



national
union

research

In Defense
of Public
Basic Skills

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Public basic skills programs are in jeopardy

Literacy and second language programs in the public education system are in crisis

In most regions of Canada funding for Basic Skills (Literacy and Second Language) programs in our colleges and school boards has been drastically cut. Programs have been seriously reduced in many provinces and, in some places, public programs in Literacy and English as a Second Language have been completely eliminated. At least 20 percent of adults in Canada are potentially in need of these services; the majority now have absolutely no hope of finding programs to meet their needs.

Teachers are facing reduced working benefits and permanent job loss

Well qualified teachers who have spent their entire working lives in the field of adult literacy and language training have seen their jobs reduced to part-time and contractual positions. Many others have lost their jobs completely and are finding themselves on the unemployment lines with little hope of ever finding work in their field again.

Funds shifted from public system to community groups, labour organizations and for-profit trainers

Literacy and language programs are being privatized

Until the early 1980s, adult upgrading and English/French as a Second Language programs—like all other fundamental education programs—were delivered almost entirely by public educational institutions. These programs were rightfully seen to be part and parcel of the education services generally available to Canadian residents in need. But this began to change in the mid-1980s when both the federal and provincial governments started the process of privatizing Adult Basic Education and Second Language services.

Community groups and labour organizations are beneficiaries of privatization: Some lobby for continued privatization

In the first phase of privatization, small amounts of funding were made available to community groups, volunteer literacy organizations and labour organizations for the delivery of literacy and language programs. As these organizations became involved in the delivery of educational services, they began to form a political lobby in favour of an increased role

for themselves in the delivery of these services. Governments intent on reducing the public sector—and reducing the amounts spent on services like adult education and training—have been quite responsive to this lobby. Over the last decade, they have shifted a substantial portion of funds from colleges and school boards to private sector groups and organizations for the delivery of basic educational services.

Privatization of basic skills also includes private colleges, but they are not yet the problem in many provinces

In most regions of the country, privatization of so-called Basic Skills programs has taken place through community groups—and, to a lesser extent, labour organizations and trade unions.

In some regions, the privatization process has also involved the public funding of private colleges, although for-profit training agencies are not yet a significant part of the problem in many provinces.

Impact of privatization on public system is the same regardless of whether private sector deliverer is for-profit or not-for-profit: role of public educational institutions is undermined

Whether the private sector deliverers of literacy and language services are community groups, unions or for-profit colleges, the effect on our public systems is the same. Funding to private sector deliverers is not new money; it comes directly from public sector funding. It is now clear that **government's intention** in funding private organizations—including community groups and unions—has been **to set up a basic education service parallel to the public system in preparation for withdrawing funding from the public system**. In at least one province, that process is all but complete; Adult Literacy and Second Language services have been almost entirely privatized. In several other provinces, the public system has become a minority player in the delivery of adult basic educational services, as a greater and greater share of public funding goes to private sector deliverers. **In virtually every province, the long-term intention is the same—to minimize the role of public institutions, and public educators, in the delivery of adult literacy and language programs.**

No political repercussions for privatizing basic skills. Unions representing public educators fighting privatization alone

The capacity of our public systems to deliver literacy and language services has been drastically curtailed in most provinces. Unlike most other public service cuts, however, there have been almost no political repercussions for the governments responsible for doing this. Incredible as it may

seem, there has been virtually no protest against cuts to public Adult Basic Education and Second Language programs, except from within the public system itself. **Unions representing public educators have been left to fight the battle for public adult education alone.**

Privatization strategy has undermined political opposition

Community groups and unions concentrate on saving, and increasing, their own share of funding and ignore cuts to public system

We in the public education system have lost powerful allies in the struggle to stop cutbacks and maintain these vital public services. Community groups and labour unions—traditionally strong supporters of public education—have found themselves unable to oppose the cutting of adult basic educational services in our public systems as they have themselves come in for a share of the funding transferred from the public system. Even more seriously, both community groups and **unions have begun to fight for an increasing share of these funds for their own programs.**

