# **Country Report For Canada**

**International Council on English Braille**

**7th General Assembly**

**October 2020**

## Introduction

In my report to the 6th General Assembly in Baltimore I wrote that I looked forward to all that we would achieve in the next four years. My hope was that we would increase awareness of the value of braille and improve access to braille literacy. Although we still have a long way to go we have indeed accomplished much.

## Canada’s Braille Authority Turns 30 This Year!

In 1990 the Canadian Braille Authority (now Braille Literacy Canada) came into being. Although the party we had planned at our Annual General Meeting in Toronto had to be cancelled because of COVID-19 we are finding other ways to celebrate. A special issue of our newsletter, a timeline and virtual Presidents’ Panel are just some of the ways that we plan to honour the fabulous work of this organization over the last 30 years.

## Highlights From Braille Literacy Canada

Since the 6th General Assembly in 2016 Braille Literacy Canada (BLC) has implemented the following:

* A UEB listserv where subscribers can post questions related to the code.
* A bi-monthly e-newsletter containing articles on braille-related topics.
* Bi-monthly teleconferences on topics such as refreshable braille technology, UEB technical material and access to braille books.
* Online surveys to get more input from members and non-members.
* A YouTube channel to promote braille and provide resources to our stakeholders.
* A program to make French print/braille books available to Francophones across Canada.

## French Translation of the UEB Rule Book Completed

Late in 2016 we finalized the French translation of the UEB rule book. Unfortunately, the organization that had initially offered to create the BRF file is not currently in a position to do so. That portion of the project will remain on hold until we can find a viable solution. We have already received several requests for the PDF version of this document.

## Legislation

Over the past several years the federal government has worked to develop national disability rights legislation. In 2017 BLC held a consultation with members and prepared a submission that emphasized the importance of braille as well as the rights of braille users. The Accessible Canada Act, which is Canada’s first national accessibility legislation, received royal assent on June 21st, 2019.

## Teaching and Learning Committee

In the past this committee (chaired by Dr. Cay Holbrook) conducted numerous research projects related to braille instruction, such as the ABC Braille Study. Now under the leadership of Betty Nobel and Natalie Martiniello, the committee is looking at possible research projects, some of which are related to UEB technical material. In April of this year the committee hosted an online workshop on teaching braille to English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. After the workshop the committee put together a list of relevant resources, available upon request by emailing info@blc-lbc.ca.

## The Braille Zoomers

The description of this initiative was also included in the June 2020 issue of the ICEB newsletter.

In April of this year BLC launched the Braille Zoomers group, a monthly virtual get-together for adult and older adult braille learners.

Each virtual get-together is an informal opportunity to share resources, support and ideas for adult braille learners. While there is a general theme each month, the intent is that participants will determine the direction of the discussion so that BLC can best support their braille learning journey.

As the name suggests, these meetings take place on the Zoom platform and are typically held on the first Saturday of each month. We generally have different moderators each time so that attendees can benefit from the varied experiences and perspectives of long-time readers, as well as educators in the blindness field.

In the first session participants had a chance to encourage one another by sharing tips and resources that they find most helpful as they learn and practise braille. The following month we had a discussion led by one of our board members who uses both large print and braille. In another session we gave members an opportunity to ask their braille-related questions in an informal “ask the experts” panel. Although each get-together is centered around a different topic the focus is always the same: supporting and encouraging adult braille learners.

Many of the Braille Zoomers have shared that they were discouraged from learning braille. Some were told that it would be too difficult and others were told that they had too much vision and should wait until they had lost more sight before even considering braille as an option. We’re glad they didn’t give up, and we believe that this program will provide much-needed support to adult braille learners across Canada. It is never too late – or too soon, for that matter – to learn braille!

## The Brailler Bounce Initiative

We continue to run the Brailler Bounce Initiative, which we first launched in 2015. In this program we take unused or unwanted Perkins braillers, refurbish them and make them available to individuals who need them. We have provided over 50 braillers to people of all ages across Canada, from beginning braille readers to lifelong users. In 2018 and 2019 we held walk-a-thons in Victoria and Ottawa to raise money for the program. BLC would like to thank all who have partnered with us, whether by servicing braillers, providing financial support or donating unused machines to the program.

## Promoting Literacy

In the last few years we have also begun participating in mainstream literacy events whenever possible. Access to braille is just as much a literacy issue as it is one of disability rights, and we need to increase awareness of the value of braille in the mainstream literacy community. One such event is Word Vancouver, which is held each year in September.

## Access to Braille

The Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA), formerly the CNIB library, has launched a program called Single Use Braille. Current and future titles produced as BRF files are only embossed when requested, and patrons do not have to return these hard copies to the library.

In addition, the National Network of Equitable Library Service (NNELS) is a repository of content owned and sustained by Canadian Public Libraries that provides books in accessible formats. Staff are working to increase the number of titles available in braille.

## Braille in Museums

BLC has been collaborating with various Canadian museums to provide advice on the inclusion of braille in exhibits. This guidance ranges from code accuracy to dot quality to the placement of labels and panels. We’ve been impressed with the enthusiasm of museum staff when it comes to making their exhibits accessible to braille readers.

With the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions BLC has once again been consulted for guidance related to braille signage in museums and other public places as well. The needs and rights of braille users are just as valid as ever; therefore, BLC has issued the following statement regarding access to braille in public spaces during COVID-19:

Braille is literacy. Braille is equality. Signs, elevator buttons, menus and other materials are essential for blind people to have in braille, just as their print equivalents are essential for the sighted. Braille in public spaces must continue to be accessible during the pandemic. Braille readers should sanitize or wash hands before and after touching the braille and these surfaces, such as elevator panels, signage and room numbers can and should be cleaned in accordance with public health guidelines and any other relevant protocols.

## Other items of Note

* CNIB celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2018 and a number of events and activities took place across the country.
* On January 24, 2018, Darleen Bogart was made an Officer of the Order of Canada for her invaluable contribution to braille.
* Every two years the Canadian Vision Teachers host a national conference for educators of the blind and visually impaired. This conference, called Seeing Beyond the Horizon, was scheduled to take place this spring in Toronto, but was cancelled due to COVID-19.
* CNIB’s annual conference, Connecting the Dots, has gone virtual in 2020, with English and French iterations taking place in October. The winners of CNIB’s Braille Creative Writing Contest will be announced at that time.
* Thanks to some incredibly generous financial contributions, BLC was able to establish an endowment for the Edie Mourre scholarship. This fund will ensure that we can continue to support transcribers, proofreaders and educators seeking braille-related certifications.

## Conclusion

I would like to close this report by expressing appreciation on behalf of Canada for all of the work that Mandy White and her team have put into this event, especially with the switch to a virtual format. I’d also like to thank Phyllis Landon for all her years of service as CMC Chair. Phyllis, you may have been de-territorialized but you have represented Canada well nonetheless!

Finally, I’d like to acknowledge Natalie Martiniello, who was elected BLC President in May of 2018. Her creativity and her passion for braille literacy have already benefited not only BLC but also braille readers across the country.

Respectfully submitted,

Jen Goulden, Past President of Braille Literacy Canada

Ottawa, Ontario

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