

Getting it Right for Adolescent Learners

A Call to Action¹

Adolescence is a complex period of human development during which serious developmental tasks challenge young people. They are striving to achieve emotional independence from their parents, develop mature relationships with others and understand their own identities and they are constructing an ethical framework to guide behaviour while preparing for their economic futures and beginning to assume new adult roles in their families and communities. They must manage these various interrelated tasks during a tempestuous period of rapid personal change, marked by physical, social, emotional and cognitive developments.

The young people who make the transition to adult life most successfully are those who have the opportunity to approach these developmental tasks in a supportive learning environment within the context of families, communities, workplaces and schools.

During two days in May 2006, one hundred and twenty people came together to consider how we could do a better job of *Getting it Right for Adolescent Learners*. Students, parents, educators, senior decision-makers, government officials, and people who work in the voluntary and private sectors shared their deep commitment to the learning of young people and collectively shaped the following principles, commitments and recommendations for adolescent learning in Canadian schools.

¹ This document captures the essence and ideas generated in the symposium as a manifesto.

Principles

Our purpose is to help students be the best they can be and meet whatever meaningful goals they have set for themselves. The following principles represent what we know about how best to meet the academic, social and emotional needs of adolescents in our schools.

All students have the capacity to learn and the right to set their own goals. Therefore, schools should offer programs and choices that respect the goals, intentions and talents of all students. Both teaching and learning should be purposeful, collaborative and connected to the community, and each student should be engaged with education and rigorously committed to learning.

Young people learn best when they are valued and respected by adults. To demonstrate a commitment to value and respect learners, educators should get to know each student as an individual with talents, aspirations and dreams for the future and work to build strong relationships, based on the shared responsibility for learning.

All people value and are entitled to the respect of others. Schools should treat young people as full persons, demonstrating and encouraging respectful relations with and among all students. As adults, we have the responsibility to examine our own biases that often lead to false judgments of individual students. Because labels are dehumanizing, out of respect we will not use them in describing students.

Embracing diversity and pluralism enriches the learning environment for all students. Educators should understand and respect the differences in backgrounds, learning styles and interests among students. We need to create schools and classrooms in which all young people experience a sense of belonging and contribute to choices and decisions about their own education.

Community is essential to the creation of a sense of belonging. Schools should purposefully create cultures of community where young people and adults feel safe, both physically and

psychologically. To prepare adolescents to move into the adult world, schools should also build strong connections with their wider communities.

The transition to adulthood involves many partners. Because young people are on a journey from dependence to maturity, we should invite the opinions of students themselves, as well as parents and others who work directly with them (youth workers, youth assistants for disabled students, school and community volunteers), when making school decisions.

Curriculum and pedagogy are tools to an end, not ends in themselves. Curriculum and pedagogy should provide opportunities for deep and passionate engagement with ideas and experiences that matter to young people and their teachers. Successful teachers should provide challenging projects that make connections to real life so that student work is relevant for the world that young people inhabit now. We value creative or alternative approaches to education that bring life to the subject disciplines deemed essential to education.

Only learning that is relevant will stand the test of time. The curriculum and pedagogy of the school should assist students in making connections to the world beyond the school. The learning environment of the school and classroom should encourage self-expression and risk taking that encourages personal growth as students seek greater autonomy and independence.

Commitments

In support of the above principles, participants in the symposium, *Getting it Right for Adolescent Learners* made personal commitments to:

Expand the dialogue... by engaging students, parents, colleagues, partners, and governments in re-thinking the experience of adolescent learners.

Support learning in school... by modeling experiential learning, encouraging the development and sustainability of alternative program models, strengthening inter-agency collaboration, actively listening to student and community input and feedback and involving students in the assessment of their own learning.

Support teaching... by expanding the reach of what works well within school systems; encouraging collaboration among teachers; incorporating effective use of technology; encouraging and supporting professional learning; exploring cross-curricular projects and initiatives; advocating for the inclusion of teacher-student relations in pre-service teacher education programs; and reviewing teacher and principal recruitment and selection processes to encourage the hiring of those responsive to the needs and aspirations of young people.

Reflect on our own work... by examining our own biases, applying new understandings and being willing to extend the conversation.

Recommended actions

Departments/Ministries of Education are called to...

- ensure that provincially mandated curriculum is relevant to young people and encourages cross curricular learning;
- revise assessment policies to minimize their tendency to encourage direct instruction or ‘teaching to the test’;
- work towards integrated policy approaches across all departments of government with mandates concerning the well being of youth; and
- take account, when developing policy, of a wide-range of research and evidence about adolescent learning and development.

School districts and schools are called to...

- include students in all dialogues about middle and high school education;
- build strong relationships with communities; encourage and support a variety of ways of presenting the curriculum (inquiry learning, project-based learning, experiential learning);
- value the work of teachers; celebrate successful teachers;

- review hiring practices to ensure that prospective teachers of adolescent learners have the necessary values, attitudes and aptitudes as well as the required subject expertise;
- encourage teachers to create longer term plans for the development of their professional knowledge and expertise in teaching;
- create safe and healthy schools for all students;
- genuinely value all chosen destinations of students and reflect this value in programming and budget decisions;
- engage teachers and parents in conversations about the changes they would like to see.

Faculties of education are called to...

- embed the principles of this Call to Action in teacher education and ensure that pre-service teacher education offers a variety of teaching strategies for presenting the curriculum (inquiry learning, project-based learning and experiential learning).

National and provincial education associations are called to...

- undertake country-wide advocacy for what works best for adolescent learners; and
- develop policy positions based on research and evidence in areas of curriculum and assessment.

The Canadian Education Association is called to...

- sponsor a country-wide dialogue about getting it right for adolescent learners;
- undertake research to establish what learning activities students currently undertake throughout the school day;
- create a synthesis of research, proven learning models and strategies;
- create a CEA listserv for continued communication among symposium participants and to broaden the interested involvement;

- create effective networks between educational partners to increase vertical and horizontal communication, to share solutions and to overcome challenges;
- develop a common ‘white’ or ‘position’ paper to present to all provincial ministries of education and stakeholder groups;
- establish a visioning process and a long term plan in support of all jurisdictions and districts committed to *getting it right for adolescent learners*.

Getting Right for Adolescent Learners is an initiative of the Canadian Education Association. For further information visit <http://www.cea-ace.ca/dia.cfm?subsection=the&page=ado> or send an e-mail to info@cea-ace.ca .

