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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A SHARED VISION for Aboriginal Literacy in Manitoba – results of the 2011 Aboriginal Literacy Symposium

On November 1st & 2nd, 2011 over 140 participants – including guest speakers, presenters, and registrants – attended the 2011 Aboriginal Literacy Symposium in Winnipeg. The gathering was hosted by Literacy Partners of Manitoba and Chaired by LPM Board member Edward Kidd, CIBC Regional Manager, Western Region Aboriginal Banking. Sponsors to the event were The Counseling Foundation of Canada and the Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counseling (CERIC), Pitblado Law, Boeing Canada, Community Futures Manitoba, Manitoba Hydro, Workplace Education Manitoba, Lowey Insurance, and Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation. Support was also provided by the Government of Canada – Office of Literacy and Essential Skills.

Master of Ceremonies for the Symposium, Patrice Mousseau, explained how the event was the first effort to organize a gathering of this magnitude from the grassroots community in Manitoba, while LPM Vice-Chair Holly Banner noted that registrants had come from all over Canada. Edward Kidd, Chair of the Symposium, followed by reminding attendees of their three main objectives: to initiate focused dialogue and information sharing on Aboriginal literacy issues; to establish a network of individuals and organizations committed to improving Aboriginal literacy, and; to begin the process of developing a shared vision and action plan for improving Aboriginal literacy. Then, guest speakers inspired participants with stories about what Aboriginal literacy was all about.

Ovide Mercredi, Former Chief, Misipawistik Cree Nation and former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations defined Aboriginal literacy as being about cultural literacy, social literacy, economic literacy, computer literacy, political literacy and legal literacy. He noted that literacy rates have a direct bearing on poverty, and that a correlation exists between literacy and employability. Therefore, he felt that literacy in a dominant society is critically important, and is about what binds us and what divides us. “We need a continuum of learning to empower individuals to live competent and productive lives and know our culture and language....we must keep moving forward trying to rise above poverty.” He is in favour of a “literacy revolution” to rise above poverty.

Ms. Ningwakwe George, Author and member of the Saugeen First Nation acknowledged the event as the very first Aboriginal literacy gathering in Manitoba. She defined Aboriginal literacy as walking in two worlds. She noted that there were many barriers that kept people from moving ahead, but Indigenous people are all saying the same thing – they want an holistic approach that is not delivered at the expense of who they are as Aboriginal people. She called on people to learn by listening to one another with love and respect.

Hon. James Bartleman lived in an era when racism was overt. Despite his family living a marginalized existence, he knows that literacy made him a different person, opening doors to new experiences and opportunities, and an improved future. As Lt. Governor he got the

opportunity to travel to the north, where he saw broken down schools and poor equipment and books in bad condition. "Literacy was my ticket out of poverty" he said, adding that "Aboriginal Literacy at its core has to be learning to read and write, because without it people cannot move forward."

Indeed, Aboriginal literacy is a growing concern in our province. Between 40 and 70% of adults in many of Manitoba's Aboriginal communities have less than a grade 9 education, leaving them without the minimal literacy skills for coping with every day work and life. Outside of Canada's northern territories, Manitoba is the province with the highest proportion of Aboriginal peoples at 15.5%, and by 2017 it is expected that 25% of Manitoba's population will be Aboriginal. These projections indicate that Aboriginal people will have a prominent role to play in the labour force.

Symposium participants appreciated the opportunity for so many individuals and organizations to come together to dialogue, share information, and work cooperatively and creatively towards improved Aboriginal literacy. They learned to look at Aboriginal literacy from a holistic standpoint and built partnerships, while collaborating to develop a stronger future for all Manitobans. As a result of this more informed understanding of Aboriginal Literacy and the various issues affecting it, by the end of the second day participants identified a shared vision for the future of Aboriginal Literacy:

All Aboriginal people excelling and reaching their full potential through a holistic approach to literacy and lifelong learning.

They felt this should be accomplished through the application of the seven teachings of respect, love, humility, honesty, wisdom, courage and truth - and through strategies that include infused Aboriginal content and perspectives, measureable action-based processes, strengthened family literacy, equal access, interdisciplinary cross-cultural collaboration, meaningful learning opportunities, and strategic, consistent funding.

Literacy Partners of Manitoba is pleased to have the opportunity to work and partner with Aboriginal people and organizations to improve Aboriginal literacy in our communities. The shared vision and strategies identified at the 2011 Aboriginal Literacy Symposium are key to ensuring improved Aboriginal literacy in Manitoban and provide a framework for moving forward on this important work. Please visit www.aboriginal-literacy2011.ca for more information and the full conference report.

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