



Canadian Centre for
Policy Alternatives
Manitoba Office

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A Roadmap for Adult Education in Manitoba



Manitoba is awash with problems. Many have been allowed to grow for decades. There is no quick fix. However, one part of a longer-term solution—and governments really must begin to think longer term—is an enhanced adult basic education system.

Luckily, adult educators in Manitoba have contributed to a detailed “roadmap,” or action plan, for building here in Manitoba the best adult basic education system in the country.

This would produce multiple benefits.

Consider poverty. Manitoba has Canada’s highest rate of children growing up in poverty. The terrible consequences are increasingly visible to everyone. Adult education is part of the solution. The many adult learners who do well in Adult Learning Centres that offer the mature high school diploma and Adult Literacy Programs that prepare adults for high school courses have a much-improved chance of finding a job that will pull them and their families out of poverty. Also, the evidence shows that children of parents in adult education are themselves more likely to do well in school, and thus more likely to avoid a life lived in poverty. Everyone benefits.

Reconciliation would be advanced by enhancing adult basic education. Almost one in five

Manitobans is Indigenous. Winnipeg has Canada’s largest urban Indigenous population. Indigenous youth are graduating high school at a lower rate than the population at large, but Indigenous adults are particularly eager participants in adult education, enrolling at a rate two and a half times their share of the population. Justice Murray Sinclair has frequently said that “education got us into this mess, and education will get us out of it.” This must, of necessity, include adult education.

Like much of the industrialized Western world, Manitoba is facing a shortage of workers. Moving more Manitobans into the paid labour force—in 2013/14 there were 192,600 adults in Manitoba with literacy levels so low they could not fully function in society—is increasingly important from an economic perspective. Enhancing adult education will produce more skilled workers.

Given its many benefits—these are benefits to all Manitobans—we should work to build the best adult basic education system in Canada. Here are some steps that need to be taken.

First, double the now relatively small annual budget. The budget has been flat for years and is miniscule—less than one percent of what we spend on K-12 education, and less on a per capita basis than what we spend on prisons and prisoners. To double the annual budget would cost an additional \$20 million. That would be about two-thirds of one percent of Manitoba’s total education budget.

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Second, shift Manitoba’s Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) program from its “work first” orientation to “adult education wherever possible.” Those on EIA are now discouraged from enrolling in adult education, even when they want to improve their education. Instead, they are pushed into the paid labour force as quickly as possible, despite limited skills and lack of self-confidence. Few find jobs that can lift them out of poverty. The purpose appears to be just to get them off the EIA rolls. This is short-term thinking. It just makes no sense at all in today’s complex world to deny education to those who want and need it. We should be investing in people on EIA by supporting them to improve their education, thus enabling them to build better lives for themselves and their families. This benefits everyone.

Third, move rapidly toward the creation of “adult learning hubs,” which would combine Adult Learning Centres, Adult Literacy Programs, and a childcare centre. Many in need of adult basic education have young children. The availability of childcare would make it possible for them to improve their education. Manitoba is rolling out the universal, affordable childcare program, and so should locate childcare centres to meet this need.

Other recommendations are contained in the report, a link to which is below. Each arises directly from multiple interactions with 36 Directors—78 percent of all Directors—of Manitoba’s Adult Learning Centres and Adult Literacy Programs. These recommendations can be acted upon immediately by the provincial government. They are perfectly

achievable. The benefits to all Manitobans would flow for decades. What is needed is the political will to act. The road map, the action plan, is there to be acted upon.

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Jim Silver is Professor Emeritus at the University of Winnipeg and a Research Associate with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba. Building the Best Adult Education System in Canada: *A Roadmap and Action Plan for Manitoba* can be found at www.policyalternatives.ca/manitoba

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