

The Learning Community

Creating A Blueprint

**A framework for a Learning City in the knowledge society:
Prepared for the 'Literate Cities' project of the
Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators**

Table of Contents

- 1. **Beyond the Vision** 2

- 2. **The Learning Community – why it's important** 2

- 3. **A Role for Local Governments**..... 4

- 4. **The Learning Community – what it might look like** 5

- 5. **The Learning Community – how to achieve it** 6
 - ◆ **Before you begin**
 - ◆ **Getting Started**
 - ◆ **Designing for Success**

- 6. **Acknowledgements** 10

1. Beyond the Vision

At the 'Literate Cities 2000: Municipal Excellence through Partnerships and Education' conference in May 2000, delegates formulated a vision that would see local governments become champions for the learning communities of the future. It was agreed that opportunities were already present and constantly evolving to pursue such a vision.

In the previous decade the role of local government in literacy had for the most part, been focussed internally with some minor forays into partnerships with local community organizations to support literacy programs. The massive changes, brought about by downsizing, restructuring, and amalgamation, forced municipal organizations to revisit their training and education programs. In partnership with the unions they began to support and deliver workplace literacy/education programs. Initially these programs were designed to improve the basic skill sets of blue-collar workers. Over time, many of these programs grew to address the learning needs of the organization as a whole and have been extended to include the employee's families. The positive impacts and real benefits derived from the introduction of workplace education programs, based on the principle of life long learning, have been clearly recognized and documented.

The local government of today continues to evolve to meet the needs of its citizens. Although supporting literacy is still a relatively new responsibility for many cities, numbers of municipal and regional organizations across the nation are positioned to become drivers of literacy development in their respective communities.

The challenge presented in May 2000 was to move the vision of a learning community from possibility to reality, recognizing the constraints of the environment that participants work within. While the concept may be daunting, this move is both critical and timely. The framework that follows describes the first steps in a course of action designed to assist local governments intent on emerging as a catalyst and champion for a learning community.

2. The Learning Community – why it is important.

It is now clearly accepted that skills and knowledge are the keys to economic progress. In February 2002, Human Resources Development Canada released its latest discussion paper in support of the federal government's National Agenda on Skills and Learning. Titled "Knowledge Matters", the paper states that, "our knowledge-based economy demands a skilled workforce" and that "a looming demographic crunch will exacerbate the skills shortage" and points to "a learning system" that needs strengthening. In addressing the area of labour market development it notes that "The very requirements for literacy have changed. What was sufficient in an industrial era no longer equips people for success in a knowledge society."¹ It is significant that the paper notes that "nearly eight million

¹ Knowledge Matters, Human Resources Development Canada, February 2002

Canadians – more than 40 percent of working age Canadians – lack the basic literacy skills required for successful participation in our rapidly changing economy”².

It is at the local level that the effects of literacy/workplace education and life long learning are most evident and where the impact on local economies and the quality of community life is most directly felt. It follows that in order to guarantee future stability, smart cities must equip themselves with the skills to ensure that their community will flourish in the knowledge society.

The concept of a ‘smart city’ is one that has been gaining favour with local governments as far back as 1995 when the *Toronto Globe and Mail* named Halifax, Saskatoon, Ottawa/Carleton, Toronto, and Edmonton as Canada’s five Smart Cities.³ Each of these cities is moving forward in a proactive fashion to ensure its position for future success. An excellent example of the outgrowth of being recognized as one of Canada’s Smart Cities is seen in the Halifax area. The Greater Halifax Partnership is a unique collaboration, bringing business and government together to foster and invest in the economic growth of Halifax, NS. The Halifax Regional Municipality is a major player in the partnership, and as such is recognized for formalizing a Workplace Education Program that addresses the literacy and workplace education needs of its employees. This innovative initiative acknowledges the importance of becoming a learning community to the success of the partnership.

The City of Ottawa held the Ottawa 20/20 Smart Growth Summit in June 2001 to discuss options for planning the city. The Smart Growth Summit produced a report that outlines plans for the future growth of the city, including a section on Knowledge Management.⁴

The City of Edmonton was one of the five cities to conduct a pilot program for the delivery of Workplace Education as part of the Literate Cities project of the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators. Edmonton promotes itself as a ‘smart city’ based on outstanding cooperation between the various levels of government, the University of Alberta, and the business community.

