

From community development and partnerships to accountability: the case of the National Literacy Secretariat

by Brigid Hayes

“Accountability” has been the overarching principle of government activities and spending in the new millennium and stands in contrast to earlier notions of partnerships and community development. The principle of accountability, as articulated by government, now rests primarily upon a transactional relationship between government and the voluntary sector.

This article explores how this shift affected relationships between the federal government and the literacy community. It will also suggest possible reasons for this shift and explores the impact of this shift on efforts to create a more literate Canada.

Partnerships and community development

In 1987, the federal government became involved in the literacy issue, not as a funder or provider of direct literacy services but as an agent of support. Funding was dedicated to developing learning materials, improving co-ordination and information sharing, improving access to literacy programs and outreach, increasing public awareness of literacy issues, and research. One of the federal government’s initial efforts was the creation of the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) in 1988, which was housed within the department of the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State had a broad citizenship mandate based on ensuring that everyone in the country had the opportunity to participate fully in Canadian society. Low literacy was seen as a barrier to that full participation. The NLS had a twin set of objectives:

To increase literacy opportunities and take-up, so people could improve their literacy skills; and

To work toward making Canada’s social, economic and political life more accessible to people with weak literacy skills.

The significance of these objectives and of situating literacy within the context of full citizenship underpinned the work of the NLS for its first ten years. The first objective required full partnership between the federal government and the provinces and territories as the providers of literacy training. The NLS focused its efforts on improving the capacity of the field to deliver, through research, learning materials development, awareness-raising, and information sharing and co-ordination, while the provinces and territories focused on the delivery mechanism.

The second objective was aimed at society in general. Literacy was not viewed in isolation or as a matter of individual responsibility, but rather it was recognized that aspects of society needed to be responsive to literacy issues. This led to groundbreaking work in the area of clear language, workplace literacy (where literacy was recognized and integrated into the workplace), raising the awareness of professionals about the impact and consequences of low literacy, and an effort to make government itself more accessible to low literacy learners.

The situating of the NLS within the Secretary of State ensured a community-development focus. At that time, regional staff were called “social development officers” and had ongoing relationships with the communities they served. Community groups were consulted and involved in setting funding priorities and in the review of projects. Often staff were directly recruited from the community. At that time, the predominant funding tool was the grant, which was seen as a “gift of the Crown” and did not have the same conditions attached to it as other government funding mechanisms.

As mentioned, the federal government did not provide direct literacy programming. In order to achieve its objectives, the NLS promoted a strategy based on developing partnerships. Partnerships with all aspects of society resulted in a shared responsibility

for literacy, exerted pressure on provinces and territories to establish or improve their literacy delivery and provided the literacy community with an infrastructure for research, knowledge transfer and advocacy. The federal government had carved out a national role for itself based on exploiting the strength of its partners. A 2006 study of the NLS's business-labour partnership program noted:

At the root of these accomplishments was a strategic position held by the NLS premised on a set of core beliefs about the need for capacity building and community development.

Projects were recommended for funding based on their own merits and on their contributions to the overall strategic direction. For example, building a partnership with an employer association was deemed as important a factor as the specific outcomes of the project itself in project recommendation. Care was taken to ensure equitable regional, target group and sector distribution among the projects.

In 1993, responsibility for the NLS was transferred from the department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship (an offshoot of Secretary of State with similar goals) to the newly created department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). A problem with this transfer was that the NLS was one of only a few grant-giving programs in the new department. HRSDC had employment as its primary responsibility, since its largest component came from the former Employment and Immigration Canada. Grants and contribution programs themselves were a small aspect of the overall department's mandate.

For the next six years, the NLS attempted to retain its partnership approach and its core beliefs in capacity building and community development. Internal efforts to maintain the NLS as a grants program were ongoing, as were efforts to preserve its partnership relationships with provinces and

territories. However, HRSDC was (and is) a very large department with over 23,000 employees in 2008. Access to the minister or the deputy minister became very restricted, particularly when compared with Secretary of State, with 6,000 or so employees, where access to senior managers was regular and personal. The culture of HRSDC was more formal, based on contribution agreements and focused on tangible delivery outcomes such as the number of jobs created and the number of people employed.



