

Key Questions for the Adult Education Review

By Wendy Terry

What is government accountability in adult education? Can government be accountable to the public and still provide a complete system of adult education that runs the gamut from literacy to job training, from post secondary programs to community-based courses in the liberal arts, from high school credit programs to general interest courses? Or would the government merit the taxpayers' wrath for spending money developing a comprehensive adult education system even though for most developed countries such a system is the norm?

***Learning Curves* believes the public would welcome such a system, and that the cost need not be much greater than the current patchwork of programs for adults is now.**

Let us compare the government's responsibility for adult education to its responsibility for transportation. Both systems use public and private money to get people where they want to go. The main infrastructure-highways and schools-is paid for by taxes.

At this time the provincial government, which is conducting the Ontario Adult Education Review, appears to believe it can justify adult education only for the neediest adult students. To continue our metaphor, that attitude is comparable to considering government responsible only for fixing potholes, not for maintaining and developing the entire network of highways across the province. (We are aware that the current responsibility for roads is divided among municipal, provincial and federal governments. However, we are sure, dear readers, that you get our point.)

We expect our governments to do more than fix potholes. Similarly, when it comes to adult education, we should be able to expect our government to do more than provide skills training for the unemployed.

We all supplement the transportation system when we use our money to buy a car or take a bus ride. In the same way, adult students may take an upgrading program through the school board paid for by tax money and be supported on social assistance also paid for from the public purse, but when they move on to college, they use their own

money to pay tuition. They may also get a student loan, as they would a bank loan to buy a car. Once employed their employer may kick in the tuition for a job skills course, thus adding to the mix of public and private support for their education as adults.

During this job-related education/training, they may take an art course for the sake of their mental health, or a comparative religion course to better appreciate the politics of our time, or a psychology course to better understand themselves and others. They pay a user fee, but the school building is supported by tax dollars just as a ride on the streetcar to go to a movie rather than to work is paid for out of public money. The general interest courses help them to stay mentally healthy, to be better citizens in a multicultural world, to be more understanding parents, spouses, bosses and co-workers just as the training courses make them better employees. Each course uses some taxpayer money and some of the students' money.

Developing adult education as a whole system, instead of funding only the most necessary skills-training programs, does not mean the government would fully fund every facet of adult education. The public would indeed be aghast at such overspending. Given the public-private funding mix that already exists, we believe the government could undertake strategic planning for the whole system, help it to work better and at the same time spend the same amount—or perhaps slightly more—more effectively.

In transportation, is government more accountable if it just fills in potholes? Obviously not! It is more accountable when it coordinates a transportation system that gets people where they want to go whether it's for work, for personal interest or for the public good. The traffic gridlock currently paralyzing Toronto and the GTA is witness to the inefficiency of not having a good transportation plan.

The question of building a comprehensive, comprehensible adult learning system would not even arise in most developed countries, where adult education is run as a parallel system to the one for children and considered equal in importance. To say adult learners are deserving of this service in Britain, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Japan, Korea, Germany, Australia, New Zealand is not the controversial statement that it seems to be in Ontario. In those countries adult learning centres are just as accepted as parks and

recreation centres. (Canada has no federal role for education so in Canada we have ten provincial systems.)

Would we consider the Ontario government too profligate with taxpayers' money if it explicitly established an education system for adults, undertook strategic planning to meet adults' learning needs and coordinated access, just as it does for children's education? Would Ontario citizens consider such an initiative to be spending on 'would be nice' needs, when there appear to be more pressing priorities? The Adult Education Review seems to worry that the answer is yes. Because they fear that citizens would object, they are asking those in the field to send them hard data which would make a case for a planned and coordinated adult education system.

We at Learning Curves find this request exasperating. Why is it that Canada of all the developed countries, treats the education of adults as a service for the dysfunctional (the unemployed who need training) rather than part of building community infrastructure. If we accept that we need parks and recreation centres to keep our bodies fit then why can't we accept that we need adult learning centres to keep our minds active? Both mental and physical activities are indispensable to the wellness quotient in society.

Must we seek out and cite the hundreds of studies over the past fifty years documenting the fact that the better educated the parent, the more successful the child is at school? Perhaps we should dig out the hundreds of studies that document that the more mentally active seniors are, the healthier they are, or the hundreds of studies that show that the more educated the citizens of a society are, the fairer, more tolerant and active the democracy.