Examples like these point to growing evidence that these ‘smart cities’ have recognized and begun to address the critical importance of having an educated workforce in a learning community. Such an achievement appears vital to the economic success of the region.

Another persuasive argument for looking at the importance of becoming a Learning Community is emerging through the findings of ‘The Situational Analysis of the Canadian Municipalities Sector’, a joint project of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Canadian

² Knowledge Matters, Human Resources Development Canada, February 2002

³ Toronto Globe and Mail, Report on Business, August 1995, page 44

⁴ Ottawa 20/20 Charting A Course, City of Ottawa, 2001

Association of Municipal Administrators in partnership with Human Resources Development Canada. This sector study plans an overarching look at the common HR themes across the country. It is anticipated that the issues of literacy and workplace education will be addressed. The study, currently in the consultation stage with municipal stakeholders is likely to get underway within the next two years. The study's findings and recommendations will be of significant interest and support to any local government undertaking the role of champion/catalyst in the drive to become a learning community.

There can be little doubt those local governments in Canada accepting the challenge of building an educated workforce of their own and actively managing the vision of lifelong learning in a literate community will be recognized as leaders in the vital area of human skills development. Simultaneously, they will unquestionably position the local economy for success in a knowledge economy.

3. A Role for Local Governments

What would the role of local government be in the Learning Community? Generally, literacy delivery falls under the jurisdiction of the provinces and territories. The limited role of local governments to date has been to introduce internal literacy/workplace education programs to benefit service delivery and simultaneously enhance the skills and personal development of employees. A few local governments have been partners with community organizations to enhance literacy/learning initiatives.

Over the past two years, the federal government has placed a greater emphasis on literacy/learning, particularly as it relates to the labour market skills of Canadians. It has acknowledged this as a crucial national issue, recognizing that within ten years, there will be zero net growth in the labour force. Any labour market growth will have to come from immigration. Consequently the federal government plans to ensure that all Canadians have “opportunities and incentives to acquire new skills and knowledge”. It emphasizes its role as a “knowledge broker”, facilitating research about the relationships between “learning outcomes and key learning determinants in the home, school and the community and measuring and providing information on skills and learning results.”⁵ In “Knowledge Matters” it outlines two goals to meet that objective:

1. that the number of adult Canadians with low literacy skills is reduced by 25 percent over the next decade.
2. that within five years, the number of adult learners is increased by one million men and women throughout all segments of society.

The federal government has announced “a call to action”; a major consultation phase to develop and implement a national action plan on skills and learning for the 21st century. It commits to working with provinces and territories and to engaging a wide range of partners and stakeholders to develop this plan.

⁵ Knowledge Matters, Human Resources Development Canada, February 2002

With this picture clearly in view, a role emerges for local government to act as a catalyst and champion of skill development and continuing education within the community as a whole. By championing the move toward a Learning Community, the literacy/learning issues that appear over the next decade will be addressed at the grass roots level.

- **Local Governments as the Learning Catalyst and Champion**

Once it is decided that it is in your government's best interests to champion the development of a Learning Community, it will be useful to promote a series of smart growth principles that endorse life long learning and continuing education. Using these principles, local government can design a blueprint for a Learning Community. They will describe a local government that contributes to social, economic and public life; a local government that is innovative and engages in creative partnerships and relationships.

4. The Learning Community – what it might look like

The Learning Community of the future will be achieved in a city that is guided by principles that see it:

- Embrace the movement to become “a learning community”;
- Lead by example;
- Pursue its destination through learning;
- Recognize the principle of inclusivity;
- Champion innovation by example;
- Promote the concept of achieving a Literate Community through knowledge management;
- Seek partnerships and collaborative relationships with governments and the private sector, community agencies and organizations to achieve its literacy/learning objectives;
- Develop a master plan for the Learning Community;
- Attract knowledge workers;
- Build a knowledge network;
- Invest in a talent plan for workforce development.

