



Discussion Guide

for the

High School Completion Symposium

Hosted by Alberta Education

September 2006

What are we missing?

“Stay in school” is one of the most common messages young people hear today. “Complete high school. Expand your opportunities for the future and improve your chances of success in work and in life. Do it now so you don’t have to come back and catch up later. Sure, it might be easy to leave now, but you’ll regret it.”

Young people have heard these messages over and over again – from their parents, their teachers, from guest speakers in schools and from the media. Yet one in four young Albertans does not complete high school within 5 years of entering Grade 10¹.

Some progress has been made over the past 5 years. But it’s slow progress and, at 75%, we’re far short of our 90% target for high school completion. The lack of better and quicker results is frustrating for everyone involved.

What are we missing?

How can we achieve better results? Why, in spite of the best intentions and efforts of teachers, parents, school administrators, government policy makers, community organizations and businesses, don’t more young Albertans complete high school? Is it because we’re not doing enough of the right things? Are we tackling the wrong issues or taking the wrong actions? Is it because, as adults, we just don’t get it... we don’t understand what is happening in young people’s lives and why they choose to leave high school? How can we do a better job of engaging young people?

If we want to see real progress, we need real answers to these questions and targeted actions that will make a real difference in the lives of hundreds of Alberta’s youth.

That's the purpose of the provincial High School Completion Symposium to be held in Edmonton on September 24 and 25 – to sift through the complex array of factors involved, to identify where we can have the greatest impact, and to set out practical actions that can and should be taken. The Symposium will involve youth, parents, educators, business leaders, community organizations and government representatives. It builds on the work of a multi-stakeholder High School Completion Task Force appointed by the Minister of Education and a series of roundtables held with youth in the spring. The input and advice received will help guide future strategies, actions and community efforts.

This discussion guide is intended to provide some basic background information, to pose questions that will be the focus of discussions at the Symposium, and to stimulate your thinking and your ideas about what can be done.

¹ Alberta Education, Annual Report, 2004/2005.

Why should we care?

It's a fundamental question. Most people just take it at face value that completing high school is a good thing. But does it really matter?

There are countless reasons why completing high school is important and they fall into two groups: good for the individual or good for our society as a whole.

For individuals, finishing high school is often seen as the minimum requirement for successful employment. Yes, people can and do get jobs without a high school diploma. But a person without a high school education will earn approximately \$1 million less over his or her life than someone with post-secondary education². Although some recent data shows that the gap in earnings between those without a high school education and those with university education has been narrowing, there is a general consensus that employment in the future will require increasing levels of education.³

In addition to getting better jobs and earning more, research shows that people who complete high school generally have better health, live longer and have a higher quality of life. In simple terms, completing high school opens opportunities for every person to enjoy a healthier, wealthier and happier life.⁴

Our society also benefits from more young people completing high school. People who are better educated tend to be active citizens involved in the betterment of their communities (volunteerism, charity and community work, and so on). They also tend to rely less on social services because they are able to support themselves and their families through good-paying jobs. Higher levels of education also mean lower crime rates. Better health means less demand on our health care system and lower costs. And when parents are well-educated, the chances are much higher that their children will be as well.

So the answer to the question is, yes, it does really matter. It's important to individual Albertans and their families, and it's becoming even more important with increasing demands for highly skilled and well-educated people. It's important to our society as a whole because we all benefit when people can support themselves and their families, and enjoy healthy and happy lives. But if that's the case, why is completing high school so difficult for so many? And if young people know the benefits of completing high school, why does one out of four young Albertans not complete high school within 5 years? Why do so many students leave high school early?

What do we know about high school completion rates?

Between 1999/2000, and 2003/2004, the percentage of students completing high school within 5 years of entering Grade 10 has increased from 73% to 75%. But this is far short of our target of 90%⁵.

