

Hire grads only: Tory

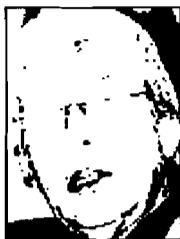
Education
minister targets
Alberta's high
dropout rate

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CALGARY HERALD

Alberta Education Minister Dave Hancock told companies Thursday to stop hiring high school dropouts as a way to stem the tide of youth leaving school early for work.



“You can help by refusing to hire anyone without a high school diploma,” he said in a speech at the



Dave Hancock

He encouraged businesses to partner with schools to mentor students and to offer enticements to help youth further their studies.

Businesses agree having an educated workforce is important. But with the labour crunch, many employers have no choice

but to hire young people who’ve chosen not to graduate, says chamber president Heather Douglas.

Calgary Alberta has some of the lowest high school completion rates in the country.

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According to Statistics Canada, about 68 per cent of Alberta teenagers completed high school in the 2005-06 school year, well below the national rate of almost 75 per cent.

When asked later about his suggestion to stop hiring students away from school, Hancock stood by his remark.

“I think there’s a general attitude in the community that one of the reasons our students are not completing high school as we’d like them to is because the economy entices them,” Hancock said. “I’m saying, generically (to the business community), don’t entice them. It’s not in their interest and it’s not in yours.”

Encouraging young people to stay in school makes economic sense. However, refusing to hire high school drop outs isn’t always possible for local businesses, said Douglas.

“We support the minister because every business wants everybody as well educated as possible. But in the shortage, they need bodies to get the

work done.

“If Alberta and Calgary are the engine for the Canadian economic drive, then we need the work continuing,” she said.

Young people who drop out to take a \$60,000-a-year job on the oil rigs can often gain maturity through work experience, which encourages them to return to school later in life, Douglas said.

Alberta Education’s statistics show many students return to school in their late teens and early 20s.

In the 2006-07 school year, Alberta Education reports 71 per cent of students graduated high school within three years of entering Grade 10 and 79.5 per cent of students earned their diploma within five years of starting high school.

If the Alberta government were to follow Hancock’s suggestion of making a high school diploma a mandatory hiring requirement, at least one cabinet minister would be out of work.

“You could count me out for sure,”

said Alberta Health Minister Ron Liepert, who held the post as education minister prior to Hancock.

Liepert didn't want to get into a war of words with his successor over how to improve graduation rates. But he suspects he's not the only MLA without a diploma.

"I have always jokingly said I have a degree in hard knocks. There's something to be said for people who survive in the world without a college degree," Liepert said, who added he always encouraged students to stay in school.

Hancock's tough love approach scaring kids back to school isn't going to produce any more high school graduates, said Liberal MLA Harry Chase.

Instead of tossing away the resumes of dropouts, Hancock should be creating school programs that meet the needs of students and allow them to complete their education on their own, Chase said.

"What he is trying to do is pass off government responsibilities for funding and supporting a strong education system to businesses," Chase said.

The lure of work can be a major pull to some youth on the verge of quitting school and should be addressed, but it isn't the only reason students drop out, said Education Matters spokesperson Donna Rapp.

Rapp is part of the Calgary community group Kafeiz, which is exploring ways to boost graduation rates.

Research conducted for Kafeiz shows factors such as alcohol and drug abuse, low academic achievement, poor literacy or English language skills, the level of education attained by parents and peers can also play a role in whether a young person is likely to abandon high school before graduation.

Solving this complex program will require the entire community working together to give students the supports they need to succeed, said Rapp.

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