New Brunswick may lag behind other provinces when it comes to literacy scores, but it is at the forefront of developing new methods to identify and correct reading problems at an early age.

One of those tools, Early Years Evaluation, or EYE, developed by researchers at the University of New Brunswick, is being used in classrooms throughout Canada to help identify children who are likely to experience reading difficulties as they move through the school system.

For Doug Willms, director of the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy at UNB, Early Years Evaluation is a source of pride and a symbol of what New Brunswickers can do when faced with a problem many consider insurmountable.

"New Brunswick has been at the forefront of using EYE," said Willms, who oversaw development of the evaluation tool at the institute.

"We now assess all children in the province at age four and five on a set of skills that we know are related to whether they will be successful readers by the end of Grade 3. ...?We're kind of proud of it - it's a made-in-New-Brunswick tool."

Other provinces using the evaluation method include Alberta, Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island.

Willms, an expert on literacy and child development, said identifying problem readers at an early age is key to breaking the cycle of low literacy levels in New Brunswick and elsewhere.

"That period from kindergarten to Grade 3, which you can call the learning-to-read period, that is absolutely fundamental," he said.

"Making that transition from learning to read to reading to learn is absolutely critical. If students are not able to read fluently and with good understanding by the end of Grade 3, 90 per cent of them will struggle through to high school, and then they are very prone to dropping out. It is one of the biggest predictors of dropping out."

Willms said there's a lot at stake in attacking literacy problems in the young, not only for the province and its efforts to bridge a yawning skills gap but also for the children themselves and their future happiness.

It's estimated that 20 to 30 per cent of children in Grade 2 in New Brunswick need help with their reading. If they are not identified and given extra assistance, they face a long road of deteriorating self-confidence and academic failure.
"One can imagine the psychological toll on a child who goes to school each day and finds the reading material more difficult than the day before and the workload ever increasing," Willms said.

"We also know that children who have low skills and find the material especially challenging have more anxiety problems during the middle school years and more depression in high school. So it really is a cumulative effect."

Willms applauds the efforts of Elementary Literacy Inc., a non-profit, private-sector-led initiative, to find volunteer tutors who will go into New Brunswick elementary schools and focus on helping Grade 2 children boost their reading abilities.

The organization is running advertisements in newspapers across the province to "Fill a prince's (or princess's) shoes" and volunteer for the tutoring program. Volunteers who participate commit to working with a student for one hour, twice a week, for 10 weeks outside regular classroom hours.

Elementary Literacy - another example of a leading New Brunswick method to improve literacy - now is involved in about 45 schools with its Elementary Literacy Friends (ELF) program. It hopes to be in all of the province's elementary schools by 2017.

Experts say socio-economic and generational factors are usually at work in shaping literacy problems in children.

Vulnerable kids often come from homes where there are no books and where the parents, who may have dropped out of school early to work, have little interest in developing strong literacy skills in their children.

Willms said in many cases, these at-risk children are clustered in the same area and attend the same schools.

"We need some whole-school interventions that bring new approaches to teaching and learning," he said.

Willms said the EYE tool has revealed that about half of at-risk students in New Brunswick are clustered in just 20 per cent of the schools.

He said the reason more vulnerable students are concentrated in fewer schools reflects the socio-economic nature of the problem.

On average, the levels of income and education of families in rural communities are lower than those of families living in large cities, Willms said. Also, within all major Canadian cities there are areas with a high percentage of families living in poverty.

"Educational policies can exacerbate the problem," he said.

"For example, the funding of magnet schools, charter schools, and schools with language immersion programs, programs for gifted students, and schools for students with special needs tends to increase the extent of separation."

He said a recent public engagement initiative on learning, led by former Fredericton MP Andy Scott, provided overwhelming evidence that New Brunswickers believe the health and well-being of children needs to be the
central element of social policy.

"Thus, a strategy that allocates disproportionately more funding to schools serving students in poor areas is likely to be met with public support."

Willms also wants to see a systematic approach to improving the professional development of teachers to attack literacy issues.

"We need to really equip them with an understanding of the science of literacy instruction and increase their repertoire of teaching skills," he said.

"The amount of training they get in pre-service training doesn't really do it."

Heather Richmond, a professor in the education department at St. Thomas University, said her department already is moving to address the issue of improving teachers' skills to address literacy.

"We just designed a new course called Early Years Education, Contemporary Theory and Practice, and we will be offering it this spring for the first time," Richmond said.

"It's to introduce beginning teachers to thinking about educational practice with young children from pre-school through the early years of school. We're hoping it will add value to our education degree and prepare our teachers to meet these challenges right away. ...?If we want children to grow to their potential, we need to provide our young teachers with good theory."

School assessment results for 2012 show that the overall trend in New Brunswick is for improving reading performance in Grade 2 students.

"I think we are on the right road and I know the early literacy scores in our schools are improving," Richmond said.

"I do think more education for teachers and pre-school people is always a good thing."

Roger Doucet, a former deputy minister of education on the francophone side, said there's no question the overall trend for literacy in the schools is improving.

"The trend is upward for sure," he said in an interview. "I think it's because of the focus. In the last few years, we have really started zooming in, identifying the kids at risk and developing the right techniques for improving literacy."

Willms said he worries about long-term funding for education.

He said that while he knows how critical literacy is for economic development - and he believes there is wide acceptance of that principle - nevertheless governments are hampered by short-term thinking based on election cycles.

"You may not see the benefits of literacy investments for 10 or 15 years," Willms said. "Governments have to take a long-term view."

He said that in most provinces, education spending is being squeezed by health-care funding.

As a result, Willms said provincial governments should fix spending targets for education based on the Gross Domestic Product.
"The tension between health and education spending in provincial budgets will only get worse over the next 10 or 20 years as the baby boom makes its way into retirement," he said.

"I would like to see our government specify spending targets for education that are linked to the province's GDP. ...?There should be a pretty well-defined limit that says, 'We are not going to go below this percentage of GDP.' Otherwise, we will see a deterioration of education funding as we go forward."

Willms and other analysts are aware that, in some ways, improving literacy skills in the province is a bit of a double-edged sword.

David Campbell, an economic consultant and co-chairman of NB 2026, a forum of influential citizens that is developing a learning agenda for the province, said the more educated New Brunswickers are, the more likely they will leave the province.

"It's a difficult part of the equation because the more focus you put on education, theoretically you might just accelerate migration. So if you really want people to stay, you should be happy with illiteracy," Campbell said.

"It's a silly conclusion, but it shows that we have to have a link between the desire to educate the population and changing the nature of our workforce."

Willms said he is disturbed every time he sees job fairs set up at New Brunswick universities, encouraging the best and the brightest students to move away.

He said youth unemployment is a key social issue that the New Brunswick government must address.

"It breaks my heart when I see employers coming in from other provinces to hold job fairs at our universities and they hand-pick our best graduates," Willms said.

"We need a comprehensive strategy to keep youth in the province, and it will probably require some sort of incentive for employers to hire new graduates."

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