



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Adult Education Creates Lasting Solutions

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are kept far too low. They are lower than the poverty line—much lower. Organizations call repeatedly for an increase in EIA rates. But the emphasis remains on cutting costs.

Second, governments push people off the EIA rolls and into the labour market as quickly as possible, even when those people have limited formal education and few work-related skills.

The number of Manitobans on Employment and Income Assistance (EIA), or social assistance, has remained high for the past quarter century. In 1996/97, there were 39,200 cases affecting a total of 74,400 beneficiaries—i.e., EIA claimants and their dependents. In 2019/20 there were 43,200 cases and 73,400 beneficiaries. The cost that year was \$659 million.

In response, governments have sought to cut EIA costs, in two ways. First, benefits

This is a mistake. It is a missed opportunity to invest in long-term change.

The *EIA Administrative Manual*, EIA's detailed policy manual, says that "EIA's primary focus is employment," EIA recipients "are expected to find employment as soon as possible," and they can pursue education "in exceptional circumstances only." Work first; no education.

there is an alternative.

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This is short-term thinking. When EIA recipients with little education, few skills and no self-confidence are pushed into the labour market, the result is low-paid jobs with no benefits and no career prospects. This does nothing to solve poverty, which is the root cause of the large numbers on the EIA rolls.

The better alternative is to think longer term, by taking the time to build the capacities and capabilities of EIA recipients, so that they can fashion a better future for themselves and their families.

Adult education does this. By adult education I mean the mature high school program offered by Adult Learning Centres, and the Adult Literacy Programs that move adults' literacy and numeracy up to the level needed to begin the mature high school program. EIA recipients with low levels of formal education should be encouraged to pursue this kind of adult education, and supported—financially and otherwise—in doing so. Investing in EIA recipients' education—i.e., letting them keep their EIA benefits while they attend adult education programs—increases the likelihood that they will gain the kind of employment that will enable them to pull themselves and their families permanently out of poverty.

This is not what has been happening. On the contrary, and consistent with current EIA policy, most EIA recipients are being actively turned away from adult education. Adult education Directors that I have spoken with describe what is happening. One wrote, "I have spoken to a number of our current students who say they have friends and family who want to have the opportunity to return to adult education but who have been told they will lose their funding if they return to school." Another wrote, "We do get referrals from EIA but we have noticed a huge decline in the referrals recently... They seem bent on removing students." Another Director told me of a student who was denied benefits when she was one course short of completing her high school diploma. I heard many such comments. The system is actively discouraging people from getting an education.

Some EIA workers, it is important to note, support people in pursuit of adult education. Most, however, do not. Most follow the policy and push people who are not ready into the labour market.

Enormous benefits could be achieved by shifting the provincial EIA program away from work first, to adult education first. We should be using EIA funds to support recipients in improving their education, so that they can develop the skills and self-confidence needed to find the kinds of jobs that will lift them and their families out of poverty.

This is especially so when there is such a shortage of skilled workers in Manitoba.

With respect to many issues today—climate change is an example—governments suffer from short-term thinking when long-term thinking is needed. Denying access to education and forcing people into the labour market when they are thoroughly unprepared is not a lasting solution. It's treating people who are poor as if they are dispensable and of no worth, instead of unlocking their potential. It perpetuates the poverty that is the source of the problem.

We invest in the education of children and youth in the knowledge that doing so makes good economic sense. The same should be the case for adults on EIA. Using adult education to lift EIA recipients out of poverty benefits them, their families, and all of us.

To produce lasting solutions, Manitoba's EIA program should abandon its short-term, work-first thinking and replace it with a commitment to adult education. As the pandemic has made especially clear, Manitoba needs more people with skills, and fewer people trapped in perpetual poverty.

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