

Literacy in Greater Saint John
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My presentation focuses on some indirect measures of literacy in the Saint John region, and on some of the activities that are underway to address the improvement of literacy skills in City.

To establish some context, I will begin with some background information on the demographic characteristics of the Saint John region.

Saint John is on the cusp of major demographic and economic change.

The recently released *Benefits Blueprint* outlines some of the major economic investments that are underway or have been recently been announced:

- LNG
- New potash mine in Sussex,
- Refurbishment of Point Lepreau Generating Station
- Potential for a second oil refinery and a second reactor

Direct investment in these projects may reach as high as \$19 Billion; with indirect economic spin-offs exceeding \$40 Billion.

As these projects come on stream, there will be unprecedented job creation in Greater Saint John and across the Province. This has the potential of stimulating demographic and economic growth, and contributing lasting benefits to the communities that make up the Saint John region, as well as the rest of the Province.

Seven key focus areas have been identified in the *Benefits Blueprint*: Four of these relate directly to the theme of this panel: Workforce Expansion; Training and Education; Infrastructure Requirements and ensuring that Community Interests are represented throughout this phase of growth.

The others – Housing; Arts and Culture; and distributing Business and Economic development across the Province – can also contribute to, and benefit from, improvements in adult literacy.

There are some very positive suggestions in the *Benefits Blueprint*, including a recommended increase in child care spaces in the City and additional educational supports for at-risk secondary school students. Both of these suggestions could lead to enhanced participation in the education system.

At its core, the *Benefits Blueprint* clearly indicates that if we do not achieve tangible benefits for all of Greater Saint John's citizens, then these unprecedented levels of investment in the community will not be fully successful.

At The University of New Brunswick's Saint John campus, I have been involved in a project that has been examining the social and economic transition that has been underway in Saint John.

This Project is called The Industrial City in Transition, and it has been funded by a Community University Research Alliance (CURA) grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

This involves close collaboration with community-based researchers at the New Brunswick Museum, the Human Development Council, ACAP, and the Kingston Peninsula Heritage Inc.,

This project has also provided me with the opportunity to work with other community-based groups such as Vibrant Communities Saint John

Using standard Statistic Canada data, this project has shown that the Municipality of Saint John at the last census taken in 2006 counted 68,000 inhabitants. This was almost 20,000 fewer residents than were recorded living in the city in 1971 (89,000). Thus, the central municipality in the Greater Saint John region has been shrinking in population for the last 3 decades

However, it is not acknowledged often enough that overall urban region (or what Statistics Canada defines as the Saint John CMA) has recorded population increases at nearly every census in this period, reflecting significant levels of demographic growth in the suburban fringe municipalities (Hampton, Rothesay, Quispamsis, Grand Bay-Westfield and the village of Saint Martins).

It was only in 2001 that Greater Saint John recorded an absolute decline in population for the first time in decades (by about 3,000 people); and at the 2006 census, this population decline stabilized and the overall CMA population remained relatively the same as it was in 2001, with 122,389 residents recorded in the Saint CMA in 2006.

To place these simple trends in context, across the Province of NB, 72 of the Province's 102 municipalities recorded an absolute decline in population between 2001 and 2006.

There are all kinds of interesting things that may be said about these data, and about the associated challenges of a central city providing infrastructure, employment and services to a large commuting region. Saint John, as those of you from outside the local area, will soon discover, is a very interesting place.

But the purpose of my participation in this panel is to talk about Literacy levels and what is happening at the local level in this region.

The Greater Saint John's *Vital Signs 2007* Publication, cites 2003 data for the Saint John region from the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS). This indicates that the average adult literacy score for prose (in the region extending from Sussex to St. Stephen) was 272 (which was slightly above the provincial average). Still, this is below the Level 3 Literacy level.

In the other areas examined (document, numeracy and problem solving literacy) Greater Saint John's scores were below the national average in each case.

