggesting that she is getting lots of practice.

CONTINUES



Community literacy coordinator Margaret Sutherland, right, teaches ESL students Paramjeet Uppal, left, Douangchai Seneyavong and Connie DeMelo at the Castlegar Library.

Top Photo: Annalize Joubert, with her two-year-old son, Renier, in Kimberley

“This enabled me to pick up the... skills I’m going to need again if I’m ever going to get back out there again and learn something and get a job I can live off.”

**LEARNER ANGELA BARTHILL,
THE CENTRAL GATEWAY FOR FAMILIES - CHILLIWACK**

A couple of blocks away at J. Alfred Laird Elementary, Parker McGrath is fresh from a tutoring session. A weak reader by definition, he admits it takes an interesting book to engage him. “I like reading a bit if I have a good book that I can read; but if I don’t like the book, then I don’t like reading.”

Veer the subject on to outside pursuits, however, and the 12-year-old is transformed. Wearing his Rip Curl graffiti-scrawled hoodie, he adds, “I like reading up about my heroes like climber Conrad Kain a whole bunch.” (How often does a turn-of-the-19th-century Austrian immigrant inspire such enthusiasm from a second-millennia schoolboy?) “Reading just helps everything pretty much,” he surmises.

It’s a sentiment that resonates in a room full of adults back at school in Chilliwack. The class meets while their children are in with their peers. “My twin boys are in pre-school,” Jeff Bennett explains. “They are four years old and this is their third year, so by the time they are in Grade 6 they will have been in the school for nine years; which is a pretty good feeling...”

For fellow learner Angela Barthill, the Central Gateway for Families has been life-changing. “I have found that it’s got me out of a rut; I’m feeling more creative,” she says. “This enabled me to pick up the... skills I’m going to need again if I’m ever going to get back out there again and learn something and get a job I can live off.”

INCREASE IN AWARENESS

Adult tutoring, ESL, computing, books, nourishment, pre-school, seniors, one-to-one tutoring, parenting... These vignettes could emanate from any day, in almost any community in the far-reaching, varied corners of B.C. Literacy work is exhaustive — from an extensive range of programs such as Play and Learn, One-to-One and Parenting Isn’t Easy to the Good Food Box, Seniors Computers and the Aboriginal youths’ Earn Your Silence — and funded by myriad sources: from Literacy B.C. and ABC Canada, to the ministries of Education, Advanced Education, Children and Family Development and Employment and Income Assistance, among others.

Judging by the majority of the 350 or so people interviewed during this three-month-long odyssey for the Literacy Now Communities program (developed by 2010 Legacies Now, a not-for-profit society, set up in 2002 following the announcement of Vancouver being named host city of the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games), there is also a wave of optimism among those participating either as learners, facilitators or planners. For some communities, it could almost be described as a revolution of sorts — the likes of which, as one literacy practitioner with 25 years in the field comments, had never been seen before.

Marilyn MacDonald, president of the Mission Literacy Association, speaks for most when she comments that there is an undeniable “optimism around literacy” in today’s world. “Getting people interested in literacy [used to be] an uphill battle,” she says. “Now the buzz is there.”

Bruce Mack, president of the Cariboo Chilcotin Partners for Literacy in Williams Lake, explains the changes he has seen over the past 11 years: “We do not want to take credit for a moment, but there has been in our community, across the province and even nationally, a far greater awareness of



Parker McGrath, 12, a Grade 6 student at J. Alfred Laird Elementary School in Invermere

the importance of literacy,” he says. “This has given us an opportunity that we simply did not have before to actually do some things that we had only talked about.”

“It has just come of age,” Michelle Lebeau, regional literacy coordinator in the Sea-to-Sky corridor, says in Squamish. “People are beginning to recognize it.”

She points to B.C.’s economic boom as one factor: with a labour shortage, companies who might not have helped people with low literacy in the past now have little choice. The demand, she suggests, might be outstripping the supply

of people with the right skills.

In Kimberley, community literacy coordinator Kim Roberts says, succinctly, “I feel more optimistic about literacy now than I did five years ago — province-wide and in Kimberley.”

LOOK WHO’S TALKING

There is no doubting the decades of literacy work it builds on, but many point to 2010 Legacies Now’s recent drive for a type of B.C.-made, community-focused planning as a “catalyst” for increased change. Through the Literacy Now Communities program, volunteers are invited to go

“2010 Legacies Now is supporting this kind of community-based approach — in some places, it just extends a way of being that already existed and in others it helps to come to this way of working.”

LEONA GADSBY, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY AND ADULT LITERACY AT 2010 LEGACIES NOW



Above, Donna Stewart, left, tutor coordinator and community liaison with the Junction Literacy and Youth Centre, talks with Amanda Allan at the Upper Room Mission in Vernon. Left, Patti Thygesen, a Kimberley community literacy facilitator, with Kate Cornelius and her mom Rachel at the Kimberley Early Learning Centre. Above right, the Good Food Box in Hazelton.

