



Constellation Model in  
Support of a Provincial  
Strategy for Family Literacy:  
Building a Partnership Framework

# Acknowledgements

The purpose of this project was to examine some models of family literacy programming that fully integrated adult and children's literacy development to help us better understand what essential elements are important to fully support intergenerational literacy practice.

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- Penny Smith-Jensen
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We hope this research and the recommended model for building a family literacy provincial framework provides the impetus and template for moving family literacy forward in Ontario.

## **Lesley Brown**

*Executive Director, Ontario Literacy Coalition*

## The Development Team

### Researcher/Writer:

Melanie Redman

### Project Committee:

Joanne Davis  
Leah Morris  
Deborah Nesbitt-Munroe

### Project Advisory (AFLO):

Lesley Brown  
Deborah Nesbitt-Munroe  
Kim Oastler  
Marilyn Perkovich-Farand  
Lorri Sauvé  
Penny Smith-Jensen

### Editor:

Andrew Daley

### Design and Layout:

Tailor Communications Design  
www.tailordesign.com

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### For ordering information, please contact:

Ontario Literacy Coalition  
65 Wellesley Street East, Suite 503  
Toronto, Ontario M4Y 1G7  
Tel: (416) 963-5787  
Fax: (416) 963-8102  
Email: [olc@on.literacy.ca](mailto:olc@on.literacy.ca)  
Website: [www.on.literacy.ca](http://www.on.literacy.ca)

For more information on family literacy visit us at **[www.on.literacy.ca](http://www.on.literacy.ca)**.

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# Introduction

The Ontario Literacy Coalition took two significant steps in recent years to define needs and create opportunities for working together in support of a provincial strategy for family literacy. The first step was convening the Action for Family Literacy Ontario (AFLO) working group. AFLO is a provincial working group committed to developing a plan to move family literacy forward in Ontario. The activities of the group to date include important family literacy research, knowledge dissemination and advocacy.

Building on the work of the Ontario Literacy Coalition and AFLO, the next step was to convene a group of Ontario ministries with a stake in family literacy in the spring of 2008. The purpose of the meeting was to build a shared understanding of the work of each of the ministries in relation to literacy and/or family literacy, and to take a closer look at a handful of successful models of integrated family literacy programming in Toronto, Hamilton and Kingston. The participants, led by the Ontario Literacy Coalition, felt that a provincial strategy in support of family literacy is required. The group agreed to move forward in forming a committee to explore the possibilities.

This document provides a model for convening a provincial strategy in support of family literacy. It also offers a vision for what a partnership framework—one that can be used as a model in provinces across Canada—can look like. Family literacy programs are emergent and creative. A partnership framework cannot exist as a “top down” model led by ministries and funders. It is, rather, a joint effort to affect policy and continue to innovate on existing and future programming.

Before we proceed with the “nuts and bolts” of the model, let’s briefly consider the difference between “partnership” and “collaboration,” and how we might shift our thinking in favour of collaboration to better serve our vision.

**Q: What is the difference between “partnership” and “collaboration?”**

**A:** According to Wikipedia, a partnership is a “nominate contract between individuals who, in a spirit of cooperation, agree to carry on an enterprise; contribute to it by combining property, knowledge or activities; and share its profit.” Wikipedia also offers that a collaboration is “a recursive process where two or more people work together toward an intersection of common goals—for example, an intellectual endeavor that is creative in nature—by sharing knowledge, learning and building consensus. Collaboration does not require leadership and can sometimes bring better results through decentralization and egalitarianism. In particular, teams that work collaboratively can obtain greater resources, recognition and reward when facing competition for finite resources.”

