

# Learning What Works

Evidence from SRDC's social experiments and research

## February 2011

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### Closing the gap in literacy and essential skills: A ground-breaking demonstration project



The last decade has seen an increasing volume of research suggesting the presence of gaps in literacy and essential skills (LES) in the Canadian workforce. Research reveals potential negative effects on firm business objectives, such as reduced productivity, increased production and human resources costs, and ultimately lower profitability. In addition, workers may suffer consequences of

low literacy in the form of lower wages, reduced job stability, and even higher health risks from workplace injury.

While much anecdotal evidence suggests that LES training may be helpful to eliminate these gaps, delivery of workplace training remains low in many sectors, in spite of significant promotional efforts and support from sector councils. Part of the reason for firms' low investments is the lack of a rigorous business case providing clear evidence of essential skills gains as well as improvements in job performance and, ultimately, in positive returns on investments as a result of LES training. With funding from the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, SRDC intends to provide this evidence by managing a large-scale

demonstration project, which will evaluate workplace LES training with the most rigorous evaluation methods.

The Literacy and Essential Skills in the Workplace project uses a random assignment design to provide the most reliable measures of the impacts of LES training on workers' skills, their job performance, and other outcomes relevant to workers and firm-level objectives. The study began in February 2010 and will run to February 2013. Eighty to 100 firms are to be recruited, with a participation of up to 1,200 workers, half of whom will receive training; the other half will serve as a control group in the study. The research strategy includes three main components: an experimental evaluation to determine the impacts, implementation research to explore delivery lessons and best practices, and a cost-benefit analysis to estimate returns on investments in LES training by firms and government.

Following a comprehensive sector analysis and engagement process, the accommodation sector in the tourism industry was selected as the target sector for the demonstration project. Conditions in this sector are best to help maintain the integrity of the evaluation and at the same time, results will be broadly applicable to many frontline occupations in other service industries, including food services, retail sales, and other clerical and administrative positions. A pan-Canadian set of delivery partners has been developed to implement the project including the Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council and their counterparts in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador. Training solutions will be developed and delivered in partnership with SkillPlan and The Training Group at Douglas College, recognized leaders in essential skills training.

Last November, David Gyarmati, SRDC research director leading the Literacy and Essential Skills in the Workplace project, made a presentation on the project's objectives and design to the Canadian Literacy and Learning Coalition. Read his [presentation notes](#).

## Experimentation for better policy-making

Experts and leading practitioners from the United Kingdom, Singapore, the Netherlands, Brazil, Australia, and Canada met last September in Singapore to discuss how governments can explore and anticipate the future, how they can innovate and adapt to increase the likelihood of favourable social outcomes. This was the fourth roundtable of the New Synthesis project, a collaborative international research network that draws on the collective knowledge and experience of senior public officials, researchers, and scholars from six countries and 25 organizations to develop a new synthesis of public administration that is "aligned with the challenges of serving the public good in the 21st century."

Jean-Pierre Voyer, SRDC president, was invited to the Singapore roundtable, which focused on preparing government to serve beyond the predictable. His presentation looked at how an important and powerful research tool – experimentation, or more specifically, social experiments – can contribute to improve policy-making. Experimentation allows policy makers to measure, in advance of full scale implementation, the size and scope of expected outcomes of a new program or policy and to identify any undesirable or unintended effects. The regular and systematic use of experiments, i.e., demonstration projects based on rigorous evaluation methods, can contribute greatly to the anticipative capacities of governments. It can improve the capacity of governments and build the adaptive capacity of communities through collective learning.

There are several reasons for governments to engage in experimentation:

- Experimentation puts ideas to the test (identifying barriers, estimating take-up rates, measuring intended and unintended outcomes, measuring impacts, and obtaining cost-benefits).
- Innovation is needed to address emerging complex problems, and experimentation plays an important role in the innovation process.
- Social experiments can serve as a means to disseminate new practices.

Social experimentation has developed over the last 40 years as a major form of research activity whose use is widespread.

Read Jean-Pierre Voyer's [presentation notes](#).

