

130 literacy centres in New Brunswick

## Learn to read, discover new horizons

**D**esneiges Pitre of Bathurst had no hesitation about quitting her job as a janitor, after seven years of heavy physical work for minimum wage, to return to school.

"The time had come to do something with my life. I truly believed I could do something to build a better future. Once I was back in school, I realized I was capable of going further," says Pitre, a woman in her 30s, who will finish high school in the spring.

According to the 1986 census, 23.9 per cent of New Brunswick adults cannot read, write or compute well enough to participate fully in modern life.

Since completing a five-month literacy program last year, which gave Pitre the equivalent of Grade 6, she has been taking things one step at a time. She is now taking Grade 11 courses and has no intention of stopping when she finishes high school.

"I've got something in mind. I want to work with disabled children. I've taken care of such children in the past and I enjoyed the experience. I have to take a two-year training program at the Campbellton community college," she says.

Pitre has only good things to say about the program she is taking in Bathurst. "We're trained well. We get all the support we need from our teachers, but we have to apply ourselves."

After working in silviculture, as a tobacco picker in Ontario and also a child care worker — all backbreaking jobs — she has learned to work with her mind. The time spent at school has also given her the chance to hone her skills as a communicator. At the request of the Bathurst community college, she talks to groups about her experience with literacy and academic upgrading programs.

"I've been asked to talk to groups of adults in literacy training to discourage them from quitting. I was on a radio show last year during Literacy

Week. I never would have done that before. I'm a bit nervous in front of a microphone, but I like it now," she says.

### EMPLOYERS GET INVOLVED

The private sector has gone the literacy route too. With about 2,200 employees, Brunswick Mining and Smelting is the largest employer in northern New Brunswick. Last year, it launched an initiative to help employees keep up with changes in technology.

"Our company is in heavy industry. Our employees are good with their hands and they work hard. But, in the context of global competition, they aren't well enough qualified because technology is constantly evolving," says John Carrington, vice-president of BMS and a member of the board of directors of Literacy New Brunswick.

"The illiteracy rate in the northeastern New Brunswick is 31.3 per cent, highest in the province. That's one-third of the labor pool."

The company and the labor union worked together to set up a community literacy program in the workplace. In a trailer that serves as a classroom, employees can take courses given in French or English by other union members. And they are paid for the time they spend in class.

Several thousand people throughout the province receive this essential training at over 130 literacy centres like the ones at Brunswick Mining and Smelting.

"New Brunswick has to deal with the problem. If we continue to work at it, we can only benefit in the long run," Carrington says.

To know more about literacy programs call (506) 457-READ.



*Desneiges Pitre of Bathurst has no intention of limiting her career choices when she finishes high school upgrading.*

## A moving target

Why your job needs literacy skills

By Burt Perrin

**S**kills in reading, writing and arithmetic have become critical to individuals and businesses in the Canadian labor market.

Nearly all new jobs, even those considered to be unskilled, put more emphasis on these skills. With these abilities comes flexibility, something almost everyone will need in a world where frequent job changes are becoming common. The cost of being unable to read well, or to do arithmetic is high both to the individual and to society. A study for the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy in 1988 estimated that illiteracy costs Canada more than \$10 billion a year. Direct costs to business were estimated at \$4 billion.

Canada cannot afford those costs; the country needs a skilled workforce. Unfortunately, our abilities to read, write and adapt to change fall far behind those of many other countries which are increasing the skills of their workforces.

### HOW DO CANADIANS STAND UP TO THIS CHALLENGE?

▼ Nearly one-third of our young people leave school before finishing high school — one of the highest dropout rates in the industrialized world.

▼ Few adults are totally unable to read or write. Statistics Canada says, however, that 16 per cent — 2.9 million adults — cannot cope with the written words in everyday life. Most of these people, for example, cannot read the label on an aspirin bottle to find out how many aspirins to give a child.

▼ A further 22 per cent — four million Canadians — can read simple materials in familiar contexts. They do not think they have a reading problem, but they have difficulty with more complex reading tasks. Examples of these include: using maps and charts, transferring information from a catalog page to an order form, even telling what hours schools are open from a school

board brochure sent to parents.

▼ The Conference Board of Canada says 70 per cent of Canadian businesses face problems because of limited literacy skills of workers. This makes it difficult for many employers to introduce new technology and train workers in new techniques.

▼ Another study found, even during a recession, many employers are having trouble recruiting suitable workers. Fifty-seven per cent of employers rejected entry-level candidates because of inadequate writing and verbal skills.

Such statistics paint a dismal picture for the labor force. For the individual, it is even worse. People who can't read will find it more and more difficult to find jobs. They will not obtain promotions easily. They will find it hard to adapt to changes in their present work. These individuals include people who do not consider themselves as having a reading problem but they actually

do. They might know the alphabet but not the meanings of the words in the context in which they are used.

### A SELF-HELP PROPOSAL:

▼ Be aware of the importance of reading and writing in your life. Read as much as possible. Take a course on any topic.

▼ Encourage others to improve their reading skills. Community literacy groups, community colleges and schools offer adult literacy training.

▼ Read to and with your children (or someone else's child). Encourage teens to stay in school.

▼ Encourage your employer or union to provide opportunities for training and education.

With more people recognizing how important it is to read and write, it is easier to get help without being embarrassed or shy. Schools can often direct adults to places where they can get help.