

Kafé12

Executive Summary

Overcoming The Educational
Challenges Faced By Calgary's Youth



The best start is finishing.

A high proportion of Calgary's youth fail to complete high school or to continue their education at the post-secondary level. For many young people, the factors that contribute to school failure and drop-out begin in early childhood and continue to mount in adolescence. By the time they reach high school, they are no longer willing and, in some cases, able to continue their education. Completing high school is a crucial step along the pathway to well-being in adulthood. Education provides people with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to fully contribute to and benefit from society. High school completion is a necessary precondition for the pursuit of higher learning and the key to economic productivity, health and well-being, civic engagement, and quality of life.

Consider the following:

- High school and post-secondary education prepare students to be responsible citizens and to participate in democracy. Students learn to think critically and solve the problems facing our city, our province, our country, and our world. There is a strong and positive association between level of education and voting, charitable giving, volunteering, membership in community organizations, and non-voting political activity. On the other hand, high school dropouts are more likely to receive social assistance, to be in poor health, to experience poor family functioning, to commit crimes, to abuse drugs and alcohol, and to become parents in adolescence.
- Education has a high rate of economic return for people from all ethnocultural groups, for men and for women, and for people from all family backgrounds. Education also has a high rate of return for society. In addition to the higher earnings enjoyed by individuals who have graduated from high school, college, technical school, or university, we all benefit from the higher tax revenues, the lower demands on social support programs, and the higher levels of innovation and productivity generated by the highly educated.
- Alberta faces a current and growing shortage of skilled workers. The economy continues to flourish, highly-educated baby boomers will soon be retiring, and we are not producing enough educated workers to fill critical jobs. The gap between labour market demands and the number of educated workers

will continue to grow. Rising skill demands have made a high school diploma the minimum condition for successfully entering the labour market.

- The nature of work and the fundamental skills required to obtain and maintain employment are changing. Students should no longer expect to train for and commit to one occupation for a lifetime. Those who train in a narrow field and do not master literacy, numeracy, communication, and problem-solving skills and those who do not continually upgrade their skill set will be left behind in tomorrow's workforce.

In terms of education, how does Calgary fare?

In some ways, Calgary has much to be proud of: Calgary high school students consistently rank among the best in the world on international tests, our young women are attending university in record numbers, and a high proportion of working-age adults in the city participate in job-related training. But on some dimensions we are falling behind other Canadian cities, and it appears that many of our young people are not acquiring the skills and knowledge that they will require to successfully compete in the new economy and sustain Alberta's position as a global economic leader.

For example:

- Alberta has one of the highest provincial drop-out rates in Canada.
- High school graduation rates are much lower among English as a Second Language students (not all immigrant students) in Calgary: Drop-out rates have been estimated at 60%-75%.

- Although there have been some improvements, it is still the case that only about half of Aboriginal people have completed high school. Completion rates have risen to 57% among Aboriginal people aged 20 to 24.
- While Alberta's school education system is generally good by world standards, and in some specific areas is leading the way, there are key areas where we are at risk of being left behind by the quality and improvements taking place in other countries.
- Calgary's high education rate is partially due to the in-migration of skilled workers from other provinces and countries, rather than the education levels of people born or raised in Calgary.
- Calgary has one of the lowest proportions of youth aged 20 to 24 participating in post-secondary education of any major city in Canada. In 2006, only 35% of Calgary's youth were enrolled in post-secondary studies, as compared with 54% in Montreal and 48% in Ottawa.
- According to the most recent International Adult Literacy Survey in 2003, about 40% of adult Albertans do not have the minimum levels of literacy and almost half lack the basic numeracy skills required to fully participate in today's economy.

Why do some youth drop out of high school?

Dropping out of school is not a single act or an event. It is a process in which different but interrelated factors, ranging from the individual and family to school, community, the job market, and government policy all play a role.

High school dropout is associated with risk factors including:

- lower academic achievement
- lower post-secondary aspirations
- working 20 hours or more each week while attending school
- the quality of the school and educational experience itself
- being surrounded by a peer group who have no post-secondary plans
- frequent drug use and/or skipping of classes
- a low degree of "engagement" in school.
- reading proficiency at age 15
- low socio-economic status and parents with lower levels of education

The greater the number of risk factors in these areas, the greater the likelihood of high school dropout.

What can we do about it?

Fortunately, there are myriad examples of excellent approaches and programs that have succeeded in addressing the specific challenges of vulnerable youth on which to draw.

Examples include:

- Community-wide collaborations involving the private sector, funders and donors, parents, schools, school boards, and community-based organizations
- Intensive school-based, community-based, and individual supports for students
- Providing adult mentors for students and training students to be mentors to younger children
- Alternative schools and educational programs
- Specialized schools and supports for subpopulations of students

Conclusions

We have a moral, social, and economic imperative to act, immediately and decisively. We know what works in improving educational outcomes and we have realized some success in helping youth, particularly those who face particular challenges, to succeed in school. The question is whether we have the collective will to join forces and fully implement promising practices and change the life course of youth who are at risk of dropping out of school or who have abandoned their educational dreams and pursuits. If we work together, we can give Calgary youth the best start by ensuring they stay on course and finish high school.

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