**Q: Why does this matter in the context of our work in building a provincial strategy for family literacy?**

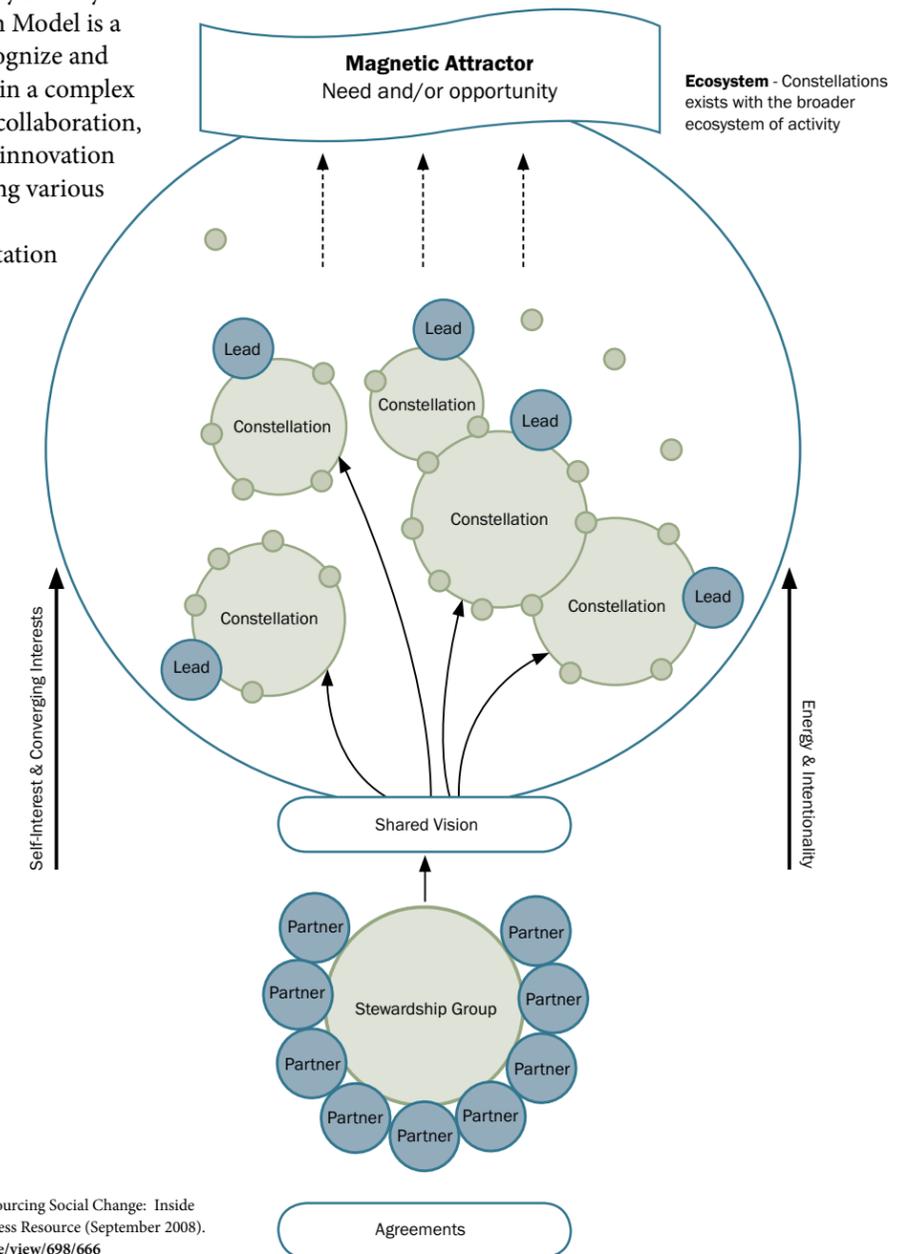
**A:** As we continue to see through close examination of successful models of family literacy programming, family literacy is a vision for how we can use tools and programming to contribute to life-long learning, health and well-being of the whole family. Practitioners across the province—and the world, for that matter—implement these ideas in a variety of ways. The range of stakeholders is extremely diverse. Collaboration allows for this range of input and commitment over time. Collaboration does not place the needs or interests of any one group above the other. The process of collaborating does not demand that the outcome be “profit,” as with the partnership model. Rather, over time it builds consensus and shared understanding toward common goal(s) or a vision for family literacy in Ontario—a vision to which everyone can contribute.

For the purpose of this document, the term “partnership” is removed in favour of “collaboration.”

