CHAPTER 9:
Implications and possible directions for BCTF advocacy in support of Adult Education in public schools—A discussion paper

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This report is one of a series documenting the findings of the Worklife of Adult Educators survey.
For additional information, see http://www.bctf.ca/AdultEducationStudy

Adult Education in BC’s public schools: A BCTF study
Chapter 9

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This chapter considers the implications of what has been learned about Adult Education from those respondents to our survey\(^1\) who teach adult students. It also contextualizes the data and analysis from those teachers who responded to the survey by discussing the “bigger picture” of why Adult Education is important. We argue that while meeting these adult learners’ needs is crucial for them, it’s also important to maximize education access in order to create the best possible social and economic development of our province’s society and workforce.

We also consider, in Chapter 8\(^2\), the recent changes in provincial policies that are already impacting the provision of adult education programs in several BC school districts. Finally, we consider what might be alternative future directions, where both the needs of adult learners might be met, and greater understanding developed, in terms of why it benefits society to maximize the potential of all its citizens through ensuring access to education.

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**Why do we need Adult Education?—The big picture**

BC and Canada need to maximize the human potential of our populations. One fundamental economic and social “building block” is education, which provides a foundation for individual social development while also providing the skills and knowledge required to gain employment and contribute to economic development and participate in a democratic society. The majority of our population enters school at Kindergarten level and graduates from Grade 12. Yet a substantial number who live in Canada in time to start Kindergarten do not complete their education for a wide variety of reasons, some linked to poverty. Grade 12 graduation rates for Aboriginal students fall well below provincial averages. Others come to Canada as either immigrants or refugees. Their schooling may have been conducted in languages other than English. If they are refugees, it may have been interrupted by war or civil unrest, or education may simply not have been available. Some may have completed their education in their land of origin but their graduation certificate may not be recognized by Canadian post-secondary institutions, or their English language skills may not be sufficient for higher education or some work options for which they might otherwise be qualified.

Whether people are born in Canada or move here, and whatever the reason they have for not completing their education, they all deserve the chance to access and further their education, some by completing Grade 12, others to upgrade their education to access post-secondary institutions or to acquire sufficient English language skills for work or further education. Whatever the reason is for their need to access Adult Education, a society’s investment in Adult Education is important. It provides adults with the opportunity to complete a crucial phase of their education and provides them with an opportunity to become productive members of society. Thus, creating a thriving adult education system results in benefits not only to those enrolled, but also to the wider community.

And if this or any other jurisdiction fails to address the needs of those populations who need and are motivated to succeed in their education, what are the consequences? Many will be forced into low-paying work with little chance of progression. Others who are highly educated may not be able to enter universities or enter a profession. Some Aboriginal students may continue in marginalized lives, and refugees may become economically and socially isolated rather than

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\(^1\) [http://bctf.ca/AdultEducationStudy](http://bctf.ca/AdultEducationStudy)

\(^2\) [http://bctf.ca/uploadedfiles/Public/Issues/Worklife/AdultEd/chapter8.pdf](http://bctf.ca/uploadedfiles/Public/Issues/Worklife/AdultEd/chapter8.pdf)
assimilated. Social, economic, and legal costs associated with poverty are likely to increase and be much higher than the cost of supporting adult students to upgrade their education. The provision of Adult Education can also be seen as a key poverty reduction strategy, in that it provides some of those who live in poverty a route into higher education or employment, which in turn enables them to escape poverty, a gain not only to the individual but to society as a whole.

These are some of the reasons why the provision of Adult Education is important, and much more could be said on each of these areas. We think this, or a more comprehensive, “bigger picture” is important to consider so that this report fits within a wider frame than the current provision of services.

What does the report tell us about adult education services in BC? Who is accessing services? Who is teaching in them? Are facilities and funding meeting the needs of adult learners? And, once we know something of what is happening in terms of providing Adult Education in BC, what is the relevance of these findings in the context of the “bigger picture” stated above?

**What does the report tell us about Adult Education in BC that relates to the big picture?**

The data collected and analyzed in this report shows that the adult education system in BC appears to be in a sharp decline, a decline which many respondents consider to have been ongoing for some time. Indeed, some respondents have referred to the “sinking ship” of Adult Education, and many who teach in the system are unsettled by what they believe to be considerable and pervasive instability. This instability is linked to multiple factors, including reduced funding, poorly-resourced facilities, and uncertainty about enrolment and course provisions.

Those who teach in Adult Education are highly qualified (over 27% of respondents had Masters’ degrees) and very dedicated to meeting the needs of their students. Yet they are frustrated by a system that they believe treats Adult Education as the poor relation of K-12, and in some cases as the unwanted offspring, of a better-funded (though funding is still inadequate) K-12 system. They believe and provide good evidence that in terms of facilities, equipment/supplies, employment conditions, opportunities for professional learning, and many other areas, the adult education system comes out second-best in comparison to a K-12 system which itself struggles to meet students’ needs in an era of chronic and sustained underfunding of public education.