Such averages, however, disguise the considerable diversity across the Saint John region. In a landmark study completed in October of 2005, entitled *Poverty and Plenty*, a profile of some of Saint John's most vulnerable neighborhoods highlighted the level of inequality across the urban region. Several census tracts were shown to deviate significantly from the averages for the city and for the CMA in such measures as:

- % of population without High School completed
- # of families headed by a single mother
- Incidence of low income.

This study revealed that in some of the city's High Poverty Dissemination Areas, more than 40 percent of the adult population did not have a high school diploma or its equivalent. Moreover, when this indicator was examined by age group, it was revealed that more than 3,200 individuals between the ages of 20 and 34 did not have a High School diploma or its equivalent in the urban region; 2/3 of this group lived in the city of Saint John.

If this population could be offered appropriate support to enhance their education and employment opportunities, perhaps this cohort could become an "untapped resource" that might contribute to Saint John's anticipated labour force needs.

To address the question whether or not there have been any measurable or notable improvements in literacy levels in the Greater Saint John Region, I have selected two very general indirect indicators:

- Those without high school credentials
- Those who have achieved some PSE certification

Here are some noteworthy statistics based on some of the research conducted by Kurt Peacock who is currently a Visiting Scholar at UNB Saint John:

- In 1986, 46 percent of the adult population within the Saint John CMA had not achieved High School completion or its equivalent (42,400 people)
- In 2006, only 23 percent of the adult population were in this category (23,250 people)
- In 1986, only 20 percent of the Saint John CMA had some PSE certification
- In 2006, those with PSE certification has grown to 30 percent of the adult population

Clearly on these simple statistical measurements there have been some improvements in the Saint John region.

However, these improvements have not been evenly distributed across the urban region.

What the more detailed analysis shows is that improvements have been greater in the suburban fringe region, and that within the City of Saint John, there remains some islands of inequality where progress has not been similar to the average for the region.

For example, in 2006, in the 7 inner-city census tracts that display high concentrations of poverty, on average 36% of the adults do not have high school or PSE credentials.

In 1986, this number was 57%, suggesting that although education levels have improved in these neighborhoods, they have not risen as quickly as in the CMA as a whole.

In the suburbs, growth in university credentials was even higher in this 20 year period, increasing by 147% over 20 years. Thus, a growing share of the most-highly educated residents of Saint John is found in suburban communities.

In this presentation, I am assuming that those Saint John adults who have not completed high school would potentially have low levels of literacy. While this is not entirely an accurate measure, the number of adults in inner-city neighbourhoods with lower education levels suggests that perhaps literacy programs should be focused in select geographic areas within the City.

There are various groups in Saint John whose mandate is focused on the learning needs of inner-city Saint John adults.

The Learning Exchange, is perhaps the City's most well-known literacy organization. They have several programs targeted at different types of adult learner, such as:

- Basic Education Skills Training (BEST)
- Community Adult Learning Program (CALP)
- Learnex – Individualized educational and training opportunities for adults in the workplace

They also have programs aimed specifically at elementary and pre-school students (Reading Rocks).

Literacy research shows that involvement in literacy activities at home and at work are important in raising literacy levels.

Other initiatives that deserve to be highlighted for their efforts to include:

- First Steps, which operates a home for parenting teenagers in Saint John, which permits teenage mothers to complete their high school education. This has been supported by the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI).

- The PALS Program (Partners Assisting Local Schools), which started as a partnership between JD Irving and Prince Charles School, and has now spread across the City. At UNB Saint John we have recently established a PALS partnership with Hazen White - Saint Francis that has varsity athletes conducting Volleyball workshops.
- The Saint John Free Public Library's Storytent initiative
- The activities of Read Saint John; and
- The Saint John Early Childhood Early Childhood Development Coalition, which has a well-developed plan to establish Early Learning Centres across the city – which are intended to bring children and their families together to engage families, neighbourhoods, and community service providers to promote healthy neighborhoods.

To conclude, it is my hope that the programs and initiatives mentioned above can achieve the long-term payoff of increasing literacy levels, improving people's lives, and creating a more equitable quality of life across the Saint John Urban Region.