“Before we came together to talk as a community, literacy was happening in bits and pieces — some literacy service providers were talking to each other but not really working together, not really collaborating.”

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR DEBBIE SCHILLER,
JUNCTION LITERACY HUB IN VERNON

through a series of wide-ranging discussions and form a community literacy plan for their own area. The aim? To put aside programming for the moment, and create time for conversations about the gaps, the community’s assets and the future goals.

The community meetings attracted up to 60 people in some cases. Who was actually at the table varied from place to place, but oft-quoted community service providers include librarians, teachers, colleges, school districts and public health nurses, as well as First Nations (from the Laichwiltch in Campbell River and the Gitksan in Hazelton to the Stó:lō in Chilliwack and Katzie in Maple Ridge), youth workers, tutors, RCMP, businesses, employment services, community activists, community groups, etc.

Speaking from the newly formed Junction literacy hub in Vernon, executive director Debbie Schiller is precise in her praise, saying the 2010 Legacies Now’s literacy program was the catalyst: “Before we came together to talk as a community, literacy was happening in bits and pieces — some literacy service providers were talking to each other but not really working together, not really collaborating.”

Meetings were well attended, she adds, by “a diverse group of community partners” and they started “to really connect and identify people who needed help with their literacy in their community.”

Following a 46-page Community Literacy Planning Guide that sets out the guiding principles, a smaller task force emerges after these initial community-wide discussions. The group is tasked with applying for planning funds (\$10,000)

from 2010 Legacies Now, which then enables them to — usually over several months — identify the area’s literacy assets and needs, and eventually form a community literacy plan. Once the plan is accepted by 2010 Legacies Now, implementation funds may be available.

Through ongoing guidance and dialogue with 2010 Legacies Now staff in Vancouver — often face to face, via phone or through an online network called the Literacy Now Communities Program Message Board — more than 300 communities in the province are now working with 2010 Legacies Now.

Talk to those at the nerve centre of the organization, and the society’s message is clear. “This is really about how we live together,” Leona Gadsby, director of community and



PHILLIP STEWART

adult literacy at 2010 Legacies Now, says. “How do we work with each other? How do we care about each other? And how do we communicate? 2010 Legacies Now is supporting this kind of community-based approach — in some places, it just extends a way of being that already existed and in others it helps to come to this way of working.”

The whole process was “amazingly easy,” according to Tracie Gobelle, the Lumby/Cherryville literacy coordinator, who works alongside Schiller. “So much so that I question how far we have gotten to where we are — I think that the plan and manual were really well done with just enough guidance to allow us freedom within our community.”

“I think 2010 Legacies Now has really provided a new starting point for change,” Roberta Thompson, co-chair of Campbell River Literacy Now, says of the work that started in 2004. “It allows freedom to create what the public wants without a prescribed plan. In small towns there is lots of history with different organizations where funding comes and funding goes. Government funding is amazing, but there is that blanket form and it doesn’t necessarily fit every small community, a lot of times you have to make your community fit. 2010 Legacies Now has fit into the community’s box...”

“It was like being told that you were only allowed to live in this one room with no windows and doors, and then suddenly there were all these windows and doors opening.”

For Diana Twiss, a seasoned adult literacy expert currently seconded to Literacy BC, the planning meeting in North Vancouver was “the most productive I had ever been at.”

In Hazelton, planning allowed the community to take stock of its literacy work. As Anne Docherty, community learning director for Storytellers’ Foundation, explains, “It’s easier when you feel like you’re in crisis and you’re always in reactionary mode... What we found is when we can put busyness aside and take that breath [we can] say what it is we want... our literacy work is more responsive. So I think planning has been very vital to slow us down and build in a reflective component.”

A couple of hours’ drive west of Hazelton, lies Houston. Already proud of its well-established literacy partnerships (such as Houston Link to Learning), Dee McRae, regional literacy coordinator, says that initially the committee for planning built on previous work and then turned its attention to other possibilities.

“It was really neat because then we started to have a conversation; what if things were done differently?” McRae says, adding that professionals were often “in snow globes of our own little worlds.”

“We all make assumptions and sometimes we don’t bash up against each other enough to pay attention to those other little worlds,” she says. “Undoubtedly it brought up new thoughts. We are now at the point that we are having the discussion about the assumptions that go with our bubbles, and how do we open this bubble to look at everyone else’s?”

Planning for literacy, however, in places where there was no specific literacy group before was likely a harder task. On the Gulf Island of Salt Spring, the new literacy society president Elma Rubright (who belies her 78 years) is today clearly raring to help the people they have identified as in need of help, but the year-long process involved in building the foundations for the society she sums up as “exhausting.”

