

COMMITTING TO SUCCESS FOR ALL

By Penny Milton

THE CLAMOUR FOR CHANGE IN EDUCATION IS loud in the land. Daniel Keating and Fraser Mustard¹ have identified two dominant issues facing Canada, to build the new kind of economy that can create wealth from ideas and to sustain a healthy social environment that is best for human development. These are no longer seen as separate endeavours. The explosion in knowledge about how the brain develops from conception to early adolescence and an enhanced understanding of the individual and societal consequences of poor school outcomes, make more urgent the need to reform the policies and practices that we use to support the development of citizens. Education and training are repeatedly called forth as a response to every agenda — enhanced social justice, economic prosperity, individual and population health, crime prevention, technological change and globalization. Changed family structures and work patterns are reflected in demands for more sensible arrangements for child care and challenges to the traditional scheduling and content of schooling. It is, perhaps, little wonder that some educators question the legitimacy of this multitude of expectations or the capacity of schools to respond.

We have known about the link between family socio-economic status and school success for over twenty-five years. We know that poor children are more likely to do poorly in school. They are over-represented among those that fail to complete secondary education and under-represented among those that make the transition to post-secondary education and training. They are more likely to be in poorer health and to have more difficulty in attachment to the labour market. The link between socio-economic status and educational attainment is not a simple one of cause and effect, but positively altering it is essential. J. Douglas Willms² writes, “a growing body of research shows a relationship between literacy and economic performance... and calls for a more literate workforce.” As the economy continues to require more “knowledge workers” and provides fewer low-skilled jobs, the future for young people without the necessary range of literacy skills looks bleak. He goes on to say that, “Because literacy is so central to social and economic status, policy measures that decrease inequalities in literacy are fundamental to achieving tolerance, social cohesion and an equitable distribution of economic opportunity.”³

There is reason for optimism. The *International Adult Literacy Survey*⁴ shows that Canadians aged approximately 20 to 40 have the highest literacy scores and that this is a cohort effect related to educational attainment rather than a result of aging. Youth who dropped out of school scored substantially lower than those than completed high school. Adults attending

or having completed college and those in university have significantly higher levels of literacy than those with high school completion. Willms’ analyses found that, “These results hold true after controlling for respondents’ family background, first language learned, and occupational experience.”

Schools do make a difference. Public education is the single largest public investment in the development of children and youth. By systematically applying all that we know about effective teaching and learning to the domains of both policy and practice, we can reasonably expect to improve the life chances of children and youth in Canada. That is not to suggest that schools alone can solve the problem of underachievement among Canadian youth.

David Ross et al⁵ state that, “The life chances of children are increasingly compromised by, for example, growing up in ever-changing family structures and by their families being exposed to greater levels of economic insecurity. As a result, a better understanding of child development is critical to devising strategies that target children and families in need and will help create a healthier environment for all children.”

The *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth* launched by the federal government in 1994, provides for the first time, the opportunity to track the development of children and youth in response to their total environments, to assess overall benefits resulting from changes in education and related social and economic policies, and check our progress in meeting the challenges of raising a healthy generation. Perhaps it is time for the education sector as a whole to shift its commitment from the principle of equal educational opportunity to the practice of success for all. ■

1 Keating, D.P., and J.F. Mustard. *Growing Up in Canada: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*. (Ottawa, ON: Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada, 1996).

2 Willms, J. Douglas. *International Adult Literacy Survey: Literacy Skills of Canadian Youth*. Monograph Series. (Ottawa, ON: Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada, 1997).

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 Ross, David P., K. Scott, M. A. Kelly. 1996. “Overview: Children in Canada in the 1990s” in *Growing Up in Canada: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*. (Ottawa, ON: Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada, 1996)

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