

For immediate release

Community challenges tied to low literacy levels in B.C. says economist



Left to right) Dr. Ralf St. Clair, Honourable Brenda Bailey, Craig Alexander, Ishani Weera, Honourable Niki Sharma, and Shawn de Raaf discussed the impacts of literacy at the Decoda Literacy Conference April 18.

May 3, 2024 – VANCOUVER – Many challenges facing BC communities are directly linked to low literacy levels, says Canadian economist Craig Alexander. Alexander spoke at the Decoda Literacy Conference on April 18. The conference addressed the critical issue of how low literacy impacts BC communities under the theme “Literacy: The Ripple effect.”

“Literacy affects how people navigate the justice system, access the Internet, understand health and safety information and find work in remote, rural communities after a major industry closes,” said Decoda Executive Director Sandra Lee.

The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) literacy survey found that:

Working together for literacy

- More than 700,000 British Columbians have significant challenges with literacy.
- 45% of British Columbians aged 16 to 65 may have difficulty understanding newspapers, following instruction manuals, reading health information and other daily living tasks.
- 52% of British Columbians aged 16 to 65 may have difficulty calculating interest on a car loan, using information on a graph, calculating medicine dosage and other daily living tasks.

A panel discussion, spanning multiple government ministries and sectors delved into the far-reaching effects of low literacy on everything from health to jobs. Dr. Ralf St. Clair, Chair of the Decoda Literacy Board of Directors, facilitated the discussion aimed at developing a provincial literacy strategy to tackle the issue and build community resilience.

The panel included:

- Canadian economist Craig Alexander
- Attorney General Niki Sharma
- Minister of Jobs, Economic Development and Innovation Brenda Bailey
- Health and Safety Centre for the BC Federation of Labour Executive Director Ishani Weera
- Decoda board chair and University of Victoria Professor Ralf St. Clair
- Research Director, Social Research and Demonstration Corporation Shawn de Raaf

Alexander highlighted the economic impact of literacy, stressing its potential to boost productivity and income. Spoiler alert... it's significant.

"A 1% increase in literacy scores could lead to a 3% increase in labour productivity and income per capita," said Alexander. "It would increase income in the neighbourhood of something between \$40 and \$80 billion. It's more than just about money. It's about creating a better and healthier society. And I actually think it can improve the political and democratic process."

To accomplish this, Alexander suggests, "We need to upskill the labor force, and we need to ensure that workers have the ability and the scope to maximize their skill sets. In other words, get rid of the barriers."

BC Jobs, Economic Development and Innovation Minister Brenda Bailey shared how literacy is important to their mandate and work. "Participating in the panel was enlightening," said Bailey. "Craig Alexander's insights into the economic data related to literacy were thought-provoking and reaffirmed our commitment to supporting literacy programs across the province."

"We often talk of changing the world – these conversations, underpinned by literacy, are a very good start," said Lee. "Governments, businesses and organizations working together and investing in literacy will make a difference in people's lives and make communities in British Columbia more resilient."

Over 200 participants from BC and literacy organizations across Canada took part in a range of sessions during the two-day event. Topics included presentations on Reconciliation, newcomers and

literacy, using our dreams as a way to achieve goals, social change, street literacy, digital literacy and artificial intelligence.

“This conference demonstrated the breadth and depth of literacy work,” Desneiges Profili, Executive Director, Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy noted. “This event showcased the fact that even though the literacy field may be relatively small in size, the work profoundly impacts the lives of the people and communities of British Columbia.”

Decoda Literacy solutions is BC’s literacy organization and supports literacy programs in 400 communities across the province. Last year in BC, 44,164 adults and seniors engaged in improving their literacy skills. To find a literacy program in your region, visit [decoda.ca](https://www.decoda.ca).

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Photo: Literacy Conference Panel_Decoda-71_April 2024.jpg **Credit:** Decoda Literacy Solutions

Photo caption: (Left to right) Dr. Ralf St. Clair, Honourable Brenda Bailey, Craig Alexander, Ishani Weera, Honourable Niki Sharma, and Shawn de Raaf discussed the impacts of literacy at the Decoda Literacy Conference April 18.

For more information contact:

Sandra Lee, Executive Director, Decoda Literacy Solutions
slee@decoda.ca 604-681-4199 x. 419