# Model for Collaboration: The Constellation Model

Given the range of stakeholders and the on-going emergence of new programs and initiatives in support of family literacy, a model for governance and collaboration is necessary. Tonya Surman of the Centre for Social Innovation in Toronto developed the “Constellation Model” as a way to organize a group of interested parties to meet a need without having to create a new organization to “hold” the issue<sup>1</sup>. In our case the need is to facilitate and support a provincial strategy for family literacy in Ontario. The Constellation Model is a tool to help stakeholders recognize and become conscious designers in a complex ecosystem of organizational collaboration, while encouraging on-going innovation in programs and policy among various engaged stakeholders.

Below is a visual representation of the Constellation Model. This document breaks down the model piece by piece, and explores how it can be applied to building a lasting collaborative framework for family literacy in Ontario.



<sup>1</sup> Surman, Tonya and Mark Surman. “Open Sourcing Social Change: Inside the Constellation Model.” Open Source Business Resource (September 2008). <http://www.osbr.ca/ojs/index.php/osbr/article/view/698/666>

# Applying the Constellation Model

How can we apply this model to the important work of practitioners, policy makers and conveners of family literacy programming in Ontario? Below are the steps required to build a Constellation Model to support programming and strategy beneath the umbrella of family literacy, which extends across ministerial and sector boundaries. This model not only acknowledges the range of committed stakeholders and programs, it provides space for continued innovation in the area of family literacy. It also offers a way for federal stakeholders and funders to acknowledge the important work being done in family literacy in Ontario and share the innovations across provincial boundaries.

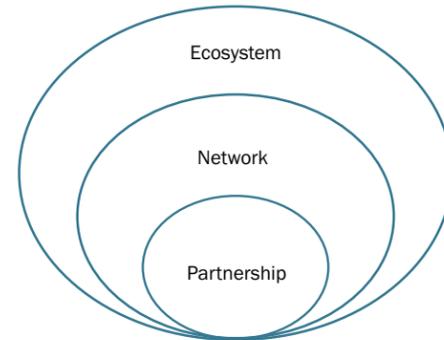
1. **Magnetic Attractor:** The Ontario Literacy Coalition and key stakeholders recognize the need and opportunity for working together to achieve individual and shared outcomes for family literacy. This opportunity is described as a “magnetic attractor.” The magnetic attractor defines the scope of the work of the collaborative partners in the Constellation Model.



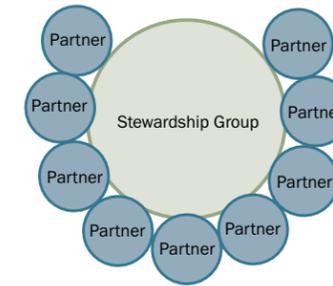
2. **Family Literacy Ecosystem:** The “ecosystem” is the sphere of activity in which the collaboration operates. It includes all the stakeholders and perspectives that affect the realm of family literacy. The ecosystem is not limited to just the partners or members of the collaboration. The family literacy ecosystem includes the breadth and range of family literacy research and programs around the globe. It also includes other adult literacy and child literacy programs and initiatives. The ecosystem acknowledges and respects the decades of work of stakeholders,

distant and near, to set the stage for a provincial strategy in support of family literacy.

A useful activity at this stage is “network mapping” to determine what programs and initiatives are currently underway and who has a stake in family literacy. The Ontario Literacy Coalition has initiated a huge part of this work by mapping the current work of provincial ministries as it relates to family literacy and inviting those stakeholders to the table to continue to share and imagine a collaboration in support of a provincial family literacy strategy.



3. **Stewardship Group:** Now that we have convened a group of provincial ministries and organizations that are interested in moving the family literacy agenda forward, we must name a “stewardship” group composed of representatives from each of the partnering organizations. In the case of the network or ecosystem, members of the stewardship group play the role of “stewards” for the ecosystem by providing a clear vision and strategic plan to guide the work of the collaboration. At the Ontario cross-ministerial meeting in support of family literacy convened by the Ontario Literacy Coalition in May of 2008, stakeholders agreed to move forward with forming a committee to consider the feasibility and logistics around building a provincial strategy for family literacy. This group can act as the stewardship group for the Constellation Model.



