



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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Adult Literacy

A brief to the

Select Standing Committee on Education

from the

British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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Adult Literacy

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(will be available at www.bctf.ca)

Introduction

The social and economic importance of encouraging adults to engage in continuous learning throughout their working lives is undisputed. Better-educated individuals earn higher wages, have greater earnings growth over their lifetimes, and experience less unemployment. Better-educated nations have higher, long-run economic growth and higher standards of living.

All too often, life-long learning simply means those who are already highly educated get even more education and training. New evidence suggests that adult learning and raising literacy skills have the potential to significantly improve the economic and social well-being of those with relatively low initial education and skills. When adult learning is diffused throughout the less-educated members of the workforce, national prosperity is significantly enhanced.

British Columbia is generally recognized as having a high level of educational attainment. However, the adult learning participation rate of the least-educated BC adults is quite low by international standards and has scarcely improved in five years. According to Canadian and international studies, 22% of BC adults aged 16–65 are functionally illiterate; over 920,000 adults. Yet studies also regularly reveal that effective literacy and success are highly correlated. It is in the interest of all to make adult education and literacy a high priority in our province.

The BC Teachers' Federation recommends the following actions for promoting adult literacy in British Columbia:

1. Recognize the importance of adult education.
2. Provide adequate funding for adult education.
3. Continue to provide adult education primarily through school boards.
4. Ensure that criteria for measuring learner success in adult education programs are comprehensive.
5. Ensure that adult education programs are accessible and stable.
6. Provide school districts with flexibility and resources to develop more relevant adult education curricula.
7. Provide support to enable adults on social assistance to access daytime adult education programs.
8. Adopt a public policy that acknowledges the “right to learn” for every Canadian.
9. Request the federal government to restore funding for adult literacy programs.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1—Importance of adult education

That the provincial government recognize that adult education is an important alternative program for students within the public education system.

Adult education plays an important role within the public education system. As well as serving as a safety net for students, adult educators provide significant opportunities for many students who have not experienced success in the K–12 system. Adult education also acknowledges the important learning principle that students learn in different ways and at different rates. As well as promoting lifelong learning, adult education provides an alternative approach for achieving success for all students. The importance of adult education should be acknowledged in the School Act.

Recommendation 2—Funding for adult education

- 2.1 That the provincial government provide adequate and targeted funding for educating adult students.**
- 2.2 That additional funding and resources be available to support adult education students with special needs, as well as ESL and First Nations students.**
- 2.3 That the funding system reflect the actual enrollment in adult education programs offered by school boards.**
- 2.4 That the enrollment cap on adult education student funding be removed.**
- 2.5 That adequate funding for adult education facilities be included in school board budgets.**
- 2.6 That funding for adult education programs be provided on the same basis as K-12 programs.**
- 2.7 That the system for the distribution of adult education funds at the school district be transparent and accountable.**

The funding formula for adult education has been reviewed a number of times over the past decade. The ongoing review has led to uncertainty in adult education programs. This instability has hindered some adult education programs from developing and becoming recognized components of the education system. At the present time adult education funding is not targeted. Funds designated for adult education can be diverted to other programs. To meet the needs of all adult students, it is critical that all adult education funds be used to support adult students.

It is essential that additional funding be available to support the unique learning needs of adult students with special needs. Adult students with special needs are not identified or recognized for funding purposes. Common sense would indicate that the population of adults who did not successfully complete their secondary education is likely to include higher numbers of students with special needs than the general school population. The K–12 system is efficiently graduating most of those who are capable of graduation. By definition, adult programs deal with those who have not yet been fully successful. A much higher proportion of these students are likely to have specialized learning needs,

but there is neither funding nor resources from the Ministry of Education to address these significant adult needs.

Much of the new student population speaks English as a second language, both in K–12 and in the adult programs, but FTE funding for adult students does not include provision for adult education specialist services. Designated classes for literacy (ESL) students should have reduced numbers, but adult education class size numbers in school districts are exempted from the BC School Act and Regulations. The combination of lower funding and lack of regulation means that classes of literacy (ESL) students are significantly higher in school district programs than in college programs.

The policy of the Ministry of Education since 1996, has been the enforcement of a “cap” on enrollment in adult education programs. In a growing district, such as Surrey, the cap has produced stagnation both in the kinds and numbers of adult education programs available. The cap was regressive from the beginning, in that it rolled back enrollment to 5% less than the previous year’s enrollment. It has produced a situation in Surrey, for example, where adult student enrollment has remained at about 2,000 FTE for the last ten years, while K-12 student enrollment has grown by about 8,000 students. The funding requirement based on enrolment and completion must be removed.