“Now,” she stresses, “I finally feel we have accomplished something — we’ve got the awareness raised, we have the tutors trained... I have been talking about this for 10 years.”

Her treasurer, Joyce Sharpe, agrees that, because their previous careers were not in literacy, it was a steep learning curve. But, she adds, the community is on board, with a roster of some 70 community members. “Our goals are very similar,” she says. “We don’t need to be working away in isolation.”

Tannis Sullivan, community literacy coordinator in the Fraser Valley town of Mission, explains how they also looked further afield for input to the process. “We felt as a committee that it was really important to hear from people who don’t normally voice their perspective in these kinds of community processes,” she says.

Farther east, Chilliwack came to the literacy planning pro-

“This is a time when — with those kinds of governmental supports — communities can make some leaps forward with the hope that they can sustain them.”

DONNA GANNON, CO-CHAIR WITH JULIA DODGE OF THE CHILLIWACK LEARNING COMMUNITY SOCIETY

cess from a different angle, too. Already widely acknowledged as the birth place of a four-component literacy program running since the early 90s, its literacy practitioners took the view that they weren’t “looking for more service providers to do things off the sides of their desk,” according to regional literacy coordinator, Julia Dodge. “They are by definition people who run programs, so if we had only service providers — it would naturally lend itself to a programming perspective,” she adds, stressing that its community aims for a ‘community-development approach’ (such as the showcase Central Gateway for Families) rather than programming. “We wanted to bring it up a notch so we’re looking at city councilors, university administrators, school district administrators, community services directors.”

Dodge continues that they also needed to be very clear why they would accept the invitation to write a community literacy plan as mandated by 2010 Legacies Now. “That actually we’re doing this because we think it is the right thing to do,” she says, “not because it’s the flavour of the month, and somebody has a carrot in front of us; then it’s doomed to fail, it won’t stand the test of time and we wouldn’t be honouring the huge contributions that we are asking of the partnerships.”

Another area widely perceived as a sophisticated model of literacy, and equally fastidious about deciding to apply for the 2010 Legacies Now planning process, was the Kootenays. For more than a decade, the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL) has forged ahead with its community-based plans and programs.

“At first we felt we had been through this before; we have



Above, Kim Roberts, Kimberley’s community literacy coordinator.

been doing community planning since 1997,” Betty Knight, regional program manager for CBAL in the East Kootenays, explains.

What swung it for them was their understanding that this was a province-wide movement. “It was important to be part of that,” Knight continues, adding that 2010 Legacies Now “re-energized the planning process; it allowed us to feel connected beyond the basin to the province and an initiative that was province-wide instead of just here in our own little pocket in the basin.” Besides, she adds, it’s constantly changing. “You can’t say I did a plan and there it is — let’s go back take it off the shelf and refer to it. You have to be flexible; meet new needs as you see them and let things go when it’s time to do that.”

LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY

Community literacy plans — each tailored to its own area — are not rigid documents. “It’s not like a birthing plan,” Roberta Thompson, of Campbell River, explains, “which says that this is exactly how it should be and when something doesn’t happen that is on your list it could throw some pregnant women off. Our plan is different because... we try to work with the natural ebb and flow of a community.”

Sticking to what the community was telling them — even when literacy practitioners felt the information was misguided — was hard. “We would have some intense meetings,” Vernon’s Debbie Schiller says. “We didn’t know what we would end up with; we didn’t know what the people would tell us and that was pretty scary. I had to be the guardian to ensure that we didn’t change what the people told us or wanted from us. They had to see themselves reflected. As a literacy person, we all have our strong views of what needs to be done; but it was much more important that the community tell us what their perceptions were. Then we knew what our job was to help set them straight or better understand which programs were in place.”

The timing in Kimberley was “fabulous” for Kim Roberts. “There were people for whom literacy was on the side of their desks,” she says. “A group of us came together and said that we had to get something like this going in Kimberley.”

She adds that community planning was everything: “I don’t think you are going to meet the needs of the community unless you are embraced in the community; talking with the community and finding out what we need to do; what are the goals; what are the needs; who can we connect with; what are the partnerships; what is happening out there so that it is a much more integrated service that is being provided to the

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**KIM ROBERTS,
KIMBERLEY COMMUNITY LITERACY COORDINATOR**

families, children and adults in the community.”

That integrated service appears to be at the heart of Premier Gordon Campbell’s statement at the launch of 2010 Legacies Now’s literacy initiative four years ago: “This kind of cooperation and engagement is critical to helping us reach this Government’s goal of making B.C. the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent and a global leader in literacy by 2010.”

Where that type of change will happen — and where it always will happen — is in the community, according to Donna Gannon, co-chair with Julia Dodge of the Chilliwack Learning Community Society.