DEAN PALMER

Toward a paradigm of accountability

Efforts to keep the NLS approach and partnership model distinctive within HRSDC ended in 1999 with the grants and contributions "crisis." An internal audit of 461 files examined whether or not complete paper documentation was available on each file. The audit found cases of poor documentation, which was interpreted by the auditors, the media and the public to mean that funds were missing (this became known as the "\$6-billion boondoggle"). This led to a reaction by HRSDC that

fundamentally changed the way the department dealt with grants and contributions.

The NLS had 27 files that the auditors found to be problematic. Staff tried, but failed, to convince the auditors that the checklist they were using to determine file "completeness" was designed for contribution agreements and was not appropriate for a grants program. The NLS was sanctioned for not having cash flows or formal agreements: items required of contributions but not grants. The audit looked only at the paper files. It did not review the NLS's internal computer tracking system, which would have shown complete information on each file.

It was a difficult period for public servants and for the minister, Jane Stewart. Public servants were made to feel corrupt, as if they had pocketed the money. In order to ensure that "this" never happened again, the department set out to codify

every step in the process to eliminate risk. The rules pleased the auditors. Projects were approved based on paper qualifications and performances were rated based on what was in the files. The result was 24 different forms for each project with 1,800 information fields. The NLS went from an intensive, hands-on, development approach to something that was hands-off and as objective as it could possibly be.

From 2000 until 2006, the staff of the NLS worked on two fronts. They tried to maintain the previous relationships with their literacy partners, while ensuring that the program met all of the internal HRSDC requirements (moving to contribution agreements and the use of the "Common System," which standardized processing).

At the same time, government was moving toward a one-stop service for its clients. On the surface, one-stop services made sense. Each interaction with government would be the same regardless of subject matter. In order to make this transition, harmonization was required. To be successful, this management style required checklists and limited discretion. Projects were judged on their own singular merit and not as part of a strategic package. Grants and contributions were treated in a similar fashion to service contracts, using a competitive process. For the NLS, this meant aligning its operations and its grants and contributions to those of other programs so that any project officer could deal with any project on any subject.

In 2006, the department decided to merge the NLS with two other programs into the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program (ALLES). To manage the program, in 2007 the department created the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES). The program now uses an approach of transactional relationships to provide funds based on meeting predetermined conditions through contribution agreements. This type of relationship results in a hands-off, neutral position on the part of government. The change in approach led to the abandonment of review committees, with their community membership, and the role of the project officer in developing, commenting on and supporting a project proposal through to recommendation.

While the government in general has shifted the way it deals with the voluntary sector and with its funding mechanisms, the way in which HRSDC has reacted has been more risk averse. Groups

receiving contribution funds from other departments have remarked on HRSDC's onerous and process-laden system.

Accountability in the new millennium

Although many traced the current accountability regime back to the HRSDC "crisis" or even the sponsorship scandal, other commentators found its roots in the New Public Management (NPM) methods of the late 1990s. This method saw an increase in contracting out and a change in relationships between the government and the voluntary sector. The method of providing funding determined the relationship (moving from partner to controller) and the governance structure (from government and the voluntary organization collaborating to the voluntary organization being solely responsible). The focus was on controlling abuse by relying on rules. It also meant moving away from accountability being a means for learning and continuous improvement to not tolerating failure. The results were more detailed reviews and reporting, thinking small and inside the box, delays in approval processes, a changing role of the project or program officer and the use of quantitative measurement for performance evaluation.

The fixation on measurement had both a general and a specific impact on the NLS and on the government's literacy efforts. Results-Based Accountability Frameworks emphasizing measurable outcomes were introduced. In 2001, it became clear with the NLS's first logic model that measuring the number of grants and contributions would be easier than measuring the value of the partnerships or the impact of research. Whereas before, grants and contributions were one of a series of tools available to the program (along with consultations, service contracts, etc.), they were now the main outputs. The strategic element of the program was underplayed and movement began toward making NLS officials merely the reviewers and recommenders of projects.

