

The Rae Review Misses the Mark While Adult Education Review Languishes in Cabinet.

By Wendy Terry

A second reading of the Post Secondary Review reinforces our disappointment with this report. Clearly the education of adults was seen as just an add-on to what has been the main mission of the colleges and universities, the education of youth.

Adult education should be taken as seriously as is the education of the young. Adults contribute to the economy now; they shape our society now; they raise their children now. Investing in adult education today would bring an immediate return on that investment.

Demographic trends show that in the long term it will be adults who will demand post secondary education. David K. Foot, a professor of economics at the University of Toronto, wrote a paper titled “Demographic Change and Public Policy in Ontario” in which he noted that youth who are currently putting pressure on our post-secondary system represent a four to five year blip in demand. They are the children of the baby boomers, a smaller generation than their parents’. He notes that from 2010 “educational enrollment will decrease and resource transfers outside the traditional educational sector (youth) may be necessary. An aging workforce is likely to make demands on continuing education resources...”

As well Foot notes that immigration will compensate for our declining population. Over 100,000 immigrants a year arrive in Ontario, and many first settle in Toronto and the GTA. The resettlement learning needs of these adults, who will soon comprise the majority of our labour force, will have to be met in part by the universities. Thus the new majority for post-secondary education will be adult learners. Foot’s paper was posted on the Review website but seems to have been ignored.

There was no section in the Post Secondary Review report on system redesign to meet the needs of adult learners. The review says, “adult learning should be promoted actively.” Seven words on page 11 in a paragraph on participation targets! Thin gruel for a student body

that today represents a significant constituency for post-secondary education and a majority constituency by 2010!

The report starts out by noting that there are 175, 000 part-time students in the colleges compared to 162,000 full-time students; in the universities, there are 69,000 part-time undergraduate students compared to 280,000 full-time students. Clearly part-time students are the majority in the colleges, while almost one in five students are part-timers in the universities.

Given that many part-timers are adults managing work and family along with their studies, their needs are significantly different than youth going full-time to college or university or doing an apprenticeship. The distinct needs of this group were noted in the Post-Secondary Review Discussion paper: “Large numbers of students participate in part-time studies, particularly in the college system. Part-time students, who are often working and have family responsibilities, have specific needs with respect to flexible formats and customized supports that aren’t easily accommodated by institutions.”

However, this issue, though addressed in the discussion paper, was not given any text in the final report. Perhaps Rae, like others who have tried to fit adult education into a system for children and youth, simply threw up his hands and said, “Well yes, it is important but we can’t figure it out.”

Lip service will not do when the emerging majority student group are adults. We need a system redesign. This is not an impossible task. Many countries have an adult education system that runs parallel to and is just as important as the system for children and youth. In 2002, Henry Milner, a Quebecker wrote *Civic Literary: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work*. He found that societies that were the most sustainable all had comprehensive adult education systems. By comprehensive systems he meant ones that supported education for human development as well for human resource development. These societies see adult education as good social policy. So do some sectors of Canadian society.

Recently a Toronto Dominion/Conference Board of Canada Forum challenged government to see adult education as social policy.

Policy work is certainly needed. Recently the Organization for Economic Development (OECD) report criticized Canada for having a confusing and fragmented policy and program structure for adult education. If these experts found it confusing, how much more confusing it must be for adults who have been out of the education system for a while or for newcomers who are totally new to our system. Adults, unlike youth, do not have access to a school guidance counsellor to help sort it all out.. So why don't we roll up our sleeves and get to it.

We can think of two reasons. One is the disconnect between structures for adult education and those for children and youth and the other is political will.

The dominant public image of learning is one of students of the same age cohort moving along through the elementary and secondary systems eventually branching out into work, apprenticeship, college or university. It is a straight line going in one direction— up and out. But this is only the first phase of learning in life; at some point we leave school and become adult learners.

For adult learners, there is no dominant public image just stories of family, friends, neighbours, co-workers of all ages and stages in life, taking a course at one of the myriad of institutions offering adult courses; these adult learners follow a learning plan that makes sense to each one of them at a particular time in their lives. The line of learning can start at any point and go in any direction, into a college program and back to an upgrading program then back to college before moving on and up.

The first picture is our image of learning in the first 25 or so years and the second picture is our image of learning for the next 50 or so years. The first image of learning covering the first 25 years of a person's life is a tidy, lock step picture; on the other hand, the second image is a seemingly chaotic picture. Adults are not moving up silos of learning branching off into other silos; they are knitting together community offerings from each silo in a way that makes sense to each one of them at the time.

