

# **Resolution to Increase Digital Literacy**

## **Opening Statement**

Access to information, education, resources, and services is a human right. Essential components of life are increasingly moving online. This makes access to reliable technology and internet services crucial. However, this remains difficult or impossible for too many members of our society, resulting in their rights as citizens effectively being denied as, for example, they are unable to access disability benefits, income assistance, etc. As such, there is an urgent need to address:

- Affordability and access to a secure Internet connection for all;
- Equitable access to working devices through which to access the internet; and
- Ongoing access to digital literacy skills, so that residents can engage online in a critical, informed, safe, and effective manner.

There is a necessity for collaboration on the part of government ministries at different levels in partnership with community groups to address all three components in the spirit of digital equity and justice as human rights issues.

## **Background**

Digital literacy is the knowledge and ability of individuals to access, evaluate, understand, manage, and create information online<sup>1</sup>, as well as to communicate with others through digital technologies<sup>2</sup>. Digital literacy includes the skills to think critically about the uses of technology in society, and adapt to changes brought about by such technologies in safe and appropriate ways<sup>3</sup>. Digital literacy allows people to use technology to solve problems, interact with technology in creative and innovative ways, and participate in a digitally inclusive environment. Thus, digital literacy as conceptualized by the writers of this resolution, explicitly contains all aspects of digital citizenship, i.e. digital access, equity, inclusion, safety, and justice.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has sharply illustrated the extent and consequences of digital exclusion experienced by many Burnaby citizens. Residents are excluded from vital access to employment, housing, health, and recreation, because this information has moved online<sup>4</sup>. Those who could not access online telecommunication tools lost access to literacy and language education. COVID-19 related information primarily circulated online and residents

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<sup>1</sup> Government of British Columbia. "BC's Digital Literacy Framework." <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/teach/resources-for-teachers/digital-literacy>.

<sup>2</sup> Law, Nancy, David Woo, Jimmy de la Torre, and Gary Wong (UNESCO Institute for Statistics). 2018. "A Global Framework of Reference on Digital Literacy Skills for Indicator 4.4.2." University of Hong Kong: Centre for Information Technology in Education (CITE). [ip51-global-framework-reference-digital-literacy-skills-2018-en.pdf](https://www.cite.edu.hk/ip51-global-framework-reference-digital-literacy-skills-2018-en.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> ABC Life Literacy Canada. 2021. "Digital Literacy." <https://abclifeliteracy.ca/digital-literacy/>.

<sup>4</sup> Kupfer, Matthew (CBC News). 2016. "CRTC Declares Broadband Internet Access a Basic Service." Last modified December 22, 2016. <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/archive/2016/2016-496.htm>.

were either excluded from this information or pushed into filter bubbles where they were exposed to misinformation and disinformation. The housing crisis intersects with digital exclusion in that many residents must trade internet access for food and higher rents. Low-rent housing continues to be built without attention to internet access, and many residents in subsidized housing do not have access to the internet in their residences.

It was made very clear during the pandemic that public Wi-Fi and secure Wi-Fi in libraries are vital, but they cannot substitute secure, high-speed access in people's homes<sup>5</sup>. Adults applying for jobs cannot wait for libraries to open to submit their resume in a time sensitive job or housing search; school children and adults should not need to leave their homes to complete homework while others are able to stay in the comfort of homes; nor can unsecured Wi-Fi at fast food restaurants become the default public access sites for digitally excluded citizens when libraries are closed.

Frontline health, education, and service organizations swung into action to address these digital exclusions. These organizations have harnessed working cell phones and laptops, opened their premises to public Wi-Fi, and provided some citizens with in-person and online tutoring in digital literacy skills. These efforts are ongoing but they are unsustainable, and cannot on their own tackle the problem of the privatization and unregulated nature of Internet fees, and to equitable and sustainable access to devices and to literacy skills that are central to a just digital ecosystem<sup>6</sup>.

The conceptualization of a *digital ecosystem* situates digital literacy not as the unique responsibility of the individual, but in relation to the rights and responsibilities of governments, agencies, and other service providers to create the conditions whereby all citizens have access to essential services and information that are now almost exclusively available on the internet<sup>7</sup>. Burnaby should strive towards collective responsibility for the digital ecosystem.

This approach to digital literacy will support citizens to use the internet for access to employment, housing, health, and recreation, and doing so in a safe manner, protecting one's privacy and personal data, developing critical information literacy that orients adults to misinformation, disinformation, and security online<sup>8</sup>.

It is noteworthy that BC has developed a framework for digital literacy for K-12 education, but there is no such framework or commitment to digital literacy education for adults. Nevertheless, nonprofit organizations and libraries have stepped into this vacuum to create curricula and programs, although these efforts are dependent upon short-term inadequate funding, are not

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<sup>5</sup> Smythe, Suzanne. 2020. "Digital Equity and Community Solidarity During and After COVID-19: Policy Note." Last modified on April 21, 2020. <https://www.policynote.ca/digital-equity/>.

