



CANADIAN POLICY RESEARCH NETWORKS INC.

## **Expert Panel on Student Achievement Goals**

November 21, 2001 – Ottawa, Ontario

‘Raising the Literacy Bar’: A Background Statement on the results of the first *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)* Survey, to be released on December 4, 2001.

On December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) will release the first results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA is a major step towards understanding the literacy skills that 15-year-olds have and need.

In order to stimulate public discussion about what PISA results mean for Canada, Canadian Policy Research Networks (a non-profit policy think-tank) convened an **Expert Panel on Student Achievement Goals** (Panel members are listed at the end of this statement). Panel members, most of whom had not seen the results, were asked to comment on the broader context in which the results could be interpreted.

### **What is PISA?**

PISA is a new international survey designed to track reading, math and science literacy trends among 15-year-old students in the 32 OECD countries. PISA’s common international framework provides valid and reliable comparisons across these countries. While the specific skills needed in tomorrow’s knowledge-based economy and society are hotly debated, there is broad agreement that these three forms of literacy are the foundation for success as workers, life-long learners, parents and citizens.

The first PISA survey, conducted in 2000, focused on students’ ability to retrieve, interpret, and reflect on the information they read. Subsequent years of the survey will focus on scientific literacy (in 2003) and mathematical (in 2006) literacy.

In Canada, the PISA study was administered through a partnership between the Council of Ministers of Education, Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada. The Canadian sample was sufficiently large to support provincial breakdowns of results.

## **PISA Extends Our Understanding of Literacy**

Canada has been a leader in literacy research (with the 1989 Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activity and the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey) so we have a clear sense of how and why it matters. This earlier research shows strong links between literacy and labour market success, including income, job stability, the risk of unemployment and the chances of being on welfare. Literacy is positively related to citizenship – being aware of current events, engaging in public discourse, knowing your rights and responsibilities, and taking an active role in community life. Furthermore, there are real costs to society in not striving to provide everyone with solid literacy skills. Consider, for example, that literacy is a key determinant of health.

The good news from the research is that literacy can be learned and taught. So for society, the pay-offs from investing in literacy development are substantial and long-term.

The PISA survey builds on this understanding. It goes beyond testing the high school curriculum to examine how well students can cope in ‘real-world’ situations. The results place students in one of five proficiency levels based on their reading literacy test scores. The higher a person’s reading literacy, the more choices he or she will have as a worker, citizen, parent, and life-long learner.

## **A National Conversation on the Importance of Reading Literacy**

The December 4<sup>th</sup> PISA results will provide a profile of the level and distribution of the reading literacy skills of Canada’s 15-year-olds. The results will raise many questions that go to the heart of the kind of society and economy Canadians want to create for future generations.

- How good does a 15-year-old have to be on this test?
- What societal goals should we set for reading literacy?
- Will the reading skills that youth possess today be an adequate foundation for them to meet the rising skill requirements of an increasingly global, technology-intensive economy and a vibrant democracy?
- And what impact will reading proficiency at age 15 have on the risks and opportunities these youth will encounter throughout life?

The challenge the first PISA results poses for Canadians is deciding what level of reading literacy achievement we want for our 15-year-olds, so that they can do the best they are capable of as workers, citizens, parents, and learners.

But that’s only a start at exploring the meaning of the PISA results.

The Panel offers the following ten points on the implications of the reading literacy documented by PISA. These points are intended as a contribution to a national conversation on ‘raising the literacy bar’:

### **1. PISA is not just about whether schools have taught 15 year olds how to read**

It is more useful to view the test results as a snap shot at age 15 of the cumulative investments by families, schools and communities in these young people from birth. Furthermore, reading skills

are a measure of their ability to continue to learn throughout life. Given the generally slow pace of educational reform, decisions made today affect future generations of students. Thus, it is critical to keep high standards throughout the system so that we do not lose a generation.