Even though the NLS did not support direct literacy training, the results-based framework held that the ultimate outcome of the NLS was an improvement in Canada's literacy rates as measured by International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). In part, this was due to an increased attention within government circles to measurement made possible with IALS. IALS scores were easier to understand in an environment where programs were assessed on how many jobs were created, how many sectors had Sector Councils and how many people

received employment benefits. Literacy was no longer about citizenship, empowerment, motivated training and being learner-centred. It was now about moving people to "level 3." The core beliefs of the NLS were no longer supportable and so the NLS was reduced to a funding program in line with other HRSDC programs.

The shift from a hands-on, collaborative process to one that was suspicious of the client's capacity to manage projects was complete. The department insisted on having everything in writing, even in a so-called paperless environment. These attitudes changed the atmosphere and the nature of the relationships. Today, most groups would say they are not partners of OLES. They would say they were clients.

The Blue Ribbon Panel on Grants and Contributions has affirmed the nature of the problem. Paper burden, distrust and lack of transparency are some of the characteristics of the funding relationship between government and the voluntary sector. Civil servants spend more time writing financial reports, validating all financial expenditures and ensuring that government of Canada rules are applied to non-government organizations. They no longer have the time to follow a project's progress, to provide direct support to project co-ordinators or to enhance the strategic impact of projects. Some organizations feel they spend more time with financial officers than with project officers.

An alternate approach

There has been a shift in how the federal government deals with literacy since 1989. The federal government, as a whole, has moved away from a community-development approach to clients to a more transactional relationship. The NLS was unable to retain its partnership and community-development model in light of the aftermath of the grants and contribution "crisis" and the overall dominance of the new accountability. The demise of the NLS was due, in part, to those forces that were not specifically about literacy.

Much has been justified under the banner of increased accountability. However, accountability does not necessarily need to be rigid or standardized. Programs need to be accountable in ways that are meaningful for the objectives they are trying to achieve. For example, an organization like the NLS could have been accountable for how its officers worked with voluntary organizations that

may not have had the wherewithal to develop and manage projects.

A viable accountability framework for literacy should be established in partnership with the literacy field, the provinces and territories, and the other stakeholders. An annual coming together of people would enable the government to understand what needs exist in the community and what the government should be supporting in the next one to two years. This approach could lead to a shared accountability framework. The indicators of success would be balanced between financial indicators and indicators aligned with a literacy strategy (e.g., getting certain sectors involved in literacy and seeing certain partnerships take place). Possibly, this approach would be more expensive because it would be a hands-on kind of process; however, it is better than a process that follows logic understood only by government.

Accountability is answering the question "How can I prove that what I'm doing is useful and valuable?" and must be based on a relationship that acknowledges that each party has their own set of accountabilities. It must also be based on trust. Because the NLS lacked the evaluation tools to "measure" success in a non-quantitative way, it was difficult to articulate that organization's successes. What was lost was not simply the NLS but the capacity of the federal government to play a catalyst role in creating a more literate society through developing and nurturing partnerships. ■

BRIGID HAYES worked for the National Literacy Secretariat from 1989 until 2003. She currently has a consulting practice specializing in policy and program development, strategic planning and evaluation on issues related to literacy, essential skills, and labour market and skills issues.

SOURCES:

- Good, David A. (2003). *The Politics of Public Management: The HRDC Audit of Grants and Contributions*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Human Resources and Social Development Canada (2004). *Summative Evaluation of the National Literacy Secretariat*. Ottawa. www1.servicecanada.gc.ca/eng/publications_resources/evaluation/2007/sp_ah_672_09_04e/page00.shtml. Accessed January 25, 2009.
- Partnerships in Learning (2006). *Fostering Partnership Development: An Historical Look at the National Literacy Secretariat Business and Labour Partnership Program*. Ottawa: Human Resources and Social Development Canada.
- Phillips, Susan and Karine Levasseur (2004). The Snakes and Ladders of Accountability: Contradictions Between Contracting and Collaboration for Canada's Voluntary Sector. *Canadian Public Administration* 47(4), 451.
- Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (2006). *From Red Tape to Clear Results, the Report of the Independent Blue Ribbon Panel on Grants and Contributions Programs*. Ottawa.