

Revelstoke Poverty Reduction – Creating Shared Prosperity

~ Lifelong Learning ~

by Jill Zacharias, Social Development Coordinator

The relationship between literacy and poverty is intimate. Literacy influences income and poverty influences literacy. Children who live in poverty have a harder time at school. People with lower literacy levels earn less, work fewer weeks in a year, and are more likely to be unemployed for longer periods. So it makes sense that working to improve literacy skills from a young age can prevent poverty down the road, and improving adult literacy can help reduce poverty. Further, increased literacy skills are strongly linked to economic growth and prosperity. Apparently a 1% increase in literacy skills nation-wide would lead to an increase of \$18.5 billion per year in Canada's GDP.

In Revelstoke, for the past decade, members of the Revelstoke Literacy Action Committee (RLAC) have worked to build resources and promote literacy for all ages in our community. School District 19 has been an important community partner and leader in literacy efforts, including providing office and space for community literacy programming and workshops in the new Neighbourhood Learning Centre at Begbie View Elementary. As well, the district continues to focus on literacy and early intervention strategies to ensure students are reading at expected levels, and are being supported when they are not yet meeting those benchmarks. For reading, the district target is for a minimum of 90% of students to be reading fluently by the end of grade 3 and grade 7. Last year, 96% of grade 3 students and 95% of grade 7 students reached this goal. The district attributes very high graduation rates (last year at 90%, among the highest in the province) to this kind of literacy success.

For adults in a small community like Revelstoke, improving literacy skills can be challenging. Ever-changing technology, language barriers for new residents, fitting courses in with work schedules, and even the perceived stigma that might go along with the need to upgrade can be barriers. The local branch of Okanagan College has been an invaluable resource, offering everything from individual tutoring to computer classes. Proposed changes to OC's Adult Academic and Career Preparation program are a real concern for literacy advocates in the community. This program is for adults who need to upgrade their general academic skills, meet entrance prerequisites for post-secondary programs, or complete high school graduation – all critical to decreasing a person's risk of poverty.

An important community goal in the Poverty Reduction Strategy is to strengthen and expand lifelong learning opportunities for all residents by working with the members of RLAC to address barriers to literacy. In particular, the strategy recommends moving forward with financial literacy – something that has been flagged in literacy planning for a while. Financial literacy is about having the knowledge, skills and confidence to make good decisions about money matters, something that is important to us all. Making financial mistakes can put us more at risk of living in poverty. Being financially 'literate' can help us move towards better financial security.

Earlier this year, the Social Development Committee partnered with the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL) and submitted a proposal to CBT Social Grants program to plan, develop and deliver a two-year financial literacy project in Revelstoke. The application was successful and the project is off and running. Over two years, the intent is to strengthen our ability to work together on many different aspects of financial literacy as well as help build both individual and community resilience to poverty. Local resources, programs and workshops to promote financial wellbeing will be created and delivered. It is hoped the project will empower people to help them with a variety of financial matters.

Tracy Spanner, the Community Outreach Coordinator for CBAL is excited about the project, "It is great to see this project moving forward. Literacy is all about having the skills to do the things you want to do. Financial literacy is about empowering people with knowledge and skills that can impact their lives".

Stay tuned and check the Community Calendars for upcoming Financial Literacy workshops. For more information, contact the CBAL Financial Literacy project coordinator Lisa Nguyen at cbal.lisa@gmail.com or call 250-805-2305.