The stewardship group is responsible for the management of the core agreements (described below), and for ensuring the overall health of the collaboration and constellations. It provides the management oversight of the projects and constellations. The stewardship group is responsible for:

- Assessing the current assets, successes, gaps and needs in the family literacy ecosystem (Much of this information and research is readily available through the hard work of the Ontario Literacy Coalition, AFLO, and like-minded organizations).
  - Inviting new partners to be a part of the collaboration.
  - Scoping the nature of how and why the group should work together.
4. **Vision and Planning:** As the nature of the magnetic attractor is further defined—in this case the cross-provincial strategy in support of family literacy—the group will need to develop a clear set of assumptions, vision and loose plan:
    - **Assumptions:** Include a shared understanding of the assumptions related to the magnetic attractors. This could take the form of a “guiding principles” document that articulates a shared understanding of the need or opportunity.
    - **Vision:** The group must articulate a shared vision for the collaboration. This could be a re-articulation of the magnetic attractor, which is a provincial strategy in support of family literacy, or it can be a more grand statement of where the group imagines the status of family literacy programming in Ontario in ten years.
    - **Plan:** The plan for the collaboration should set out a broad framework for the work together. The plan must build on the

assets, core competencies and interests of the partners. It must be specific enough to mobilize action and to be able to measure success, but still loose enough to allow ideas, programs and initiatives to emerge organically.

5. **Agreements and Secretariat:** At this stage in developing the Constellation Model for family literacy in Ontario, foundational agreements and a formal secretariat role become key. The collaboration agreement articulates the way that the partners work together and describes the roles and responsibilities of the various players.

There are two models possible for housing the formal secretariat and collaboration director. One vision finds the Ontario Literacy Coalition as an official part of the stewardship group, while also functioning as the formal secretariat and the collaboration director. The second model finds the Ontario Literacy Coalition convening the stewardship group and acting as the formal secretariat and collaboration director, but not taking an official part of the stewardship group.

In some ways this model is essential for the Ontario Literacy Coalition to maintain perspective and impartiality. The responsibilities of the secretariat and the collaboration director, who resides within the secretariat, include: facilitation, conflict mediation, project development, strategy, partnership development, fundraising (as appropriate), incubation and support of the constellations. The secretariat is responsible for facilitating all communication for the collaboration. The Ontario Literacy Coalition is uniquely qualified and positioned to act in this capacity.

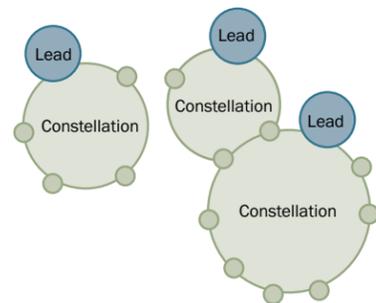
6. **Emerging Constellations:** Now that systems of accountability and coordination are in place, an “enabling” environment, or structure, is required to allow activities and initiatives to emerge within the larger framework of the shared vision. These “constellations” are self-organizing action teams that operate in cooperation with one another. They are clusters of activity in which a subset of partners voluntarily participate. Constellations can be formal projects, occasional and opportunistic initiatives, or committees that guide particular

aspects of the work of the larger collaboration. Constellations must advance the interests of the collaboration and must be consistent with the vision and plan of the group.

Within each constellation, one partner takes a leadership role and acts as the fiscal and legal authority on this activity. The lead is determined on a case-by-case basis, as determined by the partner's interests, competencies and fit with potential funders.

When constellations emerge, it is the responsibility of the partnership director, in this case the Ontario Literacy Coalition, to incubate the initiative. The group works together to define their own terms of reference. Each constellation must decide which partner should play the leadership role and who has the organizational capacity to be the financial lead of the initiative. It is important to match roles and responsibilities with the particular assets of each group. As with the larger collaboration framework, it is important to develop a written agreement for how the particular constellation will work together. The Ontario Literacy Coalition holds these agreements and regularly updates them as needed.

