

# **Learning Curves' Wish List for Adult Learners**

**By Wendy Terry**

**Learning Curves is now in its sixth year of publication. The first issue was published in January 1999 by the Workers' Educational Association (The WEA) of Canada. In existence now 86 years WEA pioneered adult education in Canada. The WEA is a member of the International Federation of Workers' Educational Associations, which represents WEA in many countries including Scandinavia and others and has consultative status with UNESCO. Unlike Canada, many countries have an adult education system which runs parallel in importance to the one for children and youth. For adult learners in Canada, we have a number of wishes we would like the decision-makers at all levels of government to grant.**

**We wish that adult learning were 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 today. Investing in adult education today would bring an immediate return on that investment.**

**We wish that all adult learning needs were considered worthy of support, not just those that develop skills for the labour market. In the global village, adults also need life long access to a general, liberal arts education. Courses on comparative literature, art, culture, history, international laws human rights etc. would help us to participate fully in our multicultural society and understand our multilateral world. Popular, affordable, community courses in the liberal arts are the norm in many countries, even countries like Japan and South Korea.**

**We wish that all levels of government—federal, provincial and municipal—would find the political will to put comprehensive policies and programs in place to support adult learners. This would mean looking at the educational systems from the outside in, as the adult learner must. Adults try to knit together offerings from several systems over time to follow their learning plans. Yet our governments rarely, if ever, undertake policy and program reviews from the learner's point of view. Instead, they use the silo approach asking each education provider or program and business sector what they need.**

**Is it any wonder then that a recent Organization for Economic Development (OECD) report criticized Canada for having a confusing and fragmented policy and program structure for adult education? If it was confusing to these experts, how do we expect ordinary people to find their way as lifelong learners?**

**In short, we wish Canadian policy makers would stop paying just lip service to lifelong learning. Instead, we wish they would commit themselves to a comprehensive and comprehensible system of education from the cradle to the grave.**

**In 2002, Henry Milner, a Quebecker, wrote *Civic Literacy: 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 means ones that supported education for human development and as well as human resource development. These societies see adult education as good social policy. Recently, a Toronto Dominion/Conference Board of Canada Forum challenged government to view adult education as social policy.**

**Governments, of course, will balk at the cost. However, we would like to point out that adult education enhances global competition through an increased skills base and add tax dollars to public coffers.**

**So Paul, Dalton, David et al, we at *Learning Curves* believe you could get a lot of political support by making adult education comprehensive and intelligible for adults at a price you can afford.**

**March 2004**