

By Penny Milton

SHAPE THE FUTURE

Imagine high schools in Canada as they could be. What should tomorrow's high schools look like? What should they try to achieve? If we define success in high schools for the new millennium, what would it take to realize our dreams? *Shape the Future* is a nation-wide effort to encourage and support the creation of successful secondary schools.

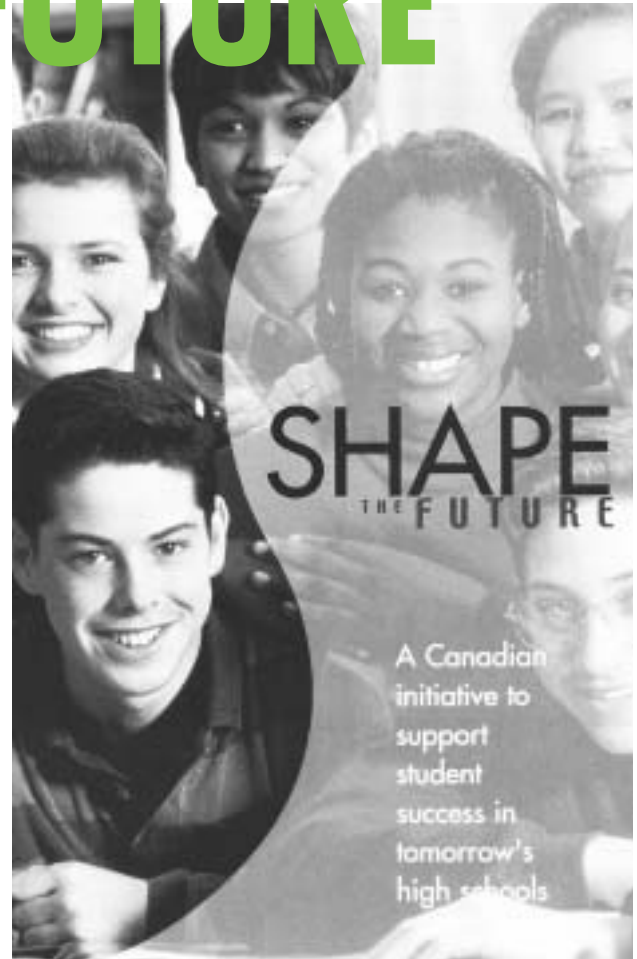
High schools across the country face many challenges — new policy frameworks, new curricular and assessment programs, and heightened expectations of student success. As important and useful as provincial reforms may be, they will not alone create the schools that our young people deserve and society requires. We need schools that take responsibility for the success of all students, regardless of their post-secondary destinations; schools that are able to engage the hearts and minds of all students in their own learning. Great progress has been made in increasing participation and graduation rates in secondary schools. Data from the *International Adult Literacy Survey*¹ shows that the latest group of graduates is generally much better educated and more literate than older age groups. Even so, 37% of 16- to 24-year-olds have literacy skills at the two lowest levels,² insufficient to enable them to participate fully in society, the labour market, post-secondary education or training.

The Canadian Council on Social Development reports a growing polarization in the quality of jobs. Full-time jobs have been disappearing and low-paying non-standard jobs increasing.³ The emergence of the knowledge economy may exacerbate the polarization between “good” and “bad” jobs, leaving even more young people with limited prospects of supporting themselves or families. Youth unemployment and underemployment

remain very high. Real earnings for young people have declined in the 1990s and we can expect even fewer opportunities for those unable to complete post-secondary education.

Shape the Future is a Canadian initiative to support student success in tomorrow's high schools. The project is co-ordinated by the Canadian Education Association and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, and funded by the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. This initiative starts with a belief in Canada's schools and in the tremendous potential of students. The goal is to work with partners across the country to find out what is successful and share the results — to learn from each other collaboratively and positively.

The initiative will establish shared principles reflecting a common purpose and build on the experience of those engaged in creating schools that nurture success and create opportunities for all students. It will require the involvement of virtually everyone in schools and in communities. This initiative will encourage a nation-wide network of those dedicated to helping students achieve for the future. By January 2000, building from grassroots participation across the country, we will define the initiative in detail and provide ideas for how it will support student success. A national strategy document will be made public to encourage discussion and dialogue. Once there is a strategy, everyone who shares a belief in the principles will be invited to put the strategy into action by working on change at the local level.



The project team under the leadership of Pauline Laing, former Director of Education of the Durham School Board and Director of Curriculum for the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, invites you to join the initiative now. Visit the web site at <http://improveschools.web.net>. Register your interest, tell us of work that you are already engaged in and provide your input to the development of the underlying principles. ■

1 “Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy — Highlights,” *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) — Canada Report <http://www.nald.ca/nls/ials/introduc/htm>.

2 *Ibid.*

3 G. Shellenberg et al. *Temporary Work in Canada*. (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development, 1998).

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Shape the Future will be a new column that will report on project activities and feature work on school change. We invite submissions.