Learn more about the [New Synthesis project](#).



*Jocelyne Bourgon, SRDC board member (front row, fourth from left), Jean-Pierre Voyer, SRDC president (second row, centre), and delegates of the New Synthesis project. Singapore Roundtable, September 2010.*

## Testing a new approach to raise awareness of PSE opportunities



SRDC is implementing an experiment to test a new program called Life After High School that provides support to high school students in British Columbia through the process of applying for a post-secondary program and for student financial aid.

SRDC is working with Professor Phil Oreopoulos of the University of Toronto to develop, implement, and evaluate Life After High School in BC high schools with lower rates of graduates making the transition to post-secondary education (PSE). Recruitment of participating schools began in April 2010. By September, SRDC secured the cooperation of 50 principals and had permission to proceed from their school districts. Half the schools were assigned at random to receive the program and half were allocated to a control group for evaluative purposes.

The program is innovative in its universal approach. Through its classroom workshops, all Grade 12 students should apply for, and learn how to pay for, a program of study at a BC college or university. All students are invited to attend as part of a strategy to increase attendance of those who are less likely to apply to post-secondary education. The program removes financial barriers to the process as it pays application fees. By making this payment, students can learn about their post-secondary eligibility at any BC public institution. Although the program cannot assure acceptance into their program of choice, Grade 12 students will nevertheless gain awareness and valuable knowledge about processes for the BC Post-Secondary Education Application and StudentAid.

The program comprises three one-hour workshops during normal class time in the fall and spring. The first workshop helps students choose a college or university and determine their post-secondary budget. The second guides them in the application process for a post-secondary program (including payment of the application fee for one program at any BC public institution). The third workshop takes students through the application for student financial aid. Over the three workshops, students receive information about the benefits of PSE and step-by-step practical assistance about how to apply for PSE and student aid.

The overall goal of the intervention is to increase the proportion of students who enroll in post-secondary education after high school. Not all who apply will take up a place immediately, but the arrival of acceptance letters may well encourage some to give post-secondary education a try when they might not have done so without the intervention. Outcomes will be measured by comparing school-level administrative data on post-secondary transition rates for the 25 program group schools to those at the 25 control group schools. Other program objectives include increasing Grade 12 students' awareness and knowledge of relevant post-secondary opportunities, to be measured by a survey in June 2011. Students should leave the program better equipped to apply in future years. Although current funding covers the evaluation of effects in the first year, the evaluation is constructed so that the differences in student outcomes can be tracked for five years.

The experiment began in March 2010 with funding from the Canada Student Loans Program of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, and with the support of StudentAid BC. Results are expected to be available in the summer of 2012.

## Working together to build a healthier British Columbia

Over the past three years, SRDC was engaged in a unique opportunity to evaluate several health promotion initiatives delivered across British Columbia (BC). In 2006, the BC government provided a one-time \$25 million grant to BC Healthy Living Alliance (BCHLA) to improve the health of British Columbians. A first of its kind in BC, the project brought together key organizations in health promotion and other areas as well as communities in the province. BCHLA members worked together to develop and implement 15 healthy living initiatives in 4 strategic areas: healthy eating, physical activity, tobacco reduction, and community capacity building.

BCHLA entered into an agreement with the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research to facilitate an independent evaluation. In 2007, SRDC was contracted by the Foundation to conduct an evaluation of these initiatives. Six of them were selected for an outcome evaluation and another for a case study.

The SRDC evaluation team relied on a variety of research methods to evaluate the selected initiatives. Process, outcomes, and formative evaluation designs were used along with a variety of methods to collect information, such as surveys, observations, focus groups, site visits, key informant interviews, and case studies.

BCHLA chairs acknowledged in their final report on the initiatives that SRDC's evaluation results provided valuable insights into their work in BC communities. Furthermore, the results contributed to research in the four strategic areas of healthy living.