“I feel optimistic [about literacy] based on community-based efforts,” she explains. “I really believe that that’s where the changes always happen and are sustained. And some communities have better luck with that than others for many, many reasons. It’s terrific when levels of Government support a particular issue with a longer-term plan.

“This is a time when — with those kinds of governmental supports — communities can make some leaps forward with the hope that they can sustain them.”

THE BROAD APPEAL

For 2010 Legacies Now, literacy is a broad subject: “Where once literacy was thought of as encompassing only basic reading and writing,” the Community Literacy Planning Guide states, “we now accept that there are many literacies... We can all become more literate.”

“I think having it defined for us in such a way so broadly allows us to function within that broader sense,” Tracie Gobelle, Lumby/Cherryville literacy coordinator, states. “And then within our own organization, narrow it down to the reading. Whereas if it were the other way round where it was defined as reading only, it would be very difficult to break out of that and I think our jobs would be much harder because you could not sneak it in — you couldn’t do computer literacy, or technology.”

For Marilyn MacDonald in Mission, it was important that the Literacy Now Communities program was this flexible and “allowed for community individuality.” (She is unequivocal in her praise. “I think of any initiatives that I have seen in literacy in the past couple of decades,” she declares, “this has been the one that is going to make the change.”)

Roberta Thompson says that it “embodied what the community in Campbell River needed.” She stresses work on their plan built on things the community had already done or was doing, a point raised repeatedly on these visits. “We took the credo of enhancing literacy skills and programs that already exist in the community,” she says.

Community literacy coordinator Debbie Denault in Chilliwack seconds that: “We are really cognizant of,” she says, “how important it is that the community has great assets,



Jackie Postinoff, with her son Cooper, during the baby goose program at the Castlegar Library

great resources and that it's most stabilizing to build on what you already have and expand what you already have."

When the consultation is complete and the community literacy plan has been written, it appears to offer a level of assurance. "What happens is our literacy plan was developed as a result of consultation with the community...so we know we can go out in confidence, there's been a whole group of people who have been involved in this ...and our community has been just really excellent," adds Denault.

MINDING THE GAPS

When asked what they needed to help the literacy of their people, the communities spoke most about the broad spectrum of programs mentioned above. Common themes emerged, but it was clear that what was needed or going to work in Chilliwack, Mission or Burnaby did not appear to match the experiences of Hazelton, Smithers or Houston, nor the set-up in Invermere, Kimberley or Castlegar.

Literacy gaps identified during these meetings included all age ranges, cultural groups and unique community situations. In Kimberley, for example, one parent attends a parenting literacy class with a young son who switches between their native Afrikaans and English. In terms of major barriers to learning, rural communities spoke of transport issues and accessibility in a B.C. winter.

For First Nations, Anne Docherty in Hazelton says it is important to learn "how to work with people who have skills that aren't as high as they need to be to function in the Western society... and yet have an incredible skill set and knowledge [without which] they wouldn't be able to live here, and the Gitksan have been here for over 10,000 years."

In Williams Lake, home of the Southern Carrier, Shuswap, and Chilcotin nations, Bruce Mack talks of the discrepancy between traditional knowledge and those skill sets the Western world demands. "It's a huge hurdle for people who have

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**MARILYN MACDONALD,
PRESIDENT OF THE MISSION LITERACY ASSOCIATION**

all types of knowledge, wisdom, skills," he says, "but they don't even get to first base if they don't have the skills to get in the door."

There is also a need to focus on work-place literacy in the area, Mack adds (echoing Michelle Lebeau's earlier comments in Squamish), which became clear after a pattern started to emerge about employees sometimes failing to return to work once they were given manuals and the like to read.

"They were too embarrassed to [talk about their low literacy]," he says. Now, with "great support" from trade unions, South Cariboo Labour Council, steel workers, the mill and other employers, Mack adds that the literacy group is "moving to the next level to develop programs or services that they can implement both within companies and in the community as a whole."

It's a point that Betty Knight also raises. "I think that people

do understand [literacy] is a social and economic imperative," she says. "Businesses used to say I'll just make sure that whoever I hire has the skills I need; now with the labour crunch it's starting to sink in that who we have here is who will be available for their businesses or to build their economy; you can't treat people as unimportant or disposable because that's a person that you need to work for you.

"So you need to work out how to get them the skills they may need — and that's only going to get better."

POWERFUL MODELING

Those folk dealing directly with programs — and able to recognize any improvements in literacy first hand — speak with great brio. In Invermere, when I tell Sandra Jones, the librarian at J. Alfred Laird Elementary School, of my positive chat with Parker McGrath, she is visibly proud.

"He was one of the pupils who really hated reading," she says. "He didn't like it because he couldn't, but because he has the family support who tell him how important it is and how necessary it is to read and encourage him to get into books via the things he loves like ski racing or climbing — that's the key."

