

Teaching a child to read can create opportunities for a lifetime

BY TERESA BITTI, POSTMEDIA NEWS SEPTEMBER 29, 2010

Claire Rettie recently had a phone call from the wife of a former student.

"She wanted me to know that he had become a doctor," says Rettie, executive director of Victoria's READ Society, an organization that provides literacy education for children, youth and adults.



Claire Rettie is executive director of Victoria's READ Society
Photograph by: Deddeda Stemler, Postmedia News

"We often hear from families that what we do expands hope," says Rettie. "Students tell us it's easier to go to school. They feel more confident. They don't feel picked on. Improved literacy improves their self-esteem and gives them the confidence to try new things. The work we do is transformative."

In Toronto, the Children's Book Bank works toward the same goal with children in three low-income housing developments. The organization collects books that people no longer want and gives them away -- some 300 books a day -- to families that cannot afford their own.

The Book Bank also provides storytimes and one-on-one assistance to improve the reading skills of children and their parents, many newly arrived in Canada. As many as 101 languages are spoken in the communities it serves.

The Children's Book Bank receives no government support. A registered charity, it relies on donations and the personal funding of its founder, Kim Beatty.

READ relies on various funding sources, including provincial and private grants, community and small business support and individual donations, to help provide its services to low-income families that cannot afford its fees.

"Postmedia's Raise-A-Reader program has been a huge support to us," said Rettie. She anticipates declining support from the B.C. government, which has already made significant cuts to funding for literacy programs.

Many literacy advocates across the country strive to do their work in the face of limited funding.

In 2006, the federal government cut funding to literacy programs by \$17.7 million. After a national outcry, virtually all the money was restored, but there has been no increase since. And the demand for literacy programs far outstrips the supply.

Thanks to the lack of a national literacy strategy or national objectives, funding in Canada is a patchwork quilt. The federal government supports workplace literacy initiatives through the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, which has a budget of just under \$40 million for 2010-11.

The provinces and territories fund literacy education for children and adults to varying degrees.

"Some provinces understand the connection between the economy, education and literacy," said Margaret Eaton, president of ABC Life Literacy.

Over the past two years, Ontario has invested \$90 million in community literacy programs, she said. "Others still have a way to go."

Public libraries -- critical sources for literacy programming for families and new immigrants -- largely rely on increasingly cash-strapped municipalities for funding, although they work intensively to access grant money from other sources.

The Regina Public Library, for example, recently received grant money from Industry Canada's Canadian Access Programs to create an online tutor-training tool to help its volunteers teach English to new immigrants.

"Literacy programs are absolutely vital to the health of communities," said Jeff Barber, past chairman of the Canadian Urban Libraries Council and CEO of the Regina Public Library.

"We know the more opportunities adults have to improve literacy skills, the more opportunities they create for themselves and their children. We also know the more early-childhood education a child receives, the better that child will perform throughout their lives. The reason we exist is linked to the value of literacy in society."

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