They work for the most part in low or mixed socio-economic neighbourhoods, and describe how poverty has impacted some students’ ability over time to attend and complete their adult education courses. In their view, cutbacks in recent years, like the elimination of childcare and access to health care services, have compounded deprivation. Adult education funding cutbacks have also made programs less accessible and less flexible. What is being described here are not poverty-reduction initiatives in recent years, but systemic actions that have exacerbated poverty by cutting funding and services that might reduce poverty and make chances of accessing adult education services more likely. In addition, government inertia in areas like low-cost housing and transport subsidization has done nothing to improve either access to Adult Education, or students’ chances of successful completion. Where some services such as those from multi-

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3 [http://bctf.ca/AdultEducationStudy](http://bctf.ca/AdultEducationStudy)
cultural agencies were available, they were not universally accessible, and internal adult education funding cuts removed whatever supports programs might previously have offered.

Adult educators believe that Adult Education is marginalized from the K-12 system and that both the conditions for students, and their own working conditions, are inferior to those in K-12, and deteriorating more rapidly. With almost half of respondents having more than 20 years’ teaching experience, those teaching in Adult Education appear older on average than those teaching in K-12. This may mean that late-career teachers were more likely to respond to the survey, but it may also mean that the steady erosion of adult education programs has resulted in fewer younger, early-career teachers in Adult Education compared to K to 12 schools. It may also mean that cash-strapped school districts will use attrition due to retirement to diminish the provision of adult education services.

While many new teachers in BC’s K-12 public school system face unstable employment conditions, many adult educators encounter situations different to comparably-experienced K-12 teachers. These include split shifts, reduced course assignments (for over one-quarter of respondents), no paid prep time (for over two-thirds of respondents), and the majority have minimal breaks, which are often used to assist students. Taken collectively, these conditions reflect a system starved of funding and trying to “make do” by imposing shifts and assignments that maximize course provision at the expense of reasonable working arrangements for adult educators.

One paradox we have found in surveys of both K-12 teachers and adult educators is how much many teachers in both systems love the act of teaching, and are highly committed to maximizing the learning of their students. Yet they repeatedly state that they work in systems that, from their perspectives, do not adequately support their work. While adult educators are critical of specific working conditions, they, like their K-12 peers, are much more critical of those learning conditions that negatively impact students and reduce their capacity to learn. Working and learning conditions are, of course, inextricably linked. Working in an under-resourced facility hampers both teachers and learners. Reductions in per-student funding reduces the capacity of teachers and districts to meet the needs of adult learners. Split-shifts hardly reflect what most professionals experience, and do nothing to enhance learning.

The multiple and combined sources of stress stated and described by adult educators (in Chapter 5⁴) reflect a system that essentially disrespects its teachers. Allowing the kind of system instability over time caused by reduced funding from the province has forced school districts to stitch together whatever they can manage to provide within the restricted and reduced budgets they can access. The patchwork quilt of adult education programs was already wearing thin, and arguably starting to fall apart, before the province’s alarming policy shift earlier in 2015. That policy shift and its implications for future provision of Adult Education is the focus of Chapter 8⁵.

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⁴ http://bctf.ca/uploadedfiles/Public/Issues/Worklife/AdultEd/chapter5.pdf
⁵ http://bctf.ca/uploadedfiles/Public/Issues/Worklife/AdultEd/chapter8.pdf
Where do we go from here? The need to renew the provision of Adult Education in BC

There are multiple reasons to renew Adult Education. The areas considered below should not be read as discrete and unconnected, but rather as interconnected elements of a renewal strategy which might better meet the needs of adult education students while also playing a part in addressing the economic and social needs of the province. While the recent adult education provincial policy change and subsequent cuts in district service are unfortunate, they are not irreversible. The case made in this research is that BC needs to maximize the potential of all its people, and cutting adult education services will prove detrimental to the economic and social fabric of our society.

We suggest the following as reasons to change direction and renew Adult Education in BC:

1. **There are multiple arguments which identify the imperative to support those adult students who are trying to complete their education in the K to 12 public school system and prepare for post-secondary studies or upgrading skills for employment purposes.**

   Some of these arguments will be addressed in more detail below, but essentially the case rests on building a socially-cohesive and prosperous society. Graduation rates are at current levels in part because of the “safety net” of Adult Education, which enables some students with interrupted schooling to complete K-12 education, or to take course in English or upgrade some subjects to make them eligible for employment or to access higher education. Recent cuts in adult education services after government policy changes may impact these graduation rates and reduce employment and post-secondary education opportunities for adult learners.

