

## **SOUTH EAST WALES REGIONAL COMMITTEE**

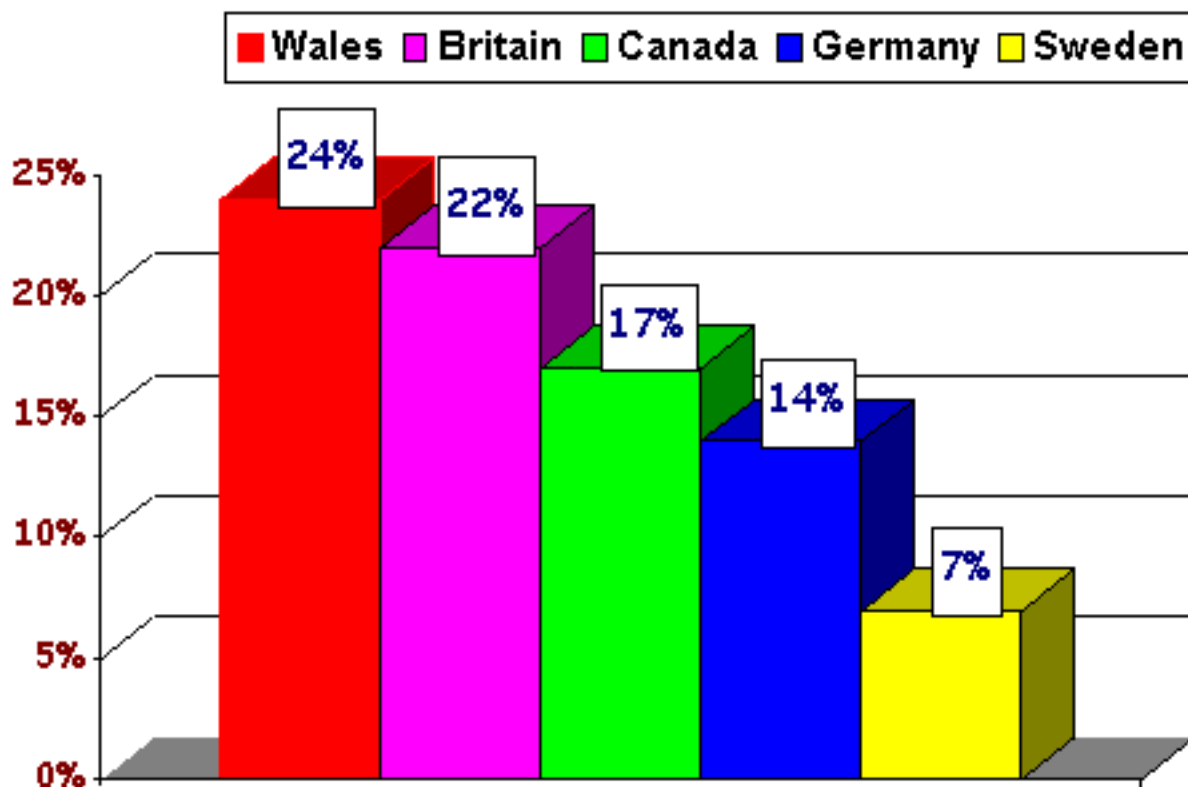
### **POST-16 EDUCATION AND TRAINING: PAPER FROM THE BASIC SKILLS AGENCY**

#### **BASIC SKILLS IN WALES**

1. We have a major problem with basic skills in Wales. Too many children leave primary school ill-equipped for the more demanding secondary curriculum; too many young people leave school with basic skills that are not good enough for the modern world; too many adults struggle with the basic skills most of us take for granted . Many of these adults are parents who have difficulty giving their children the support for language and literacy which would give a firm foundation for their future education. Thus the intergenerational cycle of underachievement is perpetuated.
2. More than 1 in 3 eleven year olds lack the basic skills they should have gained by age 11 and start secondary school with literacy and numeracy skills that are not good enough for the wider, more demanding, secondary curriculum. Some children catch up; others don't.
3. Only 36% of young people in Wales get GCSEs in English/Welsh, Maths and Science at age 16. Others get a GCSE grade in English/Welsh and Maths so low that it does not demonstrate to prospective employers that they have a sound grasp of the essential basic skills. And about 1 in 10 young people leave school with no GCSEs at all.
4. Our further education colleges are dealing, in some cases, with more than a third of their intake who need additional literacy and numeracy support in order to cope with the demands of vocational programmes and key skills. For training providers dealing with New Deal the problem is worse as unemployment falls and they are left with a growing percentage of clients who are much harder to help.
5. Recent national survey work suggests that while 24% adults in England have poor literacy and numeracy skills, in Wales 28% have similarly poor literacy skills and 32% have poor numeracy skills. On average, more than half of these are at a level where

they could easily make improvements given the right support.

