

In November of 2010, the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills, and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities released a report to the Federal Government entitled “Federal Poverty Reduction Plan: Working in Partnership Towards Reducing Poverty in Canada.” This report clearly documented the link between education and employment. It noted that during the recession in 2008, those with less than a high school diploma were almost twice as likely to be out of work compared to those who had completed their Grade 12 or equivalent. The report also directly linked educational attainment to retirement income, showing that the payback from education continues throughout life and has an impact not only on the individual but on the economic health of our society as a whole. In fact, it quoted studies that showed “that, on the whole, a one-year increase in the average education level increases GDP in the long term by 4% to 7%.” Clearly, improving access to education for adults will benefit not only the students themselves, but their families and communities as well.

The case has well been made elsewhere of the importance of obtaining a post secondary education; where the focus in now needed is on improving the literacy levels of those adults most at risk – those without their high school completion needing to get to that first step.

The track record of the various levels of government in supporting adult literacy training is erratic. Although the provincial government recently increased funding to the literacy programs it supports, levels may soon revert back to where they’ve languished for more than a decade. With the stimulus funding from the federal government drying up, the continuation of expanded funding to local literacy programs is uncertain. And while it may be true that the recession is technically over, it is not over for so many of the factory workers in our community who lost their livelihood and now find that they don’t have the necessary credentials for today’s job market.

In Northumberland County, the READ Centre, the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, and Fleming College work together to provide educational pathways for these adults to find their way through upgrading to post secondary training. This literacy training is free to the learner, and it comes with subsidies for child care and transportation, but the learner still needs to be able to find reliable child care and workable transportation, and we know this can be problematic in our rural setting. There has been some positive movement in improving access: the Northumberland Transportation Initiative helps get people to the training opportunities and Northumberland Social Services’ network of community hubs help get the services to the people. Locally, the provincial initiative, Second Career, has helped some individuals return to school and then embark in new directions. But there is much more to be done.

If we are truly committed to improving our workforce, we need to focus as much if not more attention and resources on the beginning rungs of the education ladder to prosperity.