Perhaps because these countries look at the whole road system for learning and not just at the pot holes of the day, they have a better sense that government does not need to fund adult education at the same level that it funds the elementary, secondary and post secondary systems for the young. In these countries, there is also a popular awareness of adult education and its history.

In Canada there is no popular awareness of the history of adult education. Whereas most people can tell you a general history of the

evolution of children's education, they can't do the same for adult education. So we will tell you.

In the early part of the 1900's until the 1960's, adult education involved general interest courses and the humanities and a kind of university in the community. (Students took literature, art appreciation, comparative philosophy, religion, economic systems, history etc). The purpose of adult education at the time was to help newcomers become Canadians and to help Canadians think through policy issues as we developed our nation. In fact, adult education often fell under the aegis of departments of citizenship.

Then from the 1970's on until today, technological change and free trade resulted in the need for higher and even new skill levels to compete internationally; that is, to adapt and to stay employed. Somehow in focusing on skills, we have lost sight of the first wave of adult education. Because we have no historical perspective on adult education, we do not see how funding priorities need to change with the changes in the demographics of our adult population and the changes in societal needs and demands. Consider the following.

We have approximately nine million baby boomers moving into their senior years and lots of public policy heat on rising health care costs. Why not spend some of those health care dollars supporting seniors' learning programs? Studies show mentally active seniors stay healthier.

There are constant demands that more money be put into the early learning years, yet we know that children spend more time with their parents than at school. UNESCO and the United States have put money into family literacy programs because they know educating the parent educates the child. Why not spend some money on adult learning as well as on early learning?

Today, we are again integrating large numbers of immigrants into Canada as we did in the early part of the century, but their learning needs are more complex as we now give preference to foreign trained professionals. Still they need to learn what it means to be Canadian citizens just as the immigrants of the early 1900's did. Furthermore, we all must learn to be global citizens if we are to live together successfully in a multicultural world. Humanities and social science

courses would help us all to adjust to our rapidly changing world. Perhaps if we felt more empowered through learning, we would feel more like voting on those big issues.

Henry Milner, who is a world-renowned authority on comparative politics and teaches political science at Laval University in Quebec, documents in his book *Civic Literacy* that a key factor in sustaining egalitarian democracies is the presence of an adult learning system, one that gives as much priority for general interest learning as it does for training.

Is this enough accountability for the Adult Education Review? Educating parents as the first and primary teachers? Keeping ourselves mentally fit as a wellness investment? Addressing the democratic deficit through civics education? Studying other cultural and religious traditions so we can better adapt to the global village?

Maybe not.

Perhaps an efficiency argument could be the tipping point. Currently governments spend millions of dollars on an ad hoc basis to solve problems as they arise, for example, so that EI or social assistance recipients can get training or so those who are deemed illiterate can learn English as a first language or English as a Second Language.

At the same time, it spends little money on helping adults find the most appropriate program. Needless to say, inefficiencies abound. If you build a transportation system but don't give anyone a road map and don't put up any road signs, people would not be able to make the best use of their time and money on the roads you have built. We could get more value for our tax dollars if they were allocated within the context of a strategic plan rather than a one-off response to a need when it becomes a political 'hot potato.'

The best argument for an adult education system parallel to the regular education system is the differences in management culture between the two. Adult education programs are developed from the ground, up, driven by the interests of students and their teachers in their community. On the other hand, the education of children and youth is driven from the top down. The adult system needs to be infinitely flexible to accommodate the mature student's prior learning,

whereas the child and youth system needs more structure to ensure they all get the basic skills package.

Any adult educator can rattle off a multitude of frustrations encountered when trying to run an adult education program grafted onto a traditional institutional model. A parallel system for adult education would accommodate a community-based management style. Reducing the time, effort and frustration of trying to fit round pegs into square holes would improve the efficiency of funds spent on adult education.

Here's to Kathleen Wynne and the Ontario government's Adult Education Review. If they say up front that they want to build a learning system for adults out of the current patchwork, Learning Curves thinks the citizens of the province will hold them accountable for doing a good thing that is long overdue. .

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