SRDC evaluated the following initiatives:

### Healthy eating

- **Sip Smart! BC.** The initiative was designed to deliver lessons to students in grades 4, 5, and 6 that inform them about health risks associated with sugar sweetened drinks, and reduce their consumption. Read the evaluation [summary](#).
- **Healthy Food and Beverage Sales in Recreation Facilities.** The initiative aimed to promote the sale of healthy foods in places where people work and play. Read the evaluation [summary](#).
- **Farm to School Salad Bar.** The goal of the initiative was to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables among school-aged children by increasing access to local, fresh, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods. Read the evaluation [summary](#).

### Tobacco reduction

- **Smoke-Free Housing in Multiple-Unit Dwellings.** The initiative aimed to support interested housing providers to increase the number of voluntary smoke-free units available in multi-unit dwellings. Read the evaluation [summary](#).
- **Tobacco-Free Workplace Initiative.** This initiative aimed employers to implement tobacco-free workplaces and offer resources to employees who want to stop smoking. Read the evaluation [summary](#).

## Physical activity

- **Walk BC.** The initiative was established to raise awareness of the importance of a physically active lifestyle and support and promote walking as a key factor in increasing overall health and well-being in communities. It also provided resources and support through the Physician Engagement Program to physicians across BC with resources for their patients. Read the evaluation [summary](#).

## Community capacity building

- **Community Capacity Building Strategy.** The strategy set out to engage people in making their community a healthier and more vibrant place. Read the evaluation [summary](#).

For information on the SRDC evaluation reports, contact Susanna Gurr, SRDC research director. To learn more about the BCHLA initiatives, write to Samantha Hartley-Folz, BCHLA manager of grant liaison. Read about the [BCHLA initiatives](#).

## SRDC presents concrete examples of the use of subjective well-being in policy research

In recent years, there has been a growing volume of new research in the determinants of happiness, or subjective well-being (SWB), and of its implications for public policy. In December 2010, the Centre for the Study of Living Standards (CSLS) in cooperation with the Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity (ICP) held a conference and series of panel discussions in Ottawa to take stock of this new research and explore the role of SWB in Canadian public policy.

Presentations were made by several prominent academics, including the keynote address by professor emeritus and SRDC board member, John Helliwell, an internationally recognized expert in the study of well-being and life satisfaction. Dr. Helliwell emphasized the importance of social context and trust in determining levels of happiness and called for more empirical research and use of SWB in cost-benefit analysis.

David Gyarmati, SRDC research director, was also invited to present his view on the role of SWB in policy research. He discussed the importance of including measures of life satisfaction and social capital in policy evaluations, highlighting several concrete examples of their innovative use in SRDC's research. He emphasized the need for rigorous methodologies such as random assignment, and comprehensive frameworks for evaluation and cost-benefit analysis, including a broad set of determinants of SWB.

The conference received significant attention from national and local media, including the presence of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), whose correspondents interviewed CSLS chairman and SRDC board member, Ian Stewart. *The Globe and Mail* published a full-page article following the event.

Read the [presentation notes](#) of SRDC's David Gyarmati. Read the complete conference program and other presentation notes on the [CSLS Web site](#).

## Training in a devolved world: Integration, adaptation, and partnerships

To help address its theme "Recovering Together? Fiscal Pressures, Federalism, and Social Policy", the 2010 Queen's International Institute on Social Policy invited Karen Myers, SRDC principal research associate, to discuss policies that foster human capital investment later in life.

Labour market-related training policy has become more important in recent years. In an increasingly dynamic economy, more workers may need to make labour market adjustments and seek assistance as they decide what to do and how to do it. Workers may need to switch to entirely new occupations or industries. As skill requirements rise and change, lower skilled workers are particularly vulnerable and are faced with the need to upgrade their skills.

For the past 15 years, governments have re-negotiated the framework for active labor market policy. Now that each province and territory has signed a labour market development agreement (LMDA) with the federal government, training programs and services can be adapted to meet changing needs of Canadians. An opportunity has emerged to recast training policy as part of a larger human capital development strategy that contributes to a broad and progressive agenda of growth and prosperity.

