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The Repeal of the Adult Literacy Act

CCPA MB Submission on Bill 55

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BILL 55, *The Reducing Red Tape and Improving Services Act*, includes a commitment to eliminating the *Adult Literacy Act*. I am speaking against the elimination of the *Adult Literacy Act*. I believe that the government ought to be increasing its commitment to adult literacy, not eliminating the Act.

Very large numbers of Manitobans are functionally illiterate – they are functioning at literacy stages 1 or 2, when stage 3 is necessary to be able to participate fully in society. Those who are functionally illiterate are at much higher than average risk of living in poverty. High levels of poverty are a key contributor – perhaps *the* key contributor – to relatively poor educational outcomes.

The educational re-organization being contemplated by the government does not address poverty and literacy. It reorganizes educational administration by eliminating elected school trustees and creating a single appointed body to oversee education in Manitoba. These changes will have no impact on children’s and young people’s experience in the classroom. By contrast, taking the steps needed to reduce poverty, and to reduce it significantly, would have a positive effect on children’s and young people’s success in the classroom.

Evidence abounds to support this argument.

The Evidence on Poverty and Educational Outcomes.

Educational outcomes correlate especially closely with socioeconomic status. As Brownell and her colleagues (2006: 4) put it: “socioeconomic status is the single most powerful predictor of educational outcomes.” Education researchers Gaskell and Levin (2012: 12) add that this “has been found in virtually every important study of these issues, over time, in every country where such studies have been conducted.” Children living in families of high socioeconomic status (SES) or in areas of high SES do better in school, on average, than children living in families or in areas of low SES. Conversely, children growing up in poverty are much less likely to do well in school.

Consider children’s readiness for school at age five, as measured by the Early Development Instrument (EDI). In the highest income quintile in Winnipeg, 23 percent of children are not ready for school at age five; in the lowest income quintile it is 38 percent; in Point Douglas in Winnipeg’s low-income North End, 42 percent of children — more than four in every ten — are not ready for school at age five (Santos et al. 2012: 10–13). The more poverty there is, the less prepared children are for school at age five, and thus the less likely they are to succeed at school.

The same pattern holds in high school graduation data, as analyzed by the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP). In 2012, 55.4 percent of high school students in Winnipeg’s lowest income quintile graduated Grade 12 on time; in Winnipeg’s highest income quintile 98.5 percent — almost twice the rate — graduated high school on time. The same is the case in rural Manitoba, where 68.4 percent of students in the lowest income quintile and 85.8 percent in the highest income quintile graduated high school on time (Brownell et al. 2012a: 207). In areas where poverty levels are high, high school graduation rates are low.

Consider further a variety of other risk factors related to poverty, all of which worsen high school graduation rates. Brownell and her colleagues (2010) examined three poverty-related risk factors: having a teen mother; being in a family that received income assistance for at least two months from ages 10 to 17; and being in the care of Child and Family Services (CFS) at any time in that age range. Among those youth who experienced all three of these risk factors, 16 percent graduated from high school; among those who experienced none of these risk factors, 82 percent graduated from high school.

The Incidence and Costs of Low Levels of Literacy

Functional illiteracy is shockingly common in Manitoba, and far too little is being done about it. In 2010–2011, the Manitoba Adult Literacy Program provided funding to support literacy programming for 2773 adults in Manitoba. Yet, approximately 285,000 adults in Manitoba between the ages of 16 and 65 years had literacy levels at stages 1 or 2, when a stage 3 level of literacy is what is deemed necessary for full participation in Canadian so-

ciety (Manitoba 2010–2011). This means that less than 1 percent of those adults in Manitoba who were in need of literacy training were enrolled in programs supported by the Manitoba Adult Literacy Program.

