

# Turning around the dropout rate

BY RUTH RAMSDEN-WOOD, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD APRIL 19, 2010

Why are only 14 per cent of Alberta youth attending university?

Don Braid's article on April 8 asks this compelling question.

Comparing us with Newfoundland's 29 per cent won't get to the answers we need, but may spur us into action.

And action is desperately needed.

If we want to get our university participation rate up, we'll have to increase our high school graduation rate.

Currently 30 per cent of Alberta students don't graduate within three years of starting Grade 10.

We know young people who graduate from high school and attend post secondary training help build a stronger skilled workforce and they participate in our community's well-being.

They tend to vote, volunteer, and contribute positively more than students who drop out.

Everyone has a different story for dropping out, but statistics show that those students who do often have low self esteem and low academic achievement, use drugs or alcohol and engage in risky behaviour, are challenged with literacy and sometimes English as their second language, and are surrounded by peers with the same difficulties.

It would be passing the buck to point to the school system to say it is failing these youth.

As a society, we all own this.

We are contributing to the issues youth face that lead them to this devastating decision.

Our youth know the score.

They have the answers. They can tell us what needs to change. They can tell us about the barriers they face and about the hurdles we make them jump through.

Hurdles even to return to high school.

We heard their stories. We listened to them, agog I might add, while youth spoke of the challenges they faced in this recession.

The jobs that lured them away from the challenges of high school were no longer available to them.

Youth unemployment skyrocketed to 15.3 per cent in 2009 -- double that of the adult unemployment rate.

Even worse, as the economy crawls out of the recession history tells us it takes twice as long for youth employment rates to rebound.

Still, youth are resilient. Scores of them, numbers more than ever, are looking to return to finish high school.

One good thing out of this recession -- they now want to and feel the need to return to school.

They now understand the value of their high school diploma.

Yet the barriers are prohibitive.

Once youth turn 20, they are no longer eligible for academic upgrading through the publicly funded system and must attend a post-secondary institution where it costs upwards of \$500 per high school course.

And for low income families there are few bursaries available for youth returning to school.

Post-secondary institutions across the province are beginning to report increased demand for student financing to cover costs while students are studying.

One local institution reports that its wait list for student financing exceeds 200 students, while another in Red Deer reported that when the full-time funding support ran out, students opted to do part-time studies instead.

These challenges of returning to school highlight the importance of prevention in the first place.

As a community let's rise to the challenge of keeping youth in school instead.

The experts in education have studied the issue.

Their research points the way to keeping kids in school. The key priorities are:

- Enhance career programs such as job shadowing and business partnerships
- Increase mentoring programs for those new to Canada and for aboriginal students
- Support and expand teacher training programs to respond to the challenges youth face
- Identify the gaps in programs that support our youth such as the lack of bursary programs for kids returning to school
- Implement wellness centres in schools that will support youth and their families

- Focus on preparing children to be ready for school through early literacy and childhood development
- Give youth a sense of relevance, belonging and success in their lives
- Increase or eliminate the age cut off for access to a publicly funded high school education
- Support English as a Second Language programming

Clearly, this is not a formula that we can implement easily or tomorrow, but we all have a role to play.

It will take all of us -- not only our youth, not only schools, not only government, not only business, not only the not-for-profit sector and not only families.

It will take everyone working together to fill the cracks that our youth are falling through.

Are we up for that challenge?

Ruth Ramsden-Wood is the President and CEO of United Way of Calgary and Area. As a former educator in local high schools, she knows first-hand the opportunities lost for our youth and our community when students choose to drop out of high school.

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