There are different ways of measuring high school completion or graduation rates. But no matter which measurement we choose, Alberta's results are not as good as some other Canadian provinces and other developed countries. As our results improve, the gap is narrowing. However, we will need to close that gap quickly as evidence seems to point to the innovation, knowledge and skills of citizens as the most important contributor to a country's success (both economically and socially).

² US Census Bureau, "*The big payoff: educational attainment and synthetic estimates of work-life earnings*," July 2002.

³ Statistics Canada, "*Perspectives on labour and income*," June 2006.

⁴ W. Craig Riddell, University of British Columbia, 2004.

⁵ Alberta Education, Annual Report, 2004/2005.

Why don't some young people complete high school?

As the saying goes, if there was a simple answer to this question, we would have found it a long time ago.

In fact, there is no simple answer. Like so many things in life, the issues are complex and there are many intertwining factors that affect an individual student's decision to leave school.

It's also important to remember that leaving school early isn't an "event" and it's rarely a snap decision. It's a process, one that may begin long before a student enters high school. In fact, sometimes we can identify students as early as Grade 3 at risk of not completing high school⁶. It's a process that can begin when a young child struggles in school and doesn't get the help he or she needs, especially if the family, community or school doesn't provide enough support or cannot identify the precise support needed. This can lead to lower grades and lower confidence, and to not liking school or wanting to be there. Hanging out with other friends and peers who also feel this way reinforces the feeling that school isn't the place to be. When jobs are plentiful and appear to be high-paying for youth, those students who want to be independent and can't find success at school often choose to work longer hours in part-time jobs and eventually stop coming to school entirely.

This is one scenario that fits many students who don't complete high school within 5 years, but it's by no means the only one. There are many complex factors that affect each student's decision to stay in school or leave early. That decision often

occurs during a confusing time in a young person's life – a time of developing one's own sense of who one is, what one's goals are, and what one wants to do. Expecting students' decisions (about whether or not to stay in school) to be based on facts and information about the consequences is likely not realistic given all the other things going on in their lives.

From a number of studies over the years and from talking directly with youth in a number of roundtable discussions last spring, the following identifies some factors – a combination of which influences the likelihood of completing high school within a 5-year time-frame.

Student factors

Many factors are related to the students themselves. These may include:

- lower academic abilities, lower marks, lower self-esteem, and less confidence in their ability to learn and succeed at school;
- skipping school, being suspended or being in trouble at school;
- lack of involvement in school, including little or no participation in extracurricular activities;
- learning disabilities, physical disabilities, or mental illnesses such as depression or bi-polar disorder;
- drug and/or alcohol use; and
- inadequate English (or French) language skills.

We also know that young men are more likely to leave before they complete high school⁷ than young women and that the reasons why they leave school early are different. For young women, pregnancy is one of the most frequent reasons for leaving school⁸. Fewer young women leave because they are having trouble at school or because their marks aren't good.

We also know that, in spite of significant improvements over the past 10 years, the percentage of Aboriginal students that complete high school is significantly lower than for non-Aboriginal students.⁹

Family factors

Families have an important, if not critical, impact on all aspects of young people's lives, including their decisions about whether or not to complete high school. Studies have shown that students' decisions to leave school early may be influenced if:

- they live in a single parent family;
- their parents don't believe that completing high school is important;
- family income is low;
- the family moves frequently; or
- they need to look after family matters (including young women who become pregnant).

Community and work factors

Students' experiences in the workplace, or in their own hometown or community, can also have an influence on whether or not they complete high school within 5 years.

When the job market is attractive – like it is in Alberta right now – it's tempting for students to leave school early and take a job. But Alberta has experienced low rates of high school completion even when the economy was not nearly as strong as it is today.

However, a balanced understanding must be sought, because we know that working part-time can be a positive factor for students. On the one hand, working part-time can provide opportunities to develop knowledge and skills that complement school-based learning. But working too many hours in part-time jobs – more than 15 to 20

hours a week – can interfere with achievement at school, and for many students can become one of the factors involved in a decision to leave school early.