Those who are functionally illiterate have a high likelihood of living in poverty and suffering poverty-related consequences. Craig Alexander (2012: 12), then a TD Bank Vice-President and now Chief Economist and Executive Advisor at Deloitte Canada, cited evidence that in 2003 the average income of Canadians with strong literacy skills was \$42,239, while the average income of those with poor literacy skills was \$20,692 – less than one-half. It has been estimated that 65 percent of social assistance recipients in Canada have low literacy skills (Maxwell and Teplova 2007: 37). Seventy percent of inmates entering federal custody have less than Grade 8 literacy levels (Office of the Correctional Investigator 2012). A senior economist with the Toronto-Dominion Bank (Gulati 2013: 4) found that these low levels of education were costing Canada “hundreds of billions of dollars in lost opportunity.” In addition, low literacy levels correlate with low levels of participation in voluntary community activities, and reduced participation in the political process, including voting (Maxwell & Teplova 2007: 20–21).

Low levels of literacy adversely affect health, and drive up health costs. This has been shown by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Manitoba 2008: 4). Rootman and Ronson (2005: 567) found that “people with lower literacy levels make less use of preventive health services, are less likely to seek care, have higher rates of hospitalization and experience more difficulties using the health care system.”

By contrast, evidence from a study of a community literacy program in west Winnipeg found that parents were able to read the notes coming home from their children’s school, and were for the first time able to read bedtime stories to their children. The evidence is that when a parent is in school, her/his children do better in school. “Adult literacy is family literacy: when parents are engaged in improving their education, including literacy, their children benefit, educationally and otherwise” (Silver 2014: 1).

In all of these ways, low levels of literacy impose significant costs upon all of us, and severely circumscribe and diminish the lives of those who are functionally illiterate, while literacy programming produces positive educational outcomes, for adults and their children.

Further, there is strong evidence that public investments in adult literacy programming produce such large economic benefits that the payback period would be shorter than one year (McCracken & Murray: 2010: 4-5).

Children, Poverty and Educational Outcomes

Children in families struggling with literacy are at risk of growing up in poverty; the evidence is exceptionally clear that poverty produces poor educational outcomes; and poverty, especially child poverty, is a major problem in Manitoba. A recent report prepared by the

Social Planning Council of Winnipeg (SPCW 2020) and based on 2018 data found that 87,730 children in Manitoba were living in poor families. This is 28.3 percent—more than one in every four—of all children in the province. This is the highest rate of child poverty of all the provinces in Canada. Manitoba’s child poverty rate is 10 percentage points worse than the national average. Approximately one-third of pre-school children in the province are growing up in poverty; almost two-thirds of children in lone-parent families are poor.

These appalling rates are even worse for First Nations children. Of those living off reserve, 53 percent are growing up in poverty. Consistent with all the evidence about the correlation between high levels of poverty and low levels of educational attainment, Indigenous people have, on average, lower levels of education than the overall Manitoba population. In Winnipeg in 2011, 26.2 percent of Indigenous adults had not completed high school, compared to 11.1 percent of non-Indigenous adults. Indigenous adults in Winnipeg are just over half as likely as non-Indigenous adults to hold a university degree.

These educational outcomes are directly related to poverty. In a major study Lezubski (2014: 120) found that the incidence of poverty amongst Indigenous people in Winnipeg was almost 2.5 times that of the non-Indigenous population. In Brandon, the incidence of poverty among Indigenous people was three times, and in Thompson four times that of the non-Indigenous population. Lezubski, consistent with the 2020 Social Planning Council of Winnipeg study, found very high levels of poverty among Indigenous children under the age of six years.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Indigenous children experience EDI scores—measuring readiness for school at age five years—that are, on average, lower than those for non-Indigenous children. What is especially revealing and important, however, is that when Healthy Child Manitoba analyzed 2005–2006 EDI data and controlled for parental income and education, they “found that most of the differences between non-Aboriginal children and Aboriginal children were no longer statistically significant. That is to say, socio-economic status, and not Aboriginal identity, determined the lower EDI scores” (Brownell et al. 2012b: 14). Children are not ready for school because of their poverty, not because of their Indigenous identity.

Conclusions

Because of the close causal connection between literacy levels and poverty, and between poverty and poor educational outcomes, the provincial government should not eliminate the Adult Literacy Act. Expenditures on adult literacy are already far too low. We should be investing in adult literacy programming, and investing in proven solutions to poverty. Doing so would improve educational outcomes, and that ought to be the goal of any changes made to our educational system.

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