The Learning Community will be achieved in two distinct initiatives. These initiatives can be tackled concurrently but will most likely need to be phased in. It may take up to two years to implement a workplace education program that leads to a Learning Workplace. Similarly, it may require up to another three years to bring all the partners together and have a plan in place for Phase 2, The Learning Community

Phase 1. The Learning Workplace: As a critical first step in becoming a Learning Community, it is essential that local government put its own house in order by ensuring that theirs is a literate/learning workplace. Local governments must recognize workers as valued assets. Existing discretionary Literacy/Workplace Education programs must be deemed essential and sufficient resources must be placed beside them to guarantee their continuation. In order

to achieve the goals of life long learning within the municipal workforce it will be essential to:

- ◆ Provide sustained organizational commitment to workplace literacy/education;
- ◆ Develop and approve policies to entrench workplace education;
- ◆ Entrench Clear Language policies for both internal and external communications;
- ◆ Eradicate the stigma attached to basic skills learning;
- ◆ Identify and eliminate all barriers to learning;
- ◆ Promote and encourage workers to learn at all levels;
- ◆ Build, through training and education, a workforce with transferable skills.

Several excellent tools already exist to aid municipal workplaces in launching a workplace education program. Developed over the past decade by the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators Literate Cities Project, with the support of the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada, for just this purpose they include:

- The Writing's on the Wall: Investing in Municipal Workforce Literacy
- The Writing's on the Wall: Implementing A Municipal Workforce Literacy Program: An Organizer's Guide
- A Guide for Planning a Collaborative Evaluation - (with ABC Canada)
- A guide for Planning and Conducting an Organizational Needs Assessment for Municipal Workplace Literacy Programs
- Workforce Literacy in Canadian Municipalities: A Status Report in the Year 2000
 - After the Pilot Projects – Revisiting the Process

Phase 2. The Learning Community: As the catalyst and champion in the formation of a Learning Community, the early role of local government should be that of an advocate for broad-based community learning. In consultation and partnership with community partners it should establish a goal to designate the city as a Learning Community by a prescribed date.

5. The Learning Community – how to achieve it.

Before You Begin

At the outset there are at least two preliminary objectives that will need to be met. These objectives are the keystones to achieving the goal of a Learning Community. You will need to ensure you have:

◆ ***The political will to lead the process.***

Significant effort will be required to ensure the political will exists to champion the move to a Learning Community. A first step might be to solicit the most senior elected official to act as chair of an advisory group representing the key stakeholders in the community.

◆ ***A master plan for a Learning Community that is linked to any existing or proposed Official Plan***

The master plan should express the principles outlined in the section, **A Learning Community – what it might look like**. It should take into consideration the ability to:

- Provide a strengthened commitment to literacy/learning from local government;
- Define the leadership role of local government with the literacy sector;
- Harmonize and raise the profile of literacy/learning initiatives;
- Identify non-monetary supports facilitating public/private partners.

Along with the keystone objectives some important preliminary first steps should be considered. They should include:

- Support approaches by local literacy organizations to other levels of government;
- Develop Learner Achievement and Recognition Programs, and Local Government Recognition awards to support the CAMA National Award of Excellence for Municipal Workplace Literacy Achievements;
- Ensure an evaluation that measure both successes and challenges.

Strategies must identify and define the following:

- Key political, economic, social and technical opportunities and barriers;
- Key resource requirements;
- Key partnerships and community liaisons and timelines for implementation;
- Specific short, medium range and long term plans for implementation;
- Potential for economic development;
- An assessment to expose an enhancement of quality of life;
- How the strategy relates to and builds on existing literacy initiatives in the broader community.

Getting Started

With the two keystone objectives achieved, it is time to get started. For each of the strategies developed, an action plan must be implemented. The following list is intended to suggest some ideas to assist in making those strategies work.

A. Partnerships

- Identify, foster and strengthen partnerships at the political level, with federal/provincial agencies and within the local community so as to effectively involve local government in literacy/learning initiatives;
- Create cross boundary committees from within the community, e.g. local literacy organizations, universities, and colleges, Boards of Education and local libraries;
- Seek ways to increase community support for the city's literacy/learning endeavours;
- Identify key staff who will be responsible for mobilizing the initiative.