She adds that seniors and the RCMP also come in to the school to help with the reading: "It's good for them to get to know the RCMP [who wear their uniforms]. Some of the children were very proud to sit with them and it helps to build a rapport with the community."

Bev Henke, outreach worker at the Upper Room Mission in Vernon, is in charge of coaching Willie Gagnon — the left-handed solitaire wizard. "He is having so much fun with card games," she says, "he's excited about being up here all the time."

CONTINUES

“The funding has really allowed us to be able to go where we need to go as a community, and to build on the lessons we’re learning.”

MELANIE SONDERGAARD, DIRECTOR OF THE LEARNING SHOP AT HAZELTON’S STORYTELLERS FOUNDATION

Which has been the biggest achievement for her, so far? “[Seeing the homeless] starting to read to each other,” she enthuses. “One of the fellas, he reads to his wife every night; they live in a tent and by candlelight he reads to her. We are giving them the opportunity to learn skills that they never had before. It keeps you poor when you don’t have the skills to get jobs and computer skills are so necessary in our day and age now.”

With one eye firmly on the gaggle of zero-to-three-year-olds she is looking after today, Debbie Onucki, an infant facilitator at the Central Gateway for Families in Chilliwack, says that their results are based on the mantra that it takes a community to raise a child and it takes a community to support a parent to raise a child. “It’s not about the community doing it for them,” she believes, “it’s about supporting that parent to do it his or her self and that’s where we come from.”

In the adult class next door, where parents of these and other children are learning, the breakdown of hierarchy is embraced by Vicki Grieve. “It’s much more a meeting of equals,” says the instructor in the college and career preparation department at University College of the Fraser Valley. “It is participant-directed to a great extent.” She adds that for her the highs of the course are far-reaching. “The thing that I love about the program is the way that it gives the children of the participants the opportunities to see their father or mother engaging in learning activities which is pretty powerful modeling. The other thing that I am amazed at is what people manage to produce in their writing sometimes; people have written wonderful stories and poems and I love reading them and responding to them.”

Back at the seniors computing club in Invermere, volunteer tutor Joan Birkett says keeping up with the information age does wonders for people’s self-esteem. “I think it brings a tremendous self-confidence,” she says. Others attending speak of it bringing a sense of accomplishment and helping to make seniors feel less isolated.

THE FUNDING DIFFERENCE

Part of the planning story is the funding. “It was extraordinary to get the amount of money we did from 2010 Legacies Now for planning,” Caro O’Kennedy, library manager of Pitt Meadows and Maple Ridge, says, referring to the \$10,000 they received to do their community plan. “I cannot express how surprised I was that this kind of funding actually came from the Government [through 2010 Legacies Now].”

Melanie Sondergaard, director of the Learning Shop at Hazelton’s Storytellers’ Foundation, comments that she had never been a part of a funding mechanism as flexible. “The funding has really allowed us to be able to go where we need to go as a community, and to build on the lessons we’re learning,” she adds. “Now there’s a new energy.”

When Debbie Schiller told the Vernon community it was going to receive money for the planning — and its implementation, they could not believe it. “They were actually saying, ‘Show me the money.’”

The commitment of resources was repeatedly praised throughout the province.

“The huge benefit is its three-year funding,” Bruce Mack, of Williams Lake, stresses. “It allows you to plan ahead. We



Above, Cullie Dueck, left, the parent educator for Vernon’s Family Resource Centre, chats with mother Carmen Kinniburgh. Left, literacy program attendee turned program coordinator Dora Jack in Hazelton.



DOUG DONALDSON

“It’s a huge hurdle for people who have all types of knowledge, wisdom, skills, but they don’t even get to first base if they don’t have the skills to get in the door.”

BRUCE MACK, CARIBOO CHILCOTIN PARTNERS FOR LITERACY

have phase one and then move to this; it’s a different concept that is very helpful.”

Betty Knight in the Windermere Valley concurs: “That’s huge; it allows you to start something and know that you will be able to carry it on for a period of time. It sometimes takes some time to get things going, be there for a while.”

For Anne Docherty, her Hazelton community was “mobilized” by what she perceived to be trust in the group to come up with the answers to literacy there. “That sense,” she declares, “that a provincial organization can say, we see that you’re really struggling in your community and we believe that you know the solutions. [That] gives you the confidence and enthusiasm to carry on, and I also think that we talk about walking in solidarity — as an external ally this provincial body is there so you don’t feel solo.”

EMBEDDED LITERACY

After the planning process, it was up to the communities to decide how the next run of implementation funding should be spent. A number of the ones I spoke with opted for a coordinator. Marilyn MacDonald, president of the Mission Literacy Association, explains: “When we were all volunteers doing this, we couldn’t do it. Everything is on the side of the desk ...[but] it was starting to really fall apart. So what

[this] did was give us this opportunity to have some money to hire someone whose focus is to do this, bringing literacy throughout the community.”