<sup>6</sup> Pelan, Dionne, and Suzanne Smythe. 2019. "Digital Literacy and Digital Justice." Last modified March 6, 2019. <https://brookfieldinstitute.ca/digital-literacy-and-digital-justice/>.

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO. 2020. "UNESCO Reaffirms Need for Internet Universality, Amidst Intensified Threats." Last modified July 17, 2020. <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-reaffirms-need-internet-universality-amid-intensified-threats>.

<sup>8</sup> Media Awareness Network. 2010. "Digital Literacy in Canada: From Inclusion to Transformation." Media Smarts: Canada's Centre for Digital and Media Literacy. Last modified July 7, 2010. <https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/pdfs/publication-report/full/digitalliteracypaper.pdf>.

evenly distributed across all communities, and are not widely accessible to citizens who speak languages other than English.

For envisioning the needs of empowered digital citizens, a modified version of the so-called *three-legged stool of digital inclusion*<sup>9</sup> is applicable:

1. Access: Affordable, high quality and secure internet access and working devices.
2. Useability: Appropriate design, privacy rights, and being free from surveillance.
3. Digital Literacy: Skills and knowledge to interact online.

All three elements are integral to a just digital ecosystem, and a shift in current approaches and policies with respect to adult literacy education is required<sup>10</sup>:

- Digital literacy is contingent upon an affordable Internet, access to working devices, and to appropriate designs attuned to the needs of different citizens as they exercise their rights online;
- “One-off” programs and pilots are not sufficient to protect and enhance human and citizen rights in digital environments. Given continuous change in digital environments, digital literacy education must be ongoing;
- Digital literacy is tied into other forms of inequality, and integral to all adult education work in Burnaby, including CALP, ESL, LINC, employment programs, etc.

Currently, access to digital literacy programs are subject to short-term funding and not part of a cohesive long-term digital strategy. A coherent, collaborative, and intentional digital literacy equity policy is necessary. This is the vision and goal of the *Resolution to Increase Digital Literacy*. We hope that in adopting this resolution actors can work together to create an intentional, cohesive, and fully funded plan for a digital ecosystem in which Burnaby residents can exercise their citizenship and human rights.

## Recommendations

1. Develop an adult and community digital literacy strategy for Burnaby.
2. Expand programs that support Burnaby residents in the acquisition of digital literacy skills and embed digital literacy in the everyday work and programs of adult education.
3. Increase access to no-cost and low-cost devices for Burnaby residents through:
  - lending programs like Burnaby Public Library’s lendable technology collection
  - partnership with BC Technology for Learning to increase access to low-cost devices
  - hold tech donation days to increase the supply of low-cost devices
4. Increase provision of affordable internet in homes and communities.

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<sup>9</sup> Umayam, Nicole (National Digital Inclusion Alliance). 2018. "Thoughts on Digital Inclusion One Year Later." Last modified February 13, 2018. <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/blog/2018/02/13/thoughts-on-digital-inclusion-one-year-later/>

<sup>10</sup> Huynh, Annalise, and Malli Nisa. 2018. “Levelling Up: The Quest for Digital Literacy.” Last modified June 19, 2018. <https://brookfieldinstitute.ca/levelling-up/>.

## **Advocacy Action Plan**

- BIAC engages the City of Burnaby in conversations about affordable internet in homes and communities in partnership with provincial and federal governments.
- BIAC advocates that new housing builds for low-income citizens are wired for broadband internet, and that BC Housing installs broadband internet in their housing programs.
- BIAC organizations join with anti-poverty groups to advocate for social assistance rates to include internet fees as a basic and essential expense.
- BIAC advocates with the mayor's office to designate and proclaim a Burnaby Tech Donation Day to create awareness in community members.
- BIAC member agencies work together to:
  - seek funding and apply for grants to create and re-fund programs for one-on-one tutoring and mentoring.
  - create a broad-reaching network of digital literacy training and professional development opportunities for staff.
  - work with Literacy Now to identify digital literacy programs and gaps in Burnaby.
  - facilitate train-the-trainer courses in digital literacy approaches, so that organizations can embed digital literacy into their existing education work.
  - include computer hardware, materials, and learning resources for clients in funding proposals.
  - partner with organizations such as BC Technology for Learning to place low-cost devices in the hands of residents.

## **Resolution**

Whereas digital literacy is a fundamental right, intimately connected to internationally-recognized human rights, and central to the rights of Burnaby residents;

Whereas British Columbia has Digital Literacy Framework for grades K-12, but none for adult learners;

Whereas the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission has declared the internet a basic service and the right to access is acknowledged by the federal government;

Be it resolved that Burnaby Inter-Agency Council endorses the Resolution to Increase Digital Literacy.

Be it further resolved that Literacy Now Burnaby and its partner organizations actively advocate for and raise the profile of digital literacy access, equity, inclusion, safety, and justice in Burnaby.

## **Terms**

Submitted by Lukas Park, Literacy Now

Submitted on Nov 1, 2021

Reviewed on Nov 4, 2021

Distributed on Nov 9, 2021

Considered on Dec 9, 2021

Expires on Dec 9, 2024

■ Approved for consideration

■ Endorsed