This disorderliness causes policy makers to give up on trying to develop a coherent adult education policy, but at the same time they

assert that lifelong learning is important. The Rae Review seems to have virtually ignored adult education.

Other policy consultations have tackled adult education needs head on but all have languished for lack of a political will to act on their recommendations.

In 1994 there was the Premier's Task Force on Lifelong Learning of which the WEA, now publisher of Learning Curves, was a member. At that time the WEA ran an information service for adults returning to school the Adult Learning Line. The Task Force report pointed out that to practice lifelong learning effectively, individuals need " a more flexible and user friendly system that enables them to customize their learning paths according to their individual needs." The Task Force Report Report went on to say that the Ontario government " has a key role to pay in making lifelong learning a provincial priority. " So what happened? Well the Premier's Council had been initiated by the Peterson government and developed by the Rae government to include a Task Force on Lifelong Learning.

Then the Harris government came to power, disbanded the Premier's Council and ignored its Task Force Report on Life Long Learning. It also cut funding for the WEA Adult Learning Line.

Ten years later, in 2004 the Adult Education Review, headed by MPP Kathleen Wynne, has yet to be published, Apparently, it languishes in Cabinet because members are not convinced it is important. This an odd reaction on the part of Cabinet. Political will is usually driven by votes, and there are plenty of votes in adult education but apparently Cabinet cannot see them.

Consider today's constituencies for adult leaning. First there are high school drop outs. Over a quarter of Grade 9 students do not graduate from high school. Would they not vote for the government who gives them a second chance. Twenty per-cent drop out after their first year of post-secondary education. After a few years in dead end jobs, would they not vote for a government who gave them a second chance. Then there are newcomers. They are fast becoming the majority in our labour force. Would they not vote for the government that gives them the resettlement learning needed to get back into their field of work here in Canada. Then there are the seniors. They will soon

constitute over a third of our population. Would they not vote for the government that supports community learning programs for them at local schools. So governments could gain significant good will in the senior vote, the newcomer vote and the youth vote if they supported the development of a coherent system for adult education. They could gain good will from the working and middle class vote. Adult education is a perfect vote-getting issue for politicians today, it costs are low and people appreciate the service.

Unlike health care or the education of children and youth both of which need large infusions of tax dollars, adult education just needs a top up to make the current multitude of offering more coherent and comprehensible for adult learners.

Adult education is not a high cost public service because it is very much a mix of public and private funding. Adults students may take upgrading programs through the school board paid for by tax money and be supported on social assistance also paid 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. If employed their employer may kick in the tuition for a job skill course, thus adding to the mix of public and private support for their education as adults. Adult learners may take an art course for the sake of their personal interest, or a comparative religion course to better appreciate today's multicultural society, or a psychology course to understand themselves, their children, co-workers or neighbours better. They pay a user fee, but the school building is supported by tax dollars just as a ride on the street car to go to a movie rather than to work is paid for out of public money. Adult learners largely support themselves and their own learning.

That being said governments do spend millions of dollars `on an ad hoc basis to solve problems as they arise, for example, so that EI or social assistant recipients can get training or so those who are deemed illiterate can learn English as First Language or 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. We could get `more value for our tax dollars if they were allocated within the context of a strategic plan for adult education rather than a continual stream of responses to needs as each becomes a political hot potato. High school dropouts are the latest. We could

develop a whole program targeting just this constituent group –high school drop outs. Or we could look at how high school dropouts use the adult education system and how it could better help them and other constituent groups in the process.

Adult learners are working adults who support the education of children and youth; yet for their own learning they get little support. Tuition fee increases, one of the key issues addressed in the Rae review, affect adult part-time learners more than youth as full-time learners. Like youth going full time, adult part-time learners struggle to budget for course fees but for adults there is no parental support to fall back on. Indeed, they are often parents themselves, budgeting for their children’s education as well as their own.

It is true that adult learners can claim tuition fees on their income tax but they do not get a pro-rated tax credit for expenses beyond course fees. These include babysitting cots, extra transportation costs, book, material, computer costs, not to mention fast food costs on the run from work to school. The introduction of a pro-rated tax credit for adult learners would be low cost and helpful enough to garner political support.

The Rae Report missed the mark on Lifelong Learning- the New Majority but Cabinet with a bit of political insight should be able to make up for this by finding the will to release Kathleen Wynne’s report on the Adult Education Review and act on it.

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