Literacy coordinators were also hired in Smithers and Chilliwack. In the latter, Julia Dodge says, the community plan is about extending the notion of needing to bring more people into the discussion. “We need to always be mindful of the ever-changing landscape, that’s not programming,” she adds, “so we wanted to have a go-to person, who would start those discussions, who would facilitate community-dialogue, to bring people together, so that’s been essential.”

Up in Hazelton, however, they opted to spend their funds on small grants. “People could submit proposals to receive money, and in their proposals identify a literacy component within their project and for many it was the first time seeing how literacy was a part of what they were doing,” Leslie Hart, the literacy facilitator in the Hazeltons, says. “[It] helped a group of people [at] grass roots... [It] was a stepping stone to bringing an embedded literacy into projects.”

She explains that it’s her role now to examine the activities that happened in the past year. “The projects that occurred, what we’ve learned from that, what advances have been made,” she says, “as well as encouraging more people to come to the table who can help with literacy ideas. In that capacity, to get more things going.”



Top, Eric Rasmussen, the president of the Seniors Hall in Invermere. Above, Norma Hastewell participates in the computer skills program at the hall. Left, Girls Night Out literacy program in Castlegar.

One example, Anne Docherty explains, was to use the funds to support the time required for coordinating and supporting individuals' work at the Good Food Box, mentioned at the start of this story.

"Food has been huge in our community," Docherty says, "whether it's in terms of, 'I don't have money so my children are hungry' or whether it's food that is central to who we are — as a house group — which is the way the Gitksan society organizes itself... you can't be a member of a Gitksan house group without having access to a fishing hole — so food is identity, so no matter what we have done in literacy whether it's been the more traditional inside a classroom or it's been out on the land or on the mountains, food is always the number-one part."

"One of our principles is not to be charitable, so we look at the people who are receiving these services," she continues. "This funding — because it has given us the time to name what we want the work to be — it's allowed us to bring in people who are normally considered the recipients to be at the table — so it's the empowerment process — to participate in making decisions; so for instance, with the Good Food Box having somebody [such as Dora Jack] taking the lead role who is also in a literacy program — because she needs food in her house."

(For Jack's part, she admits she came as a volunteer and just got "carried away." Immersing herself in ordering the food for the boxes, she tells me proudly, "When I get here I am the boss..." For how long? "Forever.")

Without funding, Betty Knight says, there would be no 1,500-square-foot literacy centre (known as Headwaters) in Canal Flats — a 700-strong community overlooked by the snow-capped Purcell Mountains where you can drive around

deer wandering down the middle of the street, but cannot find any place to buy a single book. "We've always believed that we cannot just have services in the central community when you don't have public transportation [although a limited service is starting]. What were all the families living in the outlying communities to do?" she says. Now Headwaters is stocked with computers and books and hosts a range of literacy programs.

INCUBATOR FOR LITERACY

Talk to community stakeholders and they are just as proud of their achievements in the world of literacy. In the Castlegar library, sitting in an office on the main library floor and above the hive of literacy programs (including my so-called United Nations adult learning group), sits library director June Stockdale. "I think libraries are like an incubator for literacy," she states. "We germinated the idea, we kept it warm, we got it going — as initiatives came along to strengthen it, we partnered [with them]."

"Now libraries are so solidly behind literacy initiatives; we do anything for them — even free photocopying," she quips. "This was a really good opportunity for us to get together — here are all the service providers, here are all the different things that we are providing and let's see where the gaps are and where we can improve. [Community-based planning] is hugely important."

Over in Kimberley, public health nurse Terri Fergus readily connects through Kim Roberts and her team with literacy programs for the people she visits. "I look at literacy as part of the social determinants of health," she explains. "When you are looking at people's ability to get a job or to do some basic things like buying good food...you have to be able to have some literacy level to do it well."

CONTINUES

Joining the literacy conversation

2010 Legacies Now was launched as a not-for-profit society in 2002 during the Vancouver Bid for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

With its focus on strengthening arts, literacy, sport and recreation, physical activity and volunteerism in communities throughout British Columbia, up to and beyond the 2010 Winter Games, 2010 Legacies Now takes a unique and ground-breaking approach to realizing the benefits of the Olympics and Paralympics much earlier than has been done in previous host cities worldwide.

Literacy Now Communities program overview

The Literacy Now Communities program is part of the ongoing drive to help communities in the province create their own legacies now and long into the future.

With community at its heart, the Literacy Now Communities program invites volunteers to go through a series of wide-ranging discussions about literacy concerns unique to their area. The group then works to develop and implement a community literacy action plan that addresses these concerns.