Many adult education programs take place in school district facilities that are no longer used for the K–12 program. Some of the facilities do not meet health and safety standards. The learning environment is an important factor in student learning. To support success for all adult students, it is important that good facilities be available. Some adult education facilities are over 40-years-old with moldy carpets, poor air circulation, and constantly leaking roofs and ceilings. Other facilities are in dilapidated portables with faulty wiring, inadequate parking facilities, and cramped sub-standard library facilities. Adequate funding for adult education facilities must be included in school board budgets.

In many districts, it is very difficult to find out about adult education funding levels and the distribution formulae. Adult education funds are sometimes used for adult education, sometimes for general interest courses, and sometimes for K–12 program offerings. It is in everyone’s interest that the system for determining and distributing adult education funds at the school district level be transparent and accountable.

Recommendation 3—Deliver adult education in school districts

That the provincial government should continue to provide adult education programs leading to the completion of a Dogwood certificate primarily through the K-12 education system.

School district adult education programs provide structure and stability. Their long-time existence in the community means that students with minimal literacy can find them. New immigrants are brought in by their relatives who have previously graduated from the programs. Community agencies can refer students with confidence. Students can cycle in and out of classes as the need arises, knowing that the programs will still be there when they need to return.

Recommendation 4—Comprehensive criteria for determining learner success

That the criteria for measuring learner success in adult education programs take into account student needs and goals, learning abilities, life circumstances, and the role of adult education as a support system in the community.

Many adult education students did not experience success in the K–12 system. It is critical that the criteria for the assessment and evaluation of adult education students be flexible and responsive to their needs, goals, and circumstances.

Recommendation 5—Make adult education programs accessible and stable

That adult education programs be accessible, stable, and visible in their communities.

Successful adult education programs are accessible, stable, and visible. It takes some time for a program to be developed and recognized. Without stability and visibility, programs cannot maintain their accessibility, and they lose their ability to attract students.

Recommendation 6—Relevant adult education curriculum

That school districts be provided with the flexibility and resources to develop more relevant curriculum to meet the needs of adult learners.

Teachers in adult education programs have both training and experience in adult education. They do their best, within the context of the K–12 system, to modify and revise the curriculum to fit the adult learner. That being said, there is little support available for both curriculum and professional development.

Adult educators want to meet learners’ needs, and develop curriculum to meet those specific needs. Likewise, it would be preferable to have professional development and in-service opportunities based on our programs, rather than piggy-backing and adapting either the K–12 programs or the college programs.

Recommendation 7—Access to daytime adult education programs

That the provincial government provide adequate support to adults on social assistance so that they can access daytime adult education programs.

The reality of many adult learners changed in 2002 when it became illegal for adults on social assistance to access daytime adult education programs. This was a significant policy change for adult learners. Many students in adult education programs were forced to quit when this policy came into effect. It makes little economic sense to deny access to adult education and upgrading programs to social assistance recipients. Education is the only proven, successful way out of the multi-generational cycle of poverty, low-skill, low-wage jobs, unemployment, and despair. In order to access adult education opportunities, learners need to have some financial stability.

Recommendation 8—Everyone has a “right to learn”

That the provincial government adopt a public policy that acknowledges the “right to learn” for every Canadian, including all immigrants and naturalized citizens.

In June 2004, Canada signed a recommendation of the International Labour Organization on Human Resources Development with an explicit reference to the right of adults to learn. Federal and provincial governments need to work together to build on this momentum and move towards the development of concrete plans.

In Canada, there is a strong consensus that a publicly funded education is the cornerstone of a fair, productive, and socially cohesive society. There is growing reason to believe that the social and economic benefits of publicly funded adult education would be equally profound. For this reason, we argue that adults should be extended a “right to learn” that is already established for children and youth.

Recommendation 9—Restore federal funding for adult literacy programs

That the provincial government request the federal government to restore recent funding cuts to adult literacy programs.

Recently the federal government announced funding cuts to adult literacy programs. This misguided decision is counter-productive and reduces adult learning opportunities. The provincial government should pressure the federal government to restore funding for adult literacy programs.

Conclusion

BC receives 45,000 immigrants annually (2005). By 2010 the figures are expected to be 60,000–70,000. Adult literacy must become a greater priority in our province. Until now too many adult learners in BC have been left behind, greatly increasing the social sub-class of the working poor. Now is the opportune time to implement much-needed improvements in adult and literacy education.

The mind is analogous to a parachute; it works effectively only when open. Thus we will genuinely reform adult education only when we are cognizant of students' needs, abilities, learning disabilities, learning strategies, and aspirations as well as teachers' unreasonably heavy burden in discharging their professional responsibilities. Every teaching day, educators use their professional expertise to meet regular and immigrant students' diverse learning needs so that they will remain "life-long learners," participate responsibly in our democratic processes and become fully assimilated into our laudable, multicultural society.

Thank you for considering these recommendations to promote adult literacy in our province.