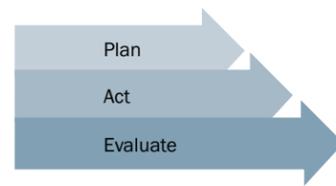
If appropriate, the constellations will work with the Ontario Literacy Coalition to seek the resources necessary to support their work, such as fundraising. Once the resources are secured, the work of the constellation begins. This process of emergence and support can occur repeatedly, so long as the work remains consistent with and supportive of the larger vision of the partnership.



**7. Evaluation and Assessment:** Once there are several constellations operating with initiatives or programs that support the vision of the partnership, the stewardship group must assess the gaps and evaluate the progress of the

collaboration. The group takes this information and uses it to continually evolve the strategy and work of the collaborative partnership.

There are a handful of evaluation frameworks and evaluative lenses that support the type of emergence and innovation we are describing with the Constellation Model. One example, from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, is “Developmental Evaluation.” This is an emergent framework used by a handful of organizations across Canada who are interested in applying learning to continuous innovation. The process looks something like this:



**8. Additional Legal and Administrative Considerations:** Now that we see how the Constellation Model can be applied to our vision for family literacy in Ontario, there are a handful of additional considerations.

- The collaboration should not legally incorporate in any way. This helps avoid uneven power dynamics within the group. A collaboration exists to serve its members and to avoid unnecessary competition. As there is no legal entity, fiscal and legal responsibility move to each member organization on a project-by-project basis. This means that the project lead has the authority to make legal and fiscal decisions. The conflict resolution process, as outlined by the stewardship group and “held” by the secretariat, should clearly establish guidelines to protect the members of the constellation.
- Because constellations drive the model, leadership and resources for them are constantly coming from different places and going to different organizations. This “in motion” money and power management ensures that the active partners are compensated for their initiative. It is the role of the secretariat, the Ontario Literacy Coalition, to balance the flow of leadership and money between participating organizations.

- Because the collaboration does not legally exist, and because resources are generally tied to projects, amassing “core” funding to serve the collaboration is a challenge. It is recommended that a portion of the administration fees fundraised for particular projects emerging out of the constellations are allocated back to the collaboration, and particularly the Secretariat (in this case the Ontario Literacy Coalition).

## Potential Constellations

In this section, we will imagine some constellations based on current synergies between various family literacy stakeholders. Again, the Constellation Model allows endless numbers of projects and initiatives to emerge, each feeding the larger vision of an Ontario-wide strategy in support of family literacy.

### Essential Skills and Family Literacy

The Ontario Literacy Coalition's recent look at successful, integrated models of family literacy in Ontario highlights Kingston Literacy's “Upgrading for Parents of Preschoolers” program. A key feature of this program is the integration of Essential Skills into the curriculum. Imagine a constellation of the collaboration that focuses on formalizing the insertion of Essential Skills training into family literacy programming throughout Ontario. Below is an image of what the constellation could look like. Notice there is a role for the practitioner (Kingston Literacy) as the lead of the constellation.

Ministries with a natural stake in combining Essential Skills and family literacy join the constellation either as funding partners or as advisory partners. The Ontario Literacy Coalition plays the role of the project “incubator” by offering capacity-building support and guidance. The Ontario Literacy Coalition, as the formal secretariat/project director of the larger collaboration, houses the learning and outcomes of the project and feeds it back to the larger family literacy ecosystem. The stewardship group also ensures that the work of the constellation remains consistent with the larger vision of the collaboration. The federal Office of Literacy and Essential Skills plays a critical role as either a funding partner or the conduit for distributing the constellation's

knowledge and products across provincial boundaries, or both.

### Constellation Example



### Financial Literacy and Family Literacy

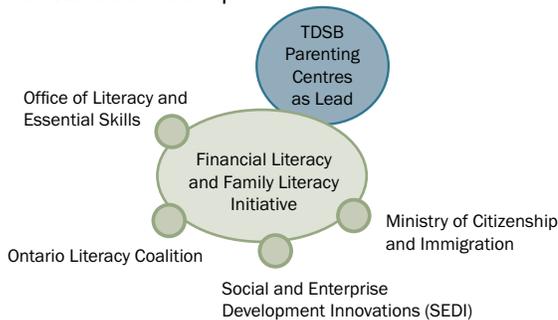
Models of family literacy throughout Ontario incorporate financial literacy as a component of family literacy curriculum. A 2002 discussion paper called “Towards a National Policy/ Program on Financial Literacy,” put forth by Social and Enterprise Development Innovations (SEDI), stated: “It is in the economic and social interests of governments and citizens to ensure that all Canadians have a basic level of financial literacy.”