The aim of the program? To put aside programming for the moment, and create valuable time for conversation.

Who should join the conversation?

Partners from all over the community are encouraged to join the discussion: librarians, teachers, college staff, school districts, public health nurses, First Nations, youth workers, tutors, RCMP, the justice system, businesses, employment services, community activists, community groups (e.g. the Rotary, Altrusa). In short, everyone.

How to launch a conversation

Follow 2010 Legacies Now's Community Literacy Planning Guide, which takes you, step by step, through the community planning process. The first stage for planners interested in the Literacy Now Communities program is to submit an Expression of Interest. Then, the whole community is asked to expand its own conversation about literacy and to launch the planning process via a community meeting.

The Action Plan — Community Literacy Plan

After these initial discussions, a smaller task group emerges, which will prepare and submit the application for funds (up to \$10,000) which are available for planning. Facilitators and stewards (who will handle the planning funds) are selected and then the job of preparing a community literacy plan begins. Over several months, the task group will identify the area's literacy assets and needs — and eventually form an action plan.

Community partners will be invited back to approve the plan before its submission to 2010 Legacies Now. After the plan has been accepted, implementation funds may be available.

The community literacy plan will continue to be evaluated, with the group determining which actions have been accomplished or which goals need to be revised.

Guidance from 2010 Legacies Now

Through ongoing guidance and dialogue with 2010 Legacies Now literacy experts in Vancouver — often face to face, via the phone or through an online network called the Literacy Now Communities Program Message Board — more than 300 communities in the province are now participating in this program.

If your community is interested in joining the Literacy Now Communities program, please log on to www.2010LegaciesNow.com/literacy_now_communities/.

Or write to 400-1095 West Pender Street, Vancouver, BC, V6E 2M6; or call toll free 1-866-427-2010 (local 778-327-5150); or fax 778-327-5199.

For her, the future's bright. Referring parents to Baby Goose or Play and Learn Parenting Literacy, Fergus proffers, "I feel we are making inroads in the programs we are now able to offer and those were ones that we were not able to offer before. We are reaching parts of the community that we weren't able to reach before." (Fellow public health nurse Carolyn Hawes in Invermere refers to this as her important role as "mediator" with meetings such as the Windermere Valley Early Childhood Development Team being the "access point" to program information.)

This, of course, is an important aspect for getting the word out about literacy programs. Referrals from community service providers are relied upon, as well as from the public: It is an obvious non sequitur to suggest that those who can't read will be reading notices about literacy programs in the paper or on the bulletin board.

Doreen Sharpe, a Grade 3 teacher at Kimberley's Lindsay Park Elementary, says: "[Community planning] is great for the schools. The more that we have community partnerships the more success we have for everybody. It shows that reading is not just important in the education system; it's important for everything in life and

"The more that we have community partnerships the more success we have for everybody."

**DOREEN SHARPE, A GRADE 3 TEACHER
AT KIMBERLEY'S LINDSAY PARK ELEMENTARY**

if we all have some basis of literacy then we can be successful at something, but it should not just be put on the school system. It can't be — we need the community to be involved in it. I can see that the Literacy Now Communities program has great community support."

On an individual level, she talks about One-to-One tutoring in the classroom which has given children who are struggling with reading a boost. Speaking about one nine-year-old schoolboy who has turned a corner with his reading through the program, she says, "It gives you goosebumps to see a kid just go, I get it. It's fantastic — for a teacher it's really exciting and I see it carrying over to his writing. When he first came he could not write and he had a real fear of writing without spelling properly — now he is just willing to take some chances."

Christine Schmidt, guest speaker for the Girls Night Out program at Robson Community School, is getting a group of girls (from Grades 5-7 after school) to role play about body language. "This program empowers them and provides them with the opportunity to know that it is cool to read," she says afterwards. "If they feel good about themselves then they are more likely to say to the teacher that they don't understand something or they can't read something and ask for that assistance."

One of the parents, Tammy Wallace, mother of 10-year-old Ciarra Laberge, is already seeing a change. "It really fosters a good relationship between the girls and it's nice and safe," she says. "Ciarra has chosen a set of historical books based on girls — called Girlhood Journeys — and that came out of this program. Reading becomes so much more acceptable. These girls are all fun and if they see each other reading, then they all get into reading as well."

STIGMA OF LOW LITERACY

While awareness around literacy appears to be progressing, it is debatable how much stigma attached to low literacy is being broken down. For Rachel Corneliuson, at the parenting literacy class in Kimberley, it has changed: "There is definitely less of a stigma nowadays; what used to be taboo and whispered about, now it's not a big deal at all."

While in Hazelton, facilitator Leslie Hart says, "In our community it is still a scary word. [We want] to make it not so scary. Literacy is a part of everything; so if you can increase literacy levels, there would be so much success for each person in being part of their community and understanding their community and being successful."