   Saving $9m and cutting adult education services runs counter to the government’s narrative of filling over 1 million new jobs in the coming years. If BC is facing a labour supply issue then it makes sense to enable all students to complete Grade 12, to access courses which build language competency, or to complete courses required for accessing post-secondary education. If these students do not access such courses, the costs to them and to society are substantial. For a minor investment now, the future “payoff” could be huge. Fewer will be unemployed. More will work in higher-paying jobs and pay more in taxes. Those completing Adult Education and accessing post-secondary will bring skills and talents to private- and public-sector employers. Welfare and crime-related costs will likely be reduced. Poverty will be reduced. More immigrants and refugees will be successfully assimilated into Canadian society and employment if they have opportunities to succeed.

   It’s simply not the case that BC cannot afford to fund Adult Education. Rather it cannot afford not to do so, unless it wants substantial costs and reduced economic benefits and less social cohesion in the future.

2. **BC’s Labour Market predictions and current government policies stress the need for education and argue for supporting those who are struggling to succeed.**

   The BC government’s *Skills for Jobs Blueprint* outlines the need to maximize educational opportunities and to support those with challenges:

   About 530,000 young people will enter the job market over the next ten years.
   Our goal is to make sure that British Columbians have a seamless plan that takes

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6 [https://www.workbc.ca/WorkBC/media/WorkBC/Documents/Docs/Booklet_BCsb.png](https://www.workbc.ca/WorkBC/media/WorkBC/Documents/Docs/Booklet_BCsb.png)
them from elementary to high school through post-secondary education and right into the workforce. We also need to provide more support to those who are struggling to gain a foothold in the job market or who face unique challenges – such as youth-at-risk, Aboriginal youth and persons with disabilities.

Through their survey input, adult educators have provided many examples of students with challenges. Students enrolled in adult education classes are taking responsibility to face challenges and extend their education. Yet the provincial policy changes, and cuts to Adult Education which are now happening in districts like Vancouver and Surrey, mean that many students will not be able to access courses previously available to them. The “seamless path” could indeed be made more real and less rhetorical by reversing cuts made to Adult Education and enabling more adults to enter the labour force with improved education and skills so that they might contribute to building the economy.

If the government’s goal is “to provide more support for those struggling to gain a foothold in the job market”, then they should reconsider the cuts to Adult Education which counter their own stated goals.

3. There is a need to ensure adult education programs are available to immigrant and refugee groups, to foster integration into Canadian society.

Several lower mainland school districts have significant immigrant and government-assisted refugee populations, often concentrated in areas as a result of federal policies and housing availability. Three districts—Surrey (28% of government-assisted refugees), Coquitlam (22%) and Burnaby (16%)—were the primary areas where government-assisted refugees were located in BC, according to a (May 2014) report by the Immigrant Services Society of BC called Refugee Newcomers in Vancouver: Changing Faces and Neighbourhoods 2000–2013.7 This report makes a case for recognizing refugees as assets to Canadian society rather than as deficits, but states that some will need intensive support:

Refugee newcomers are resilient and bring to Canada many skills and assets although some individuals will require intensive support to make a successful transition as future Canadians.... During the same period (2000–2013), the top six countries of origin for government-assisted refugees were Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Bhutan and Myanmar.

Closing accessible Adult Education Centres close to those populations will reduce their chances of accessing courses, as some will not be able to either travel to or afford fee-paying course in other locations, should such courses be started.

Some immigrants are well-educated and have English skill proficiency, so a limited number of them will likely access Adult Education unless they require specific subject credits for post-secondary access. Others are well-educated but have limited English language skills. Adult Education improves those skills, enabling those students to progress with careers or higher education while also participating in social and civil society. While some refugees may have good levels of education and English skills, many do not, especially when considering the origins of refugees identified by the Immigrant Services Society of BC. If their educational needs are not met, then BC faces the danger of an economic and social sub-class which is more likely to endure ongoing poverty and unemployment. The dangers of such a sub-class identifiable by ethnicity are considerable, and the costs to society significant. Having brought refugees into

Canada, it is crucial that they have opportunities to succeed and to become valued members of our society rather than being alienated from it.

While this issue involves both federal and provincial responsibilities, the province’s apparent shift away from supporting Adult Education with its $9m cut deals a severe blow to the successful integration of BC’s immigrants and refugees, and may be of particular concern in terms of the needs of those refugees from the countries listed above. It’s a false economy with major social and cost implications in the future, which could be avoided with a reversal of the new policy and modest improvements in supporting Adult Education.