As a result of SEDI's persistence and vision, the 2006 federal budget allocated \$3 million for financial literacy programming to be implemented by the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada. Then in 2008, the federal government approved the creation of Tax-Free Savings Accounts as an option for Canadians.

Let's now imagine a constellation that supports the development of a range of optional financial literacy materials in dozens of languages for family literacy programs. The Toronto District School Board's Parenting Centres are an excellent place to both develop and test the materials. The Parenting Centres are located in more than 50 schools across

the Greater Toronto Area and welcome an extremely diverse range of families from all socio-economic backgrounds. The federal Office of Learning and Essential Skills can disseminate these important materials across provincial boundaries. Any of the ministries can act as either a funding partner or an advisory partner. The Ontario Literacy Coalition again plays the role of the secretariat. Below is a visual that imagines this constellation feeding into the larger vision of an Ontario-wide strategy in support of family literacy.

#### Constellation Example



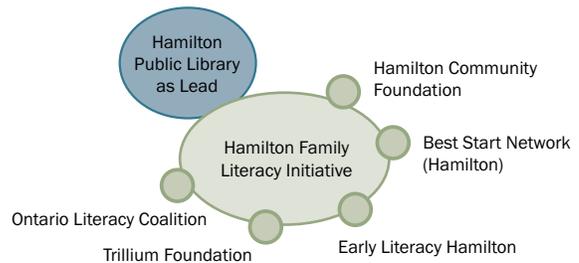
#### Keeping it Local: Municipal Engagement

We are frequently reminded, as family literacy practitioners, researchers and strategists, that municipal initiatives often have more flexibility and relevance for their particular community. The innovation and learning that takes place at the community level can drive a provincial strategy in support of family literacy. Hamilton has a rich history as innovators of family literacy programming. Beginning in 1998, a coalition of practitioners and community groups known as the Family Literacy Network came together to promote early literacy in the city. After many successful programs and initiatives, the Family Literacy Network merged with the Literacy Advisory Committee in 2003 to form Early Literacy Hamilton. Early Literacy Hamilton is a coalition of over 35 members representing four school boards, teaching both French and English, that seeks to improve the literacy levels of all children in the community. Soon, the coalition will become a sub-committee of the local Best Start Network, with the intention of moving the Best Start vision forward. In a community like Hamilton, with its rich history of collaboration around literacy and family literacy initiatives, it's not hard to imagine a

constellation emerging that infuses schools and community programs with family literacy materials.

For example, the Multicultural Early Learning Development program (MELD), based in the Hamilton Public Library, has had great success over the last five years in creating and distributing dual-language family literacy workbooks to hundreds of families. Simultaneously, it has also been building bridges between newcomers to the community and the wealth of resources and services available at the public libraries. Much like the constellations above, Ontario Literacy Coalition and the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills could play the role of distributing the resources and learning from Hamilton's community-based initiatives. At the community level, there are endless possibilities for unique, innovative constellations to emerge that will feed the larger vision of a provincial strategy in support of family literacy.

#### Constellation Example



Again, these are just a handful of possibilities for constellations that can support the larger vision of a provincial strategy in support of family literacy. The role of the stewardship group, and the Ontario Literacy Coalition as the formal secretariat, should first be to map all of the synergies within the group of partners and then imagine constellations that contribute to the vision of the group. Many of the constellations may already be in existence and can be shepherded into the collaboration.

The Ontario Literacy Coalition and its committed partners are in a unique position to implement the Constellation Model and share their knowledge across sector and provincial boundaries. The Office of Literacy and Essential Skills can play a key role in helping other provinces implement this model in ways that serve their unique interests, needs and mandates.