For Anne Docherty, this feeds into the Good Food Box program. "[It] is the cooperative model; so I have very high literacy skills and I'm getting a good food box beside my neighbour who may be considered to have low literacy skills and together we're both receiving the same service," she says. "It totally reduces the stigma..."

Mixing people with a variety of education levels and skills turns out to be a common theme in programming. In Vernon's Parenting Isn't Easy or PIE, parent educator Cullie Dueck believes it's good to see that everyone struggles with parenting. She likes to

mix her groups of doctors and other professionals, with those who are unemployed, for example. "These are the broader spectrum programs where people with low literacy are being discovered," she continues. The stories range from young mothers who are reading to their own mothers to mothers revealing that they are learning from the same books that their children are reading.

INITIAL REACTION

When the Literacy Now Communities program was announced four years ago, some questioned it. Other organizations have, as mentioned, been working in the field for decades. Diana Twiss, at the community development and outreach department of Capilano College in North Vancouver, but currently seconded to Literacy BC, explains there was a primary 'negative' reaction to 2010 Legacies Now's literacy initiative. "People asked why all funds were not channelled to Literacy BC," she says. "But now the two organizations complement each other and there is greater understanding of each other's roles."

Cynthia Whitaker, executive director of Literacy BC, explains how this type of "robust infrastructure" is emerging in B.C. to help support community-based groups which face challenges securing resources. She cites regional literacy coordination as one of the most important long-standing assets being "boosted as a community college mandate." Then she adds, "Boards of Education have new responsibilities for literacy in their districts. 2010 Legacies Now injects new momentum into community planning. Literacy BC has strengthened provincial referral services, as well as professional development to build communities of practice. The provincial action plan, ReadNow BC, coordinates our efforts strategically. Together we are making progress."

Campbell River's Roberta Thompson says, "Some people who were afraid of the change, were very skeptical and wary of the Literacy Now Communities program, but as soon as they gained confidence that there was nothing to be threatened by, it really impacted those around the table and it really instilled hope in those who had years and years of dedication to literacy... It really ignites people's passions."

ON GOAL

For practitioners, there is little doubt that having a goal statement specifically on literacy made by Premier Gordon Campbell can only have helped awareness. "I can't say I'm a super politically advanced type person but the Government making their announcement — I think it's making us a leader now," Debbie Onucki says, in Chilliwack. "The focus has been everywhere — they're giving books out to babies in hospital now. It's not just here — it's being introduced everywhere."

She adds, "I am encouraged by it — I'm glad that the Government has focused its direction"

Although referring to it as "very ambitious," Debbie Schiller adds, "But I believe in thinking big — and why wouldn't we? It's happening here in Vernon. I see significant barriers coming down in this community."

Betty Knight highlights the word 'cooperation' as key. "I think it is important to have a lofty goal," she says. "I think that the planning and the things that come out of planning will certainly move us closer to that goal."

"The Premier choosing this as a project or as a concern is huge; it's definitely getting more airplay, so to speak," Michelle Lebeau, in the Sea-to-Sky corridor, comments. "And the hard work of the literacy field, people are starting to [recognize]. This field has certainly matured, even since I have been doing it [10 years]. There's a huge difference in the level of professionalism and training and expectations. People in this field are amazing and they're tireless and they do really good advocacy work."

Listen to the communities, and you'll likely hear fired-up talk of participation; listen to learners, and it will be excitement over their successes; listen to community partners, and the conversation is flowing much easier. Of course, this is not the end of the story. Every day that "tireless" work continues in B.C., but surely it's that shift in recognition of literacy that is going to help smooth the path.

This article is an edited version of a report commissioned by 2010 Legacies Now. In partnership with the Ministry of Education, 2010 Legacies Now is currently working with more than 90 task groups, 300 communities and more than 1,000 community partners and supporters to make the goal of becoming a more literate province through community empowerment a reality in British Columbia.



A Message from Shirley Bond, Minister of Education, British Columbia

When this government set its number one goal, to make B.C. the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent, we knew that our success would depend on community engagement and collaboration.

Communities are where people live, work and play, where people experience the benefits and the challenges that stem from high and low literacy levels, and where people turn for help when they look to improve their lives. Communities are where change happens.

Government remains committed to working with communities. Recognizing the importance of partnering, the Province turned to 2010 Legacies Now. They have been pivotal in the community-planning process, acknowledging that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to low literacy levels and ensuring each unique community develops an individual plan.

Already, B.C. is enjoying increased community engagement, plus unprecedented levels of cooperation. At a Canada-wide conference B.C. shared its leading community literacy practices with the country. Thank you for doing your part, and please keep up the good work. Together, we are building a better province — the most literate in North America.



Shirley Bond
Minister of Education
British Columbia