



**Helen Thomas of the Victoria R.E.A.D. Centre has been helping adults learn to read for more than 20 years.**

*Dunc Malcolm/News staff*

## B.C. to build literacy

### Government responds to damning report card

Roszan Holmen  
*News staff*

A week after learning the province is falling behind its literacy targets, the government has announced \$1.6 million to oversee community literacy organizations.

Forty per cent of working age British Columbians don't have the literacy skills to fully participate in the workforce, according to the auditor general in a report released Feb. 7.

While B.C. compares well with other jurisdictions, it's not on track to achieve its goal of being the most literate jurisdiction in North America by 2015.

The new funding, delivered by the Ministry of Advanced Education, will be used to create 16 regional literacy co-ordinators at post-secondary institutions. Their role will be to aid and monitor community-based literacy programs through curriculum development and learner assessment.

While Claire Rettie, executive director of the Victoria Reads Society, applauds the top-level co-ordination, she's also hoping for a boost at the ground level. Long-term funding for literacy instructors and programs "means learners can stay inside the program and enhance their abilities at a pace they're capable of managing," said Rettie.

Service Canada generally funds students to participate in adult literacy programs for about 12 weeks. But at the Victoria Reads Society, many students end up staying lon-

ger, depending on their literacy skills when they entered.

Rochelle Warren has been attending the 25-hour-per-week classes for two years. "I love it there," said Warren. "They help you a lot with everything - with school work and every day life. I've had a lot of things going on in my life and Helen (the instructor) has been there through it all."

Since dropping out of high school at 14, Warren has moved around quite a bit. She now has three kids of her own and looks after her niece, but says the school is very supportive and works with her schedule. "My biggest problem was with my math," said Warren. "In reading and writing I was behind a bit, but I've caught up."

Her goal is to get her GED high school equivalency and then become a teacher's assistant for children with autism, like her 11-year old daughter.

Helen Thomas has been an instructor at the Victoria Reads Society for 20 years. "For some people, they may have really good skills, but can't get into apprenticeship programs or training they need because they can't pass the test," she said, citing examples of past students who were mechanics, electricians and miners.

Many people will quit rather than admit they can't read, Thomas said. Coming to the literacy class can be difficult because they've hidden their inabilities for so long. "That's the hardest part for some people," she said. "In order to learn you have to risk failing ... but surprisingly, a lot of people learn very quickly." Once they pick up the skills, "people are usually ecstatic."

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