What additional policy components are necessary to make this broader agenda a reality? The re-negotiation of LMDAs raised the major issue of access to training for individuals not eligible for employment insurance (EI) benefits. In response, the federal government proposed to invest an additional \$500 million annually through labour market agreements (LMAs). It also offered to explore the feasibility of transferring funds to existing programs for vulnerable groups. There are now several agreements and initiatives in addition to LMDAs and LMAs. Combined with provincial and territorial investments, annual spending on training for unemployed individuals ranges from \$2.5 billion to \$3 billion.

Although LMAs and other agreements are billed as a new training architecture in practice, funds have been used in a rather ad hoc way. There remains a patchwork of programs and services overseen by numerous ministries and defined by funders rather than by the needs and goals of individual workers. Several provinces have begun to integrate their service delivery by offering a consistent suite of services for the unemployed, regardless of their eligibility for various programs and their place of residence.

Much progress has been made, with more work left to be done. In some provinces, little inter-ministerial cooperation exists, especially across ministries responsible for education, economic development, and citizenship and immigration. Although international literature raises a pressing need to create a joint policy framework for employment services, adult education, and economic development, there is still little dialogue across policy domains in Canada.

So what do we need to move forward? More information and more opportunities for policy learning across jurisdictions. As uncertainty over how to solve a problem increases, the value of information about solving that problem also increases. Yet, the current Canadian program of research on labour market training is strikingly under-developed. The LMDA evaluation framework is narrowly defined. There is little public information to answer basic questions such as what training Canadians take and which types of training are effective in helping to secure decent paying jobs.

Faced with an increasingly complex set of policy-making options, innovative federal, provincial, and territorial partnerships are required to generate information and use it to develop solutions that are technically workable and politically feasible.

Read the [notes](#) of Karen Myer's presentation or watch the [video](#).

## SRDC participates in Senate committee hearing on accessibility to post-secondary education

SRDC was invited in the summer of 2010 to appear before the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, which was studying accessibility of post-secondary education (PSE) in Canada. SRDC informed senators about four of its projects testing new approaches to increase access to PSE, with a special emphasis on access by under-represented groups (such as students from low-income families, students from disadvantaged communities, first-generation students\*, and Aboriginal students):

- **Future to Discover.** The demonstration project involves 5,400 high school students in New-Brunswick and Manitoba. It is testing the early intervention of a post-secondary information program, *Explore Your Horizons*, and an advanced guarantee of student financial assistance, *Learning Accounts*.
- **BC AVID.** The demonstration project involves more than 1,300 high school students in British Columbia. It is testing a U.S. college-preparatory program known as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) for under-achieving students who are unlikely to go to PSE without some supportive intervention.
- **Willingness to Pay for PSE.** The project used experimentally derived indicators to examine the sensitivity of under-represented groups to the price of PSE and determine whether loan aversion constitutes a barrier to access.
- **Life After High School.** For this demonstration project, students from 25 low transition high schools in BC are being provided information about the benefits of PSE and step-by-step practical assistance in applying to post-secondary BC institutions and for student financial aid.



Senate of Canada

\* First-generation students are defined as those who had no parent with a completed degree or certificate at higher than a high school level.

Jean-Pierre Voyer, SRDC president, and Heather Smith-Fowler, SRDC senior research associate, briefly described the nature of these projects and the important policy questions that SRDC sought to answer. They pointed out that three of these large-scale projects were conducted as social experiments using the random assignment of participating students and schools. They added that this was the most reliable and accurate way to determine whether these interventions made a difference in PSE participation rates.

Read the [notes](#) of Jean-Pierre Voyer's presentation.

Read the [transcript](#) of the Senate committee's proceedings.

