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Submission to Manitoba's Poverty Reduction Strategy

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Adult basic education can be a particularly important part of an effective poverty reduction strategy in a province that is besieged by poverty and its many ill effects.

In Manitoba adult basic education includes Adult Learning Centres that offer the mature high school diploma—eight high school credits including grade 12 Math and English—and Adult Literacy Programs that bring adults' literacy and numeracy skills up to high school entry level.

Manitoba's adult basic education system has been in place for the past quarter century and is highly effective. Since 2003/04 over 24,000 adults have graduated with their mature high school diploma. If even one in ten of these graduates moved each year from social assistance to a job with a living wage and stayed employed since graduation, the combination of social assistance savings and increased tax revenue would more than pay for the approximately \$20 million annual cost of Manitoba's adult basic education program. If access to adult basic education diverted even one person per year from prison—a reasonable expectation—and each stayed out of prison until today, the accumulated savings would be far beyond the annual cost of adult basic education.

In the long run, adult basic education pays for itself.

Adult basic education is transformative. It transforms the lives of individual adults, and their families. We know, for example, that when Mom and/or Dad are in an adult basic education program, their children do better in school, breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. We know that large numbers of adults who had previously been on some form of social assistance move into the paid labour force, or into a post-secondary education program that is likely to lead to paid employment. The fiscal benefit to the province is substantial.

Living and Learning (<https://vimeo.com/1022912961>), the 2024, 4-minute documentary by filmmaker Kevin Nikkel, which features the voices of 13 adult learners and 3 teachers in all regions of Manitoba, makes abundantly clear the transformative character of adult basic education. Please use the link to view this important short video.

Yet over the past two decades funding for adult basic education has been flatlined, even while costs have risen. An earlier study found that over the most recent decade for which information was then available, adult education had been “abysmally funded,” growing in nominal terms by less than half of one percent over ten years, a decline in real terms (Silver 2022a: 7-8).

When adjusted for inflation, total actual expenditures for adult basic education in Manitoba dropped from \$26,154,373 in 2015/16 to \$20,300,000 in 2021/22, a decline in real terms of 23 percent. Total actual expenditures per Manitoban over the age of 17 years declined from \$26 in 2015/16 to \$19 in 2021/22, a reduction of 27 percent (Silver f/c 2025).

In 2003/04 there were 9715 adults enrolled in ALCs in Manitoba; in 2022/23 there were 6267—a decline of 35 percent. In 2003/04 there were 1254 graduates from ALCs; in 2022/23 there were 962, a decline of 23 percent (Manitoba 2003/04 to 2019/20).

In 2009/10 there were 42 ALPs in Manitoba; in 2019/20 there were 30 ALPs—a decline of 28.6 percent—even though a 2013/14 report found that there were approximately 192,600 adults in Manitoba with literacy levels so low they could not fully participate in society (Silver 2022b: 5).

These data make clear why an adult educator described the overall level of funding as “really, really pathetic” (Silver 2022a: 8). Two later respondents said, “our funding is barebones” and the system has been “stripped to the bone in terms of funding” (Silver f/c 2025).

Adult basic education is simply not taken seriously in Manitoba. It “is treated as an afterthought, as the ‘poor cousin’ of education. The total budget of adult basic education is two-thirds of one percent of the provincial Education budget. The amount allocated per learner is less than the amount spent per inmate in provincial and federal penal institutions” (Silver 2022b: 5).

When we think of “education,” we think of K-12 and post-secondary education. This is an outmoded form of thinking, given that 25-30 percent of young people in Manitoba do not graduate from high school, and as a result do not move onto postsecondary education. The 25-30 percent of young people are disproportionately among the poor, and without a reasonable level of formal educational attainment they are likely to end up in poverty. Adult basic education can break this cycle.

Recent legislative changes have been beneficial. The *Manitoba Social Assistance Amendment Act* enables those on Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) to continue to qualify for benefits while undertaking adult basic education programming. The *Adult Literacy Act* has been reinstated and an adult literacy strategy is unfolding now. These are important gains.

But more funding is needed to expand the numbers of Manitobans who can have the opportunity to transform their lives and their families’ lives by taking advantage of adult basic education. Doubling the rather small budget for adult basic education would produce benefits that would cumulate over many years into the future. This would have a significant impact on poverty reduction in Manitoba.

Adult basic education is a low-cost, highly effective part of a poverty reduction strategy that Manitoba desperately needs. Given its proven benefits and relatively low cost, it is difficult to see any good reasons for not substantially increasing our annual investment in adult basic education.

References.

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