



Federation of
Post-Secondary Educators
of BC

Presentation to the Select Standing Committee on Education

**Sheraton Guildford Hotel, Surrey, BC
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GOOD AFTERNOON AND THANK YOU for the invitation to speak to your Committee. My name is Dileep Athaide and I am the Secretary Treasurer of the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC. I'm here with Phillip Legg our Policy and Research Representative. Our Federation represents over 10,000 faculty and staff that work in BC's colleges, university colleges, institutes and universities.

We will leave two documents with the Committee that I will briefly refer to in my remarks. The first is a research paper that we co-sponsored, along with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, that was written by Shauna Butterwick, an education faculty member and researcher at UBC's Faculty of Education. It's called *The Path out of Poverty* and it summarizes some of the impacts that provincial policy changes have had on students in developmental education. The second document is a proposal that we, FPSE, have put forward to the Ministers of Advanced Education, Employment and Income Assistance and Education recommending a series of changes to improve education outcomes for students in developmental education programs.

My own professional experience spans two disciplines; geology and developmental education. For 31 years, I have taught in both areas at Capilano College in North Vancouver. As a public post-secondary institution, my college prides itself on some of the leading edge work that we did around adult literacy, developmental education and community outreach.

You had an opportunity to hear about some of that work when Dr. Greg Lee appeared before your Committee on April 11, 2006.

The interest that our Federation has in the area of developmental education, including programs in areas like Adult Basic Education and Adult Literacy, is rooted in the mandate that we believe our colleges and institutes have. That mandate is to serve our communities and ensure that there is full access to opportunities in post-secondary education. That mandate means that we open our doors to all adult

learners and where there are gaps in their skills, confidence or ability, we design programs and courses that encourage success.

We are glad to see this Committee undertake important work to understand how provincial policy and funding must change to meet at least one of the great goals that the premier has identified as critical: i.e. to have BC become the most literate and best educated jurisdiction in Canada.

However, we were discouraged to learn that part of your public consultation process has been cut short. The public hearings that were scheduled for Castlegar, Prince Rupert and Prince George have been cancelled. That's bad news, not just for those regions, but also for the important input that this Committee needs to gather from the non-metropolitan areas of our province.

In one of your first hearings, you heard from Dr. Ron Faris who described some of the geographical profile of adult literacy. As his maps showed, rates are much higher outside metropolitan areas. It seems clear to many that if you want to really understand the problem, you need to make a very concerted effort to ensure that citizens and stakeholders in those regions can fully participate in this process. The notice time was relatively short for those hearing dates and you should re-consider your decision. Even if it means re-scheduling to dates that work better for those communities, you should make every effort to gather input from the non-metropolitan areas of our province.

In our brief to the three Ministers, we noted that there is considerable urgency to finding ways to increase opportunities for adult learners to pursue post-secondary education and training. Let me just summarize some of the key points that we mentioned in that brief.

First, we agree completely with the economic benefit that comes from improving skills, education and training levels. The C.D. Howe study, for example, shows the strong correlation between better literacy levels and stronger economic growth. We concur. Similar research by the CCPA shows that the public investments in public post-secondary education in general have significant and positive rates of return. Why? Because better skills support higher incomes which, in turn, support higher revenues to government. It's often referred to as the "*education dividend*" and we recommend that committee members and staff review that work done by UBC economist Bob Allen for the CCPA on this issue.

Second, British Columbia has a gap that it needs to close when it comes to post-secondary education and skills training. Currently about 59% of BC's workforce have some form of post-secondary education or training. They have a degree, certificate, diploma or completed apprenticeship certificate. However, we are told that 73% of all new jobs require some form of post-secondary education or training.

Third, BC is facing a serious skills shortage. The combination of demographics and the changing skill demands of our economy are making it difficult for many

employers to fill existing vacancies. According to the Forecast Council, the skills shortage has the potential of substantially undermining economic growth prospects in our province.

Fourth, increasing opportunities for post-secondary education and training is also about citizenship. We need to ensure that every citizen has the skills and confidence to participate fully in their economy and their community. Sustainable democracies don't work if more and more citizens are marginalized. Lacking basic literacy skills is one way in which those citizens are marginalized and we can do much better to ensure that doesn't happen.

It's an unfortunate fact, but none of those points is particularly new information. We've known for some time that demographic pressures will exacerbate a skills shortage and that we need to increase post-secondary education and training to head-off that outcome and close the gap in our existing skills profile. We have also known about the education dividend and the positive returns that come from public investments in post-secondary education and training.

However, if you look at the policy changes made over the last five years, none of them has helped address these problems. The de-regulation of tuition fees, the move to block-funding for our post-secondary institutions and the chronic under-funding of per-student funding needs in our post-secondary institutions have made difficult problems worse in our view.

I mention all of these system-wide problems because we don't think that you can properly address an issue like adult literacy in isolation. Adult literacy is part of a broad continuum of challenges that our post-secondary system takes on every day. And when we are able to provide those courses and programs, we are also able to ensure that those programs are ladderred and articulated into the entire post-secondary system. We think the greatest benefit that we can provide an adult learner is more than the confidence and skill to do more; it is bridging that learner into training and skills that are recognized across our province and across our country.

What kinds of solutions should your committee be considering as part of its recommendations to government? There are several important areas to address. Both of the documents that we are tabling with you today discuss those solutions in more detail but let me highlight a few of the more critical ones.

- 1. Make Adult Basic Education tuition free in all our public post-secondary institutions.** Fees are a barrier to access and ABE fees are a barrier that hurt the most vulnerable students in our system.
- 2. Provide funding to ensure that there are sufficient support mechanisms for adult learners in our institutions.** The move to block funding all but eliminated counselling services to students, a move that really hurt lower-income students and many adult learners who were returning to upgrade their education.

- 3. Recommend that per student funding for our public post-secondary system return to at least the level that existed prior to 2001.** The chronic under-funding of the entire system has discouraged many adult learners from returning to upgrade their skills.
- 4. Encourage public post-secondary institutions to re-establish the outreach programs that they had developed in the 1990's, but abandoned because of budget cutting pressures over the last five years.** Many of our institutions set up very effective community outreach programs that delivered a range of developmental education programs. We need to encourage that innovation again.
- 5. Recognize that delivering developmental education programs successfully requires a high level of skill and that our public post-secondary system has the expertise and infrastructure to deliver those programs in every community throughout the province.**
- 6. Recognize the link between poverty and low levels of literacy and recognize that you can't address one without addressing the other.** I appeal you once more to examine our brief to the three Ministers in which we describe the policy changes needed to help low-income adult learners re-engage with the post-secondary system.
- 7. Ensure that adult literacy programs are the responsibility of one ministry.** We believe strongly in the principle that adult learners need to learn in an adult environment. That environment is one that our public post-secondary institutions have worked hard to create. For that reason, we recommend that the Ministry of Advanced Education take responsibility for those programs.
- 8.** One last point in conclusion, at previous hearings there has been some suggestion that a Literacy Secretariat be created to oversee literacy programs. We see this creating unnecessary administrative oversight. The real demands are for program support in the public institutions. That's where the funds should be directed and that's where limited resources will have the greatest impact.

Thank you.