Adults in need of literacy and language services are treated as second class citizens: The standards of public programs do not apply in privatized basic skills programs

Most private deliverers of basic skills provide lower standard of service at a fraction of the cost

We should make no mistake about our governments' motives for removing adult literacy and language programs substantially from public education and training institutions. It is to save money. When they provide funds to private sector agencies for the delivery of literacy and language programs, it is understood that these agencies and organizations will deliver the service at a fraction of the cost which education normally costs in Canada. What this means is that, in the vast majority of cases, a very inferior level of service is provided.

Teachers not qualified

Most teaching done by volunteers

Programs too short

Facilities frequently

- Teachers may not be required to possess appropriate qualifications.
- Teaching may be done entirely, or in part, by volunteer tutors.
- Students may be offered as little as two or four hours of

unsuitable for learning; do not have to meet safety standards of public institutions

instruction per week or as little as a total of 140 hours of instruction - far too little to make any significant progress in literacy or language.

No support services provided

- Facilities may be entirely unsuitable for learning - they may be noisy or inappropriately furnished; they may provide no privacy for the students; they may be uncomfortable.

Frequently no accreditation for students

- Facilities do not even have to meet the safety standards of public buildings, though they are funded by our governments to provide what should be public services.
- There are generally no provisions for the kinds of services which we usually associate with public educational services - access to learning specialists, libraries, day care facilities, and so on.
- Students may get no accreditation for the work they complete.

Conditions of much private sector basic skills delivery unacceptable

NATIONAL UNION POSITION ON BASIC SKILLS

PROVISION

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| Principles of quality programs: | The conditions which most private sector deliverers of Basic Skills operate under would not be acceptable if they were offered to any other section of the population. It is our position they should be equally unacceptable for adults who need literacy and language services. |
| Appropriately qualified teachers | We believe that programs for adults with literacy and language needs should be of a uniformly high quality, based on a recognition of the following: |
| Programs of sufficient duration for adults to achieve learning goals | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Teaching adults to read and write, or to speak a second language, requires teachers who are well qualified, experienced, and well supported.2. Learning to read and write or learning to speak a second language takes time. Those who assure adults that they can make significant progress in a very short time only set them up for failure. They also undermine the efforts of public sector ABE and Second Language teachers to have programs supported for longer so that adult students can actually make progress.3. If they are to succeed in their programs, adults in need of literacy and language services require appropriate facilities and resources, and increased learning support services—not less than the normal public educational service. The funding which governments are prepared to give to private sector deliverers is only enough to provide a very substandard service by any measure.4. Public funding for literacy and language programs should ensure that the programs provided with this funding are available to the whole population in need, not targeted at particular groups or individuals. The more public funding is siphoned off from public programs, the further we move from the goal of universal access. |
| Appropriate facilities, resources and supports for basic skills students | |
| Public funding should support publicly accessible programs | |

We, members of the National Union, call upon our Sister Unions and each of our Sisters and Brothers in the Canadian Labour Movement to:

1. Support our fight to stop all privatization of Adult Literacy and English/French as a Second Language (Basic Skills) programs—whether by unions, community groups or private colleges.
2. Speak out for the right of adults in need of Literacy and Second Language programs to educational services at least equal to all other public educational services.
3. Speak out against the use of volunteer labour to do the jobs of unionized, public sector workers. Refuse, as trade unionists, to take the work of public sector workers yourselves.
4. Refuse to accept public funding to deliver what should be public services.
5. Use training funds which you receive, through negotiations or governments, to broker needed basic skills programs through the public education and training system.
6. Join us in the public education and training system in our fight to make our institutions more accessible and more responsive to the needs of all Canadian residents and all workers—employed as well as unemployed. A public system should belong to all of us. If we work together, we can ensure that it does. If we don't, there will be no public training system to fight for.