Communities and friends can also have a big influence. When students hang out with friends who don't believe that completing high school is important, or think working hard in school isn't "cool," there's a greater chance they'll leave early. On the other hand, communities that provide recreational, volunteer, and social opportunities and supports, such as role models and recognitions of student success, and have high expectations for education in general, are likely to see more of their students complete high school within the expected time-frame.

School factors

For most students, school is a positive and stimulating experience, a place where they meet their friends, participate in sports, arts and drama, and take courses that prepare them for their futures. But that's not the case for all students, and especially not for the vast majority of those who leave school early.

A number of school-related factors are identified in the literature that can affect a student's decision to leave school early, including:

- little flexibility in programs or limited choices in courses that are of interest to the student, or no knowledge of those choices;
- lack of effective mentors in schools;
- finding school boring and irrelevant;
- experiences with bullying or racism;
- programming or teaching approaches that don't match the student's learning styles and preferences; and
- negative relationships with teachers or other students.

What do all these factors tell us?

- The issue is complex and there's not a single, compelling reason why a young person decides to leave school early.
- Simple solutions addressing only one factor may work for some students, but certainly not for all of them.
- We likely can't address all of the factors all at once, and many of them are beyond our direct control.
- As a starting point, we must identify the factors we can influence the most, and then identify and target our actions to where we can make the biggest difference and achieve the best results.

Before you come to the Symposium, we ask you to think about:

What are we missing from the list? From your own experience, are we addressing the heart of the issue or tackling the factors that have the most impact on students' decisions to leave school early?

What actions should be taken to address the key issues and have the biggest impact? As families, schools and school boards, community members, employers or youth, what can you do to address this issue? Who else would need to be involved?

⁶ Alberta Education, *"Influence of Early Literacy and Numeracy Skills on Later Achievements: A Study of the Relation Between Provincial Achievement Test Performance and Later School Results,"* Forthcoming.

⁷ Statistics Canada, *"Learning, earning and leaving: The relationship between working while in high school and dropping out,"* 2003.

⁸ Statistics Canada, *"Learning, earning and leaving: The relationship between working while in high school and dropping out,"* 2003.

⁹ Statistics Canada, *Census 2001.*

What's being done now?

Given the diversity of factors influencing a student's decision to stay in school, it's clear that the answers can't be found by schools alone.

It's going to take a concentrated effort by families, communities, teachers and administrators, employers, social agencies and government – and the students themselves – to make a real difference and to help more students complete high school within a 5-year time-frame.

To help you think about concrete actions, let's start by looking at some positive examples of things that are already being done.

There are many examples of community organizations, businesses and individuals taking up the challenge and getting more serious about keeping more students in school. As well, there are a number of projects and programs in the education system targeted at improving high school completion rates. For example:

- **CAREERS: The Next Generation** brings together industry, educators, government, communities and students to help students make the link between classroom education and their future careers, to explore career options through workplace internships, to increase their understanding of the real world of work and to identify specific fields where real opportunities exist for future jobs.
- The **Alberta Mentor Association for Youth** is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to helping middle, junior and senior high school students achieve their full potential. Over 280 volunteer adult mentors are working with youth in 64 schools in Calgary, Cochrane and Airdrie.