4. **There is an imperative to support Adult Education as a poverty-reduction strategy.**

Chapter 8 provided evidence of the connections between lower educational attainment, employment prospects, earnings, and poverty. Simply put, the evidence is that lower levels of educational achievement result in greater levels of unemployment, reduced earnings, and increased poverty. Systemic underfunding, and persistent cuts over time, have reduced the efficacy of the adult education programs which serve the needs of many low-income adults. Reducing or eliminating such services is likely to contribute to subsequent lower earnings and increased unemployment. Adult students are motivated to escape poverty by improving or completing their education, and if their opportunities to access adult education services are being reduced, then the likelihood of continued and extended poverty will persist.

The goal of poverty reduction is not linked to charity but to the respect for fundamental human rights—to provide opportunities for all to succeed in terms of work and participation in society. It also has considerable economic and social utility that benefit all members of society and the government of the province. By reducing poverty the province reduces its costs related to welfare, health care, and law enforcement. It also increases its tax base as people escape the poverty trap by accessing education and employment. We as a society pay a little now, or we pay much more later. Investing in Adult Education is a sound approach and offers one step to reduce poverty while also bringing benefits to employers in a time where it is anticipated that the demand for labour will exceed supply. Investing in Adult Education fits within the narrative of the current government’s job strategy, so why not create a more employable pool of people and reduce poverty at the same time by supporting Adult Education?

5. **There is a need to provide accessible adult education programs in the public school system for students upgrading for post-secondary**

The Ministry of Education’s most recent policy change to the Education Guarantee limits accessibility for low-income students who now must attend one of eighteen community colleges to qualify for funding to cover the cost of tuition fees and other associated expenses.

School districts are expected to charge tuition fees, estimated at at least $500 per course for students taking academic courses required for post-secondary training. Surrey School District has since announced the cancellation of their Graduated Adult program, reducing access to academic upgrading courses in their local community for all adults. Some districts have decided to charge tuition fees, but these courses will no longer be accessible to low-income adults. More affluent students will have more choices as to where to take academic courses, while low-income students who face the greatest barriers will not.

The findings of this survey provide much insight into the multiple barriers that low-income students face in attending adult education programs, and the importance of offering programs in
such a way as to support students to successfully complete academic courses. This policy seems to have been implemented without considering which low-income students will adjust readily to the college system, and which students may have difficulty with such a transition and would benefit from taking these courses in the public school system. Nor is there an assessment of the logistical barriers students in some regions may face in travelling to and from a college instead of taking the courses at their local high school or adult learning centre. The optimal response would be to adequately fund adult academic upgrading for post-secondary in both the public school system and the colleges, so as to provide maximum access to adult education services across the province, especially for low-income students.

6. **Adult education students should be funded at the same level as school-aged students, and Adult Education should include the same supports for students with special needs and additional needs.**

The per-student funding amount for adult education students in 2015–16 ($4,565) is significantly less than the funding provided for K-12 students ($7,158)⁹. This reduced and inequitable level of funding discriminates against adult students and negatively impacts the services that can be offered to them and the learning resources they can access. By bringing equity of funding to Adult Education, services could be significantly improved.

In the K-12 system, students with additional learning needs attract additional funding, yet if any such students access adult education services, such additional support is not available. This further exacerbates a situation where those adult students with exceptionalities, addictions, English language limitations, or students who are Aboriginal, do not have the same access to supports as students in the K-12 system—a system itself with limited and inadequate resources and supports.

It also appears irrational to offer supports in K-12 schools which are denied to students in Adult Education. If public and independent K-12 schools access funding to support additional needs, the same supports should be extended to adult learners.

7. **BCTF will both advocate for Adult Education in general, and address the working conditions of its members who are adult educators.**

The working conditions of teachers are the learning conditions of students. Where teachers work in poor facilities with limited access to texts and technology, student learning suffers. When teachers face difficulties meeting the needs of those students with exceptionalities without specialist support, then students’ learning is negatively impacted. So there are and will be specific areas, either though advocacy or through bargaining, where the BCTF can aim to make a difference to improve both the learning conditions of adult students and the working conditions of adult educators. One such working condition will be addressed through the committee to discuss the issue of preparation time for adult educators, established through Letter of Understanding 14, in the 2014 Memorandum of Agreement that ended the last round of bargaining¹⁰.

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¹⁰ A few local agreements provide the same preparation time for adult educators as for secondary and/or elementary teachers, and the Vancouver Teachers’ Federation (VESTA Adult Educators’ sub-local) has a separate collective agreement for adult educators. This agreement includes a preparation time provision of 12.5% of instructional time for adult educators teaching structured courses (the same as for secondary teachers of school-aged students), and some provisions for other teaching settings such as self-paced learning.
Choose the option to renew the adult education system

In conclusion, we urge the provincial government to choose the option of renewing Adult Education within the BC public school system for what amounts to a very modest amount of funding. Such a renewal would have considerable benefits for those learners trying to succeed, for employers looking for better educated workers, and for our society’s efforts to welcome and integrate all immigrants and refugees into our province and country by giving them opportunities that meet their aspirations and the needs of our society.