6. In some areas, literacy problems are above the average in every ward. In Blaenau Gwent, for example, which has one of the highest levels of literacy problem, the scale of need ranges from 29.75% in Ystrad Mynach to 39.4% in Nantyglo. But even in Cardiff and Monmouth where the problem does not appear so acute there are pockets where literacy problems are very high and range from a low 13.98% in Creigiau to 46.01% in Butetown, and 17.07% in Magor to 35.35 in Monmouth West End.
7. There is no local authority area or constituency in Wales where the problem can be ignored. [See report tabled]
8. Our position internationally is graphically illustrated in the chart below taken from a recent international survey of adults' basic skills carried out by OECD. It clearly shows the formidably large gap between Wales and other industrialised countries.



### ***IMPACT OF poor basic skills***

9. The impact on the individual is severe. People with poor basic skills are most likely to end up in unskilled or semiskilled low-grade work because high skilled jobs – the jobs of

the future in Wales – are not open to people with poor literacy and numeracy skills.

10. Low skilled and 'no-skilled' jobs are the most vulnerable in the modern economy and, therefore, employees with poor basic skills are more likely to lose their jobs. In fact people with poor basic skills are twice as likely to have been made redundant or sacked from their first job.
11. When someone with poor literacy and numeracy skills loses their job, they are four times more likely to experience long-term unemployment.
12. Those who manage to hold onto their jobs are unlikely to receive training which would enable them to progress in work. Training is more commonly available to those employees who have higher levels of skills and education.
13. The cost of poor basic skills to industry in Wales is substantial. Losses arise from errors, difficulty in giving and receiving instructions accurately, reluctance to take on new working practices – team working, quality measures, introduction of new technology. In a global market that demands high skills, the number of adults with such poor basic skills has a major impact on our ability to compete.
14. It's not just at work that poor basic skills have a major impact. We also know that people with poor literacy and numeracy are less likely to vote and far less likely to get involved in community activities. They lack the skills and the confidence to take part in the democratic process and in the social and economic regeneration of their communities. They are less likely to become involved with their children's school activities.
15. There are other social costs. The link between poor basic skills and crime is poorly explored but the facts speak for themselves. 6 in 10 people in prison in Wales, mainly young men, are virtually functionally illiterate and innumerate.
16. Poor literacy and numeracy skills are closely linked to poverty; not just economic poverty, but poverty of aspiration and cultural poverty. The National Assembly's desire for a productive and inclusive society will not be realised unless the needs of the least well educated are addressed.

### ***how can we make a difference?***

17. Our vision must be of a fully literate and numerate Wales where no one lacks the basic skills most of us take for granted. In simple terms we need to:
  - make sure all young children are prepared for learning when they begin school;

- reduce the number of children leaving primary school struggling with learning to read, write and use numbers;
  - reduce the number of young people leaving school still struggling with basic skills most take for granted;
  - decrease the number of adults with poor basic skills.
1. We cannot address the serious problem of basic skills in Wales by simple mopping up the problem displayed by adults. We need a strategy which takes a 'birth to grave' approach and includes measures aimed at preventing early failure as well as measures to help young people and adults catch-up. Nevertheless, the need to address the problems of adults is urgent. We cannot wait for the problem to be solved in schools.
  2. The role of family literacy and family numeracy programmes is one of critical importance, tapping into the motivation of parents to improve their own skills so they are better able to help their children. This is a proven programme which must be available to families in all parts of Wales.
  3. There is also a key but under-developed role for employers and trades unions, working in tandem with colleges and training providers, to raise the standards of those seeking work and already in work. The motivation to gain work or promotion and new job skills can be a driving force for basic skills improvement. We must also draw in the organisations which work with people on the fringe of society where poor basic skills is so often a contributing factor to low achievement and disaffection. Our strategy must facilitate the involvement of all key players.

## **Conclusion**

4. What we have is equivalent to a national emergency; to deal with it will require a concerted effort involving a wide range of organisations, groups and individuals. If urgent and effective action is not taken the position will worsen. This concerted effort will need to be firmly based on partnerships, in and outside of education; partnerships that involve employers, trade unions and a host of community agencies and organisations addressing social and economic exclusion, alongside schools, colleges and LEAs.
5. The battle to improve literacy and numeracy cannot be carried out in isolation. Action will have to be closely linked to the development of better childcare, more effective schools, the reform of teacher training, social and economic regeneration of local communities and measures to deal with social exclusion.

6. We need a national strategy for basic skills in Wales to turn into action the principles set out in *Building Excellent Schools Together [BEST]*, *Learning is for Everyone [LIFE]*, *An Education and Training Action Plan for Wales [ETAP]* and the vision for Wales set out in [www.betterwales.com](http://www.betterwales.com) the Assembly's first strategic plan.
7. The Education and Training Action Plan for Wales recommended that: '*a comprehensive Basic Skills Strategic Plan for Wales be developed, in conjunction with the Basic Skills Agency, to raise standards of literacy and numeracy*'. We are pleased to table the draft version of a proposed strategy for Wales.

**The Basic Skills Agency June 2000**