## Recent publications

### **Willingness to Pay for Post-secondary Education Among Under-represented Groups**

A research report released in September 2010 by SRDC and the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) investigates the roles that financial barriers may play in the under-representation of certain groups in post-secondary education (PSE). It shows that negative perceptions about the costs of PSE and about taking up student loans may discourage some students from pursuing a post-secondary education. [Read the report.](#)

### **Final report of the *learn\$ave* project**

SRDC published the final results of *learn\$ave*, a demonstration project to test the effectiveness of individual development accounts (IDAs) as a tool to promote adult learning and small-business start-up for low-income Canadians. [Read the report.](#)

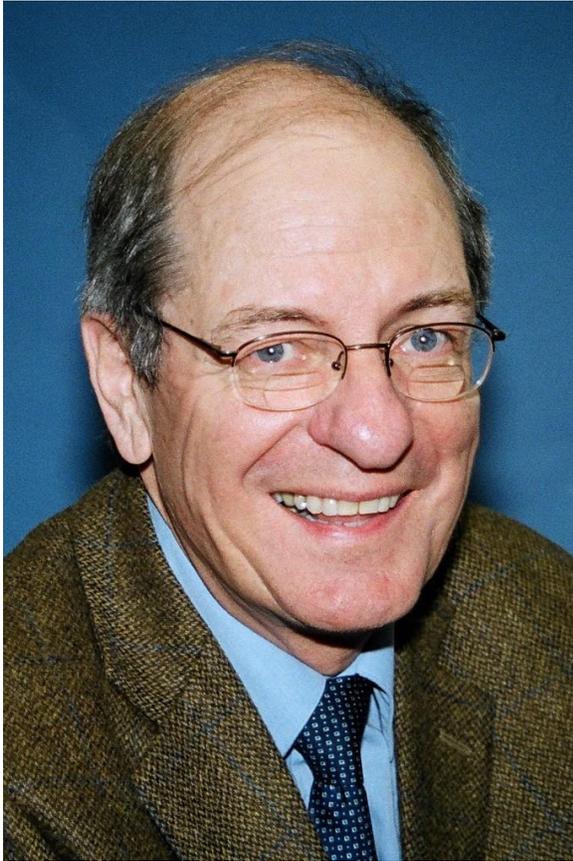
### **BC AVID Interim Impacts Report**

SRDC's second report on the BC AVID Pilot Project shows that a Canadian version of an American college-preparatory program is helping British Columbia high school students get ready for post-secondary education. BC AVID focuses on students who are academically "in the middle" (who might not otherwise go on to post-secondary education), ensuring they develop the academic and organizational skills they need to succeed in further studies. [Read the report.](#)

### **Labour Mobility Between EU and Canada**

SRDC contributed to a recent ECO Canada report, *Labour Mobility Between EU and Canada*. The study looks at the potential of attracting skilled foreign environmental workers from Central and Eastern European Countries and France to Canada. It also identifies the key barriers to foreign worker mobility to Canada and within the European Union and the initiatives to facilitate their mobility. [Read the report.](#)

## In memoriam: Paul Bernard



Paul Bernard, member of SRDC's board of directors since 2002, passed away on February 6.

A PhD graduate in sociology from Harvard University, Paul Bernard was a professor of sociology at the Université de Montréal. His research and teaching focused on social inequality and the study of the life course, as well as epistemology and methods. His recent work, in Canada and abroad, involved job quality, social cohesion, social capital, welfare regimes, social inequalities of health, indicators of social development, life course and social investment, flexicurity, and poverty in single-parent families.

Paul Bernard contributed to many different organizations, including the National Statistics Council and the Centre d'étude sur la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale, which provides advice on social policy development to the Quebec government. He played a key role in the creation of the national network of Research Data Centres and made notable contributions to the development of social statistics in Canada.

SRDC's president, Jean-Pierre Voyer, had the privilege of knowing Paul Bernard and working with him over the last 20 years. "His absence will be greatly felt not only at SRDC, but by those of us who benefited from his enthusiasm, support, and intellectual contributions. Paul had developed a large network of policy makers in Ottawa and Quebec as well as academic colleagues in Canada and Europe. He was also highly regarded by his current and former students. We will miss his ability to gather people from different milieus and disciplines and have them work together effectively. His passing marks a sad day for all of us who enjoyed many friendly and engaging conversations with him on important social issues."

SRDC's board of directors and entire staff convey their sincere condolences to Paul Bernard's family.