



Measuring Success

Learning at work: it's our right • L'apprentissage au travail : c'est notre droit

Unions are committed to improving workers' literacy skills and to meaningful, effective literacy programs. How do we measure success toward these goals?

Labour has a broad approach to literacy and urges a broad understanding of success. We are concerned when success is measured in grades and levels using test results based on narrow definitions of job and employability skills.

Governments and employers emphasize the need for improved literacy for a skilled, adaptable workforce; an efficient labour market; and increased labour productivity. This is linked to an individual's "skill gaps." Unions ask: what are employers and governments doing to meet training gaps? In this context, testing is not the point. Rather, the point is for governments and employers to provide opportunities and put resources into learning rather than testing.

Unions are particularly concerned with the government trend to require literacy programs to measure individual learning using grades and levels. The focus of the programs then becomes moving learners "up a level," with individual testing as the measurement method. Such an emphasis does not measure whether:

- learners met their goals
- learning was meaningful

- workplace and employer benefited
- the employer created and sustained literacy-rich jobs
- the community benefited from engaged and skilled citizens

Program evaluation is a better measure of success.

Individual and collective program evaluation examines whether the program achieved the desired outcomes. Does the literacy program meet the needs of participants? Does it meet the needs of the workplace? Are there tasks that workers can do now that they could not do before? Are workers better able to participate at work, in the union, community and home life?

Like other aspects of a workplace program, the joint committee plans and implements a program evaluation. Participants in evaluation include learners, tutors, instructors, union representatives, supervisors, managers, and others involved in various ways in the program. Individual contributions to the evaluation are confidential.

Program evaluation can identify impacts that are important for all involved and provide a case for continuing the program and securing needed resources.



Essential Skills

What is it?

Nine essential skills are named by the federal Department of Human Resources and Skills Development:

- Reading Text
- Document Use
- Numeracy
- Writing
- Oral Communication
- Working with Others
- Thinking Skills
- Computer Use
- Continuous Learning

The government describes the Essential Skills as “the skills needed for work, learning and life. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change.”

Profiles

The government has developed close to 200 occupational profiles which describe the use of Essential Skills in different occupations. In addition, authentic workplace materials have been gathered to illustrate how skills such as Reading Text, Document Use and Writing are actually used in Canadian workplaces.

Levels of Complexity

Levels of complexity are a rating tool to measure Essential Skills. Complexity levels from 1 (basic tasks) to 4 or 5 (advanced tasks) are assigned to sample tasks performed by a worker in a specific job. These levels are used in the occupational profiles.

Levels are tied to the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) levels.

Labour's view

Positive

- A better alternative to crude indicators like grade level proficiency.
- Seen by some as a more useful term than literacy: they apply to everyone, are developmental and portable; they are complex and measurable.
- May lead to a better understanding of the job demands (including literacy) and a worker's existing job skills.
- May lead to more relevant and fair entry requirements.
- May lead to less subjectivity and favouritism in employee assessments.
- Can help develop a framework for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition.
- Essential Skills Profiles can be used to develop self-assessment tools and learning plans for upgrading and training.
- Profiles give a context for developing transferable skills.

Negative

- Frames skills as those most useful to employers and devalues important skills and goals, particularly critical thinking and social change. For example, Essential Skills values the skill of "working well with others," but for the purpose of being a "good employee," not for the purpose of organizing collectively, attaining justice and other union goals.
- Emphasizes individual deficits rather than collective or systemic factors, problems and solutions.
- Focuses on individual responsibility for training: implicitly blaming workers for not having the skills they should, and placing the onus for getting the skills on the worker rather than on training interventions and supporting dollars from government and employers.
- Can lead to "just-in-time," narrow training that serves the employer and not workers.

- Promotes a narrow and simplistic view of literacy, education and skills, separated from power relations and complex workplace dynamics.

TOWES: Test of Workplace Essential Skills

What is it?

- Assessment tool to measure Essential Skills in workplace settings.
- Assesses competencies in three of the nine Essential Skills: Reading Text, Document Use and Numeracy.
- Seen as better than other standardized tests since test content is based on workplace documents.
- People are required to process information in the documents to complete a task.
- TOWES results are correlated to the rating scales of IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) and Essential Skills.
- Use of TOWES is controlled by Bow Valley College and those with whom Bow Valley has contracts. Fees are charged for customization and related curriculum.
- Individuals who take a TOWES test receive only a score. The test administrator (for example, an employer) receives a group report which may include individual scores.

Labour's view

- Test-takers are not able to use compensatory strategies to accomplish tasks as they do at work with co-workers.
- Does not measure all of what a person knows (excludes the real situations that individuals find themselves in).
- Can be used as a screening tool by employers, in hiring and promotion for example.
- Does not produce an explanation of results for the test-taker.
- Is not a good assessment tool, providing inadequate information to develop a training plan.
- Recreates negative aspects of school (testing), making workers feel vulnerable.
- Uses materials that are biased in favour of the employer.
- Culturally biased, particularly difficult for workers whose first language is not English.
- Does not respect confidentiality, an important labour principle.
- May lead to a better understanding of the job demands (including literacy) and a worker's existing job skills.

International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)

What is it?

The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) is the Canadian component of the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey. More than 23,000 Canadians from every province and territory participated in the study.

The survey rated people's ability to deal with everyday literacy demands. Literacy is defined as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."

The survey measured skills in the following areas:

- prose literacy: understanding text, such as newspaper articles
- document literacy: understanding informational text, such as maps and charts

- numeracy: working with numbers
- problem solving: the ability to solve problems by clarifying the nature of the problem and developing and applying appropriate solution strategies

IALSS Levels

Participants' literacy "scores" were grouped into five levels: Level 1 is the lowest skill level and level 5 is the highest.

Level 3 is the minimum skill level considered necessary to meet the challenges of today's world (Statistics Canada).

Key Finding: Four in ten working-age Canadians do not have the literacy skills they need to meet the ever-increasing demands of today's world (Level 3).

Labour's views

Positive

IALSS has been useful for raising the profile of literacy needs in the media, government, with employers, and in society generally.

The survey's broad definition of literacy helps people understand that literacy goes

beyond reading and writing and cannot be reduced to: "either you are literate or you are illiterate." Literacy is a continuum, or range, and changes as society changes.

Cautions: how IALSS is used

There is simplistic overemphasis of the survey result that 42% of working-age Canadians are below Level 3, the “minimum” literacy skills needed for today. Too often people understand this as being “illiterate,” not being able to read or write. Levels 1 and 2 become merged in public perception.

There is a tendency to ignore the survey aspect of the study. IALSS takes a broad snapshot, it is not a tool for individual assessment.

As IALSS levels get linked to the government’s Essential Skills levels, there is a trend to focus on moving people “up a level” as a goal. Measurements, tests and levels detract from the broad approach needed, with expanded training and literacy opportunities.

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