## **2. Literacy means more than good reading skills**

Reading literacy is a necessary but not sufficient skill for success. Remember that future PISA surveys will assess math and science literacy. And to put literacy in a broader context, increasingly, success in the workplace demands many other skills, including teamwork, problem solving and communication. Employers consider positive work attitudes and social skills to be essential.

## **3. Literacy is developmental**

PISA uses 5 reading proficiency levels, which for researchers is a handy way to report test results. However, when interpreting these levels, keep in mind that the reading literacy they report reflects a developmental process that is relative, not absolute. Since almost every student answered some questions correctly, none of them is ‘illiterate’.

## **4. Raising the literacy floor in society**

A student’s socio-economic background can be strongly correlated with reading literacy. Yet this is not inevitable. We know that socio-economic disadvantage does not have to limit literacy. Countries with high overall literacy are successful not because lots of people are at the top of the scale, but because they have fewer people at the bottom. They have managed to break the link between low socio-economic status and weaker literacy. This is why it is so important to commit ourselves as a society to ‘raising the floor’ through public policy. Every Canadian should see this as a joint enterprise in which all can make a difference.

## **5. Good schools make a big difference**

Previous research reveals large differences in the reading scores between the highest and the lowest performing schools, even when they are serving students from similar socio-economic backgrounds in the same province. The role of the school is especially crucial for children who start their education with weak reading skills. Many complex factors contribute to school performance – from resources, teaching and parental involvement to leadership and values – and these need to be documented as ‘best practices’. As a society, we can raise the floor for literacy significantly by bringing all schools up to the level achieved by the top 20 percent – a goal that we know is possible.

## **6. Parents nurture a culture of reading**

We can’t lay it all at the school door. Parents also have a positive role to play, reading to their children and encouraging a ‘culture of reading’ within the home, and being actively involved in all aspects of their child’s education. This will help children to learn on their own. Communities should make an extra investment to support parents with low literacy skills, by providing supportive environments where both parents and children can learn from an early age. Children should be given opportunities to help them be ready to learn by the time they reach age six.

## **7. Employers also sustain literacy**

Literacy, once achieved, needs maintenance throughout life. The workplace therefore becomes a key site for ongoing learning and maintenance of literacy skills. There is much evidence to show that when literacy skills are not used, they deteriorate.

## **8. Setting targets with caution**

PISA results likely will be used by some stakeholders to set benchmarks and gauge progress. However, given that this generation of 15-year-olds will be in the work force for the next 40 to 50 years, a target set today may not adequately prepare them for tomorrow's skill requirements. That's because the minimum reading levels needed to be successful in all areas of life are rising steadily.

## **9. The rising skills bar**

The talents and skills of our workers are Canada's greatest competitive advantage in a global economy. All occupations will need more skills in future. No longer can we equate high literacy requirements with professional and managerial jobs. Many manual jobs today require extensive use of information-technology, a high level of literacy and the ability to keep on learning. Canada is committed to a high-skills route to economic prosperity, so ensuring that 15-year-olds have the literacy they will need in 10 years is vital.

## **10. Looking beyond PISA scores**

Children and youth are better able to acquire literacy when supported in this quest by opportunities and resources. Young people must be personally motivated to want to read, so they need to understand the penalties and rewards associated with different levels of reading proficiency. Young people should be empowered to follow the motto 'don't be what you are but what you want to become'. This encourages 15-year-olds to look into the future and have a sense of what to expect. There are clearly rewards for higher achievement scores, but young people need to set their own target. Literacy is about possibilities. We encourage Canadians to debate the reading literacy possibilities for the next generation and for all society. Everyone will benefit from supporting higher literacy attainment, especially reading.

The results of the survey will challenge us to think about how to raise many bars: for schools, families, individuals, communities, employers and Canada as a whole. PISA will document our success compared to other countries and in different parts of Canada. To build on that base, we need a clear vision of how to support the life-long development of literacy. Creating this vision, and acting on it, must be a joint enterprise involving all Canadians.



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**Expert Panel on Student Achievement Goals**

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Ottawa, Ontario

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