-
-
-
-
- Two examples of the many employers directly involved in their communities and local students are Suncor and Merit Contractors. **Suncor** is a strong supporter of the Alberta Mentor Association for Youth and **Merit Contractors** provides over 125 scholarships, but only for students who complete high school.
 - **Tech Prep** is a community-based program in 31 school jurisdictions that helps students develop viable career options through a focused program of academics, career education and positive off-campus learning experiences.
 - In the **Battle River School Division**, the **Learning Success Initiative** has succeeded in increasing the three-year high school completion rate from 68% to 77%. It starts from the assumption that failure is not an option. The program identifies students who are not learning what they're expected to learn and then targets resources, especially additional teaching staff, to provide alternative learning approaches.
 - **St. Paul Education Regional Division** is expanding cross-cultural awareness as a way of increasing the attendance, retention and completion rates for Aboriginal students.
 - **Parkland School Division** puts a focus on the transition from Grade 9 to Grade 10 and starts career planning with students when they start Grade 10.
 - The **Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP)** enables high school students to get their high school diploma and earn credits toward their apprenticeship at the same time. Employers work closely with schools to create flexible arrangements for students through a combination of high school courses, on-the-job training, technical training and paid work experience.
 - **The Youth Apprenticeship Program (YAP)** helps students in Grades 7 through 12 receive hands-on learning opportunities in school through worksite visits and placements, and by demonstrations of key workplace skills by journeypeople and other professionals. In Grade 9, students may begin apprenticing in the

trades or training in an agriculture-related specialization. The project is being piloted in Lac La Biche, High Prairie and Wabasca/Desmarais, with the potential to expand to other communities in the future.

- Alberta Education, Advanced Education and Human Resources and Employment are collaborating on **Connecting Learning and Work: the Career Development Strategy for Alberta** to help Alberta's youth reach their potential and ensure that Alberta's workforce is adaptive, productive and responsive to community needs. Through flexible learner pathways and an interconnected learning and career development system, students will acquire lifelong career management skills and be encouraged to discover and pursue their individual passions, creativity, strengths and talents.

What can we learn from these examples?

- Steps are being taken to address this issue – by government, in schools, in community organizations and by some employers.
- Schools recognize the importance of keeping students in school and they're tackling the drop-out problem through specific initiatives that address one or more of the factors we've identified.
- In spite of these efforts, progress has been slow; and results, while steadily improving, are not as good as we want or expect. This can be very frustrating for everyone involved.
- It likely will take time for these and other initiatives to achieve the desired impact. In the meantime, we must find out if we're tackling the right factors, if the things we're doing now will produce better long-term results, or if we're missing something in the actions we're taking today. If students are leaving school early, then our "help" programs must also start early.

What will happen at the Symposium?

The Symposium will bring together youth, parents, teachers, administrators, community organizations, employers and government representatives to tackle this issue. But the objective isn't just to talk about the problem and discuss the many reasons why students are not completing high school within the expected time-frame. It's to come up with actions – practical, concrete, targeted actions that will result in more students completing high school within 5 years.

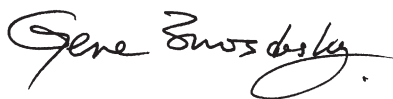
Before you come to the Symposium, we ask you to think about:

- Which of the many factors involved have the highest impact on students' decisions to leave school early? How would you complete the statement: "Students do not complete high school within the expected time-frame because..."
- Which factors can we influence? Which ones provide the best chance for us to do something positive and increase the number of students who complete high school within the expected time-frame?
- What actions should be taken to address the key issues? As families, youth, community and business members, schools and school boards, what can you do to address this issue and achieve the best results? Whom else would you need to work with to achieve such results?

As a participant, you'll work with people who have a similar role as yours. If you are a parent, you'll share the table and work with fellow parents. If you're a teacher, you'll sit with other educators and so on. As a group, you'll discuss the factors outlined in this guide and work together to develop strategies, actions and community initiatives that will make a difference.

It's going to be an informative Sunday evening followed by a very stimulating Monday full of discussion and debates. In the end, we hope the Symposium will signal a real turning point in tackling the issue of lower-than-desired high school completion rates. It's an issue that negatively affects far too many Alberta students and their futures. It's also a very frustrating issue, given that many different approaches have been tried, but haven't achieved the results we want and expect. The situation is not without hope and is slowly improving; however for the future of thousands of young people, and for the future of Alberta, we simply must do better.

I'll see you at the Symposium on September 24 and 25, and I thank you sincerely for your interest and involvement!



Gene Zwozdesky

Minister of Education

Government House Leader

September 2006