B. Assessments

With partners in place:

- Conduct an assessment of the potential for economic development in a Learning Community;
- Conduct an assessment that will identify the enhancements made to quality of life in a Learning Community City;
- Review the asset base of the community by examining community colleges, local school boards, social service agencies, and non-profit organizations with a learning clientele, in order to conduct an inventory of skills on which to build an initiative;
- Identify and assess the impacts of barriers to becoming a Learning Community.

C. Establishing Goals and Timetables

- Promote the value and practice of continuous learning within the broader community by brokering the establishment of a Council on Literacy/Learning;
- In concert with partners, establish an annual percentage by which the literacy training will be undertaken within the community;
- Expand opportunities for instructor training;
- Support and undertake new initiatives within the broader community;
- Use Clear Language in all government communications designed for public consumption;
- Declare the City a “Clear Language Zone”;
- Identify and present a series of comprehensive and ‘doable’ strategies to become a Learning Community and identify any gaps that need review;
- Identify and acquire key resource requirements;
- Establish timelines for implementation and completion of plans.

D. Awareness and Promotion

- Promote the values of a Learning Community that are described in **A Learning Community – what it might look like**;
- Promote the value and practice of continuous learning with other community partners;
- Raise awareness by promoting existing programs;
- Highlight the ways in which strategies build on existing literacy initiatives.

E. Creating the Blueprint

It is critical that in researching and creating an innovative plan for achieving the status of a Learning Community, a *funding framework should be developed* that will facilitate or enhance the blueprint. It will:

- Improve access to literacy/learning programming and services for all citizens;
- Create the potential for measurable/visible social, economic and quality of life impacts on the Learning Community;
- Provide literacy funding that serves rural, suburban and urban needs equally;

- Position the Learning Community competitively for the future as a learning ‘centre of excellence’;
- Provide leverage to the Learning Community to attract revenue from the provincial and federal governments as well as the corporate and the private sector.

The plan might also benefit from reviewing the proven value of entering into Purchase of Service Agreements with partners, in this instance, for the provision of literacy/learning services.

Designing for Success

In undertaking the challenge to become a Learning Community, it is important to keep in mind the scope of the job ahead; after all, these are uncharted waters. Reaching the goal of becoming a Learning Community is not a simple achievement. It can not be accomplished overnight nor without a major commitment of time and resources. All the elements have to fall into place, and timing is critical.

It is obvious however, that communities at large, along with their local governments, will be negatively impacted by the predicted demographic crunch. In order to escape the problem entirely or at least to soften the impact, smart cities will view the move to become a Learning Community as an attractive alternative.

As part of the September 30th, 2002 Speech From the Throne in the section titled, ‘A Magnet for Talent and Investment’, the federal government notes that “Competitive cities and healthy communities are vital to our individual and national well-being, and to Canada’s ability to attract and retain talent and investment”. It goes on to state that “the economy of the 21st century will need workers who are lifelong learners, who can respond and adapt to change. Canada’s labour market programs must be transformed to meet this challenge. To this end, the government will work with Canadians, provinces, sector councils, labour organizations and learning institutions to create the skills and learning architecture that Canada needs and to promote workplace learning.”⁶

To underwrite this position, the government is poised to partner in the development of a massive learning initiative. As part of its ‘Innovation Agenda’ it has already begun a series of wide consultations on skills and learning. The Movement for Canadian Literacy has established as one of its goals for 2002, the development of a national Literacy Action Agenda in consultation with the literacy community.

With the ongoing support and the aid of the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resource Development Canada and organizations like the Movement for Canadian Literacy, the National Adult Literacy Database, CUPE, and the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators, new strategies and tools can be developed to support local governments anxious to see their communities flourish in the knowledge society. With this support and a proactive outlook, the goal of becoming a Learning Community might just be achievable by the end of this decade.

⁶ Government of Canada/Speech From The Throne to Open the Second Session of the Thirty-Seventh Parliament of Canada, “The Canada We Want”

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We hope that this framework will be a useful tool for local governments who have a vision of a Learning Community and who wish to begin to chart a course in that direction. It is our hope that many more local governments will soon discover it as they seek tools and ways to embrace the demands of the knowledge society.



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