

Early literacy intervention is key in improving adult literacy rates and alleviating poverty. Research shows that Canadians with low literacy skills are more likely to have lower incomes than Canadians with higher literacy skills. It also indicates that those with the lowest skills are the most likely to live in poverty.

Steve Egan, principal at St. Anthony Catholic Elementary School recognizes the relationship between literacy skills and employability.

“Someone who has literacy issues would be challenged in this economy to gain employment and to stay employed. If you are employed, it is often in lower paying jobs that leave you at the poverty line or below it, and it limits advancement,” he said.

If a child who is struggling with literacy is not accessing help and developing skills by grade three, the odds of developing those skills are lower as they get older. This significantly impacts their employability and their incomes as adults. However, studies estimate that every dollar spent on early literacy intervention programs saves approximately seven dollars in costs in the future. Intervention is more effective the earlier it happens. As a result, the education system is focussing on early literacy programming for all students.

In order to help all children develop their literacy skills and to provide early support for students who are struggling, the province is in the process of implementing a full day kindergarten program. Full day kindergarten is currently offered in Northumberland County at Grant Sine Public School, Ganaraska Trail Public School, St. Anthony School, Roseneath Centennial Public School, Northumberland Hills Public School, and Colborne Public School. Starting in September 2011, three additional Northumberland County schools will offer full day kindergarten.

Full day kindergarten means that the students get to know the school routines more quickly, there is more time to spend on early literacy activities and play-based learning, and there is earlier identification of students with difficulties.

“With full day kindergarten, the teachers know the students in October like they would have previously known them in December,” says Mr. Egan. “It is designed with an early childhood educator and a classroom teacher so that students can get help in small groups. The staff help students to move along on the learning continuum based on their individual needs; for example a student may need extra help blending sounds.”

As students continue in the primary grades, there are specialized literacy programs for students who are struggling. Classroom teachers continue to be trained regarding literacy issues. The students’ situations can also be discussed at School Resource Team meetings so that they can access special supports such as speech and language assessments and, if needed, an Individual Education Plan can be developed.

The Northumberland Child Development Centre has also launched Northumberland Cares at Colborne Public School and St. Anthony School. This program offers a variety

of services related to early learning. This includes workshops for parents, opportunities to get advice about speech and behaviour, and referrals to resources in the community.

Finally, the best advice for parents is if you want your children to be successful readers, make time to read to them every day.