



Summary Report

on Alberta Education's

High School Completion Symposium

September 24 – 25, 2006

Alberta

Introduction

Finishing high school, or high school completion, is an important step for young Albertans. While approximately three quarters of Alberta's youth successfully achieve this goal within five years of entering Grade 10, a number of young people do not. Alberta Education, along with stakeholders including youth, educators, school boards, parents, community organizations, post-secondary institutions and businesses, is trying to understand why a number of young people are unable to achieve this milestone, and determine the best way to help these people achieve success.

Building on the previous work of the ministry to increase high school completion rates, including the *Barriers to High School Completion* report, Alberta's Commission on Learning, and the Task Force on High School Completion, the Government of Alberta's *Your Future Starts Here* initiative was launched.

Your Future Starts Here started in the spring of 2006 with a series of youth roundtables across the province, an online survey open to all interested Albertans during the summer, and a High School Completion Symposium in September 2006. The input collected from these consultations will help develop a provincial strategy, inclusive of community-led actions, to increase high school completion rates in Alberta.

Consultations affirmed that there isn't one *single* reason students leave high school prior to completion. A closer look behind the reasons for non-completion of high school reveals that non-completion is neither a snap decision nor is it only about what's happening at school. Leaving school is typically a process that may begin long before a student enters high school.

Alberta Education's High School Completion Symposium

"Lots of voices were heard that don't normally get heard. I think the right people were here in the right room at the right time."

16 year old participant

Alberta Education's first ever High School Completion Symposium was held in Edmonton on September 24 and 25, 2006. It marked the first time a broad group of community stakeholders had come together to discuss an issue that touches almost every Albertan. Participants shared personal experiences, success stories and perspectives, all of which were impactful. Participants came ready to listen and learn; the government did too.

The Symposium's purpose was to sift through the complex array of factors that influence youth and their decision to leave high school, to identify where we can have the greatest impact, and to set out practical actions that can and should be taken to improve high school completion rates. Through videoconferencing, the communities of Dunmore and Fort Vermilion were connected to the main site. While the input and advice received at the Symposium was intended to help guide future strategies, actions and community efforts to increase high school completion, it also raised a number of new questions to consider in discussing this issue.

The Symposium focused on youth perspectives and provided an opportunity for people to dialogue through a structured set of three table sessions. The event provided opportunities for attendees to be inspired by speakers, to watch the video "Listen Up" documenting the challenges faced by youth, and experience youth artwork and entertainment related to the subject of high school completion. Each of these components helped set the context for this complex issue and reinforced the focus of the Symposium.

Attendees heard from a number of keynote speakers including former Premier Ralph Klein and *Canadian Idol* judge Farley Flex who spoke about finding one's passion and how staying motivated to finish high school is important to realizing one's goals. In addition, former Education Minister Gene Zwozdesky, and individuals representing youth, the Aboriginal community, business, parents and community organizations spoke. Each speaker shared stories and views on the importance of high school completion both from a personal perspective and from a broader societal and economic viewpoint.

Table Sessions

“Parenting is a skill... (but) it takes a village to raise a child.”
Farley Flex, *Canadian Idol* Judge

The table sessions allowed participants to work together based on whether they were youth, parents, school administrators, educators, businesses, post-secondary institution representatives, or community representatives. The analysis of participant groups’ submissions shows that representatives from different sectors shared a common understanding of which issues are key barriers to high school completion, and had similar ideas about how some of these barriers could be addressed. Table sessions encouraged conversation and created opportunities for future dialogue in the community.

Over the three sessions, a story developed in which a youth’s emotional well-being captured a central role. For youth in general, life is filled with increasing pressures, it is fast-paced and complex, and expectations are constantly shifting. Youth are pressured by peers and by the need to find their own identity, while parents have less time to provide support. In short, today’s youth faces many challenges.

During session one, where participants were asked to identify key factors that might cause a young person to leave school early, three factors dominated discussion:

- home environment,
- students’ behavioural problems, and
- importance of a positive school climate and the provision of social and psychological support for the student.

It is interesting that when pressed to identify the most important factors and to make choices between what is critical and what is not, participants rarely mentioned factors that are often considered important. For example, lack of motivation, working long hours and learning-related issues such as uninteresting or not relevant curriculum, high expectations, insufficient one-on-one time with teachers, and teaching styles not matching students’ learning styles were rarely mentioned as key causal factors for leaving school early.

Symposium participants told us that leaving school before completion is a process that’s heavily determined by the youth’s home environment and the impact it has on his or her emotional and physical well-being. When youth can’t cope with issues at home, or don’t feel supported by their parents or others, behavioural problems

such as low self-esteem, anger or substance abuse, may appear; or, the youth may identify with peers in similar situations rather than with more positive role models. These problems are exacerbated when youth perceive schools as uncaring, unwelcoming and unsafe, and feel that they don't have access to the emotional and social supports (e.g., peer counseling, counselors, social workers or psychologists) that they need. Youth look towards school to find help when such supports are lacking at home and, if schools don't offer that environment, they leave.

Table session two was intended to prepare participants for action planning in table session three by focusing their attention on identifying the factors which their sector had the most influence over in improving high school completion.

“Through high school you can shape the person you want to become. That’s what I think counts most. Not the jobs, not the academics, but finding out who you really are.”

Listen Up video participant

During the final table session, participants were asked to identify actions that they could take to address the key causal factors they identified in Table Session 2. Most actions were consistent with the general feeling that a youth's emotional well-being is of key importance and solutions need to focus on addressing this factor. However, some groups also suggested actions that relate to their contributions as educators, business people, administrators, community organization representatives, and post-secondary education representatives. These approaches were varied and influenced by each group's unique perspective on high school completion, and by their understanding of what they can and cannot influence.

Parents

Parents at the Symposium told us that in order to provide improved emotional support they need to better connect with their children. Sometimes this means making a bigger effort to improve relationships with their children, other times it means enhancing their parenting skills. All actions put the emphasis on working as a family unit, spending more time together and enhancing family communication. What does this mean for individual families? For many it is about having a regular meal time to engage in meaningful conversations and shared experiences, or expanding youth's horizons by exposing them to a variety of new things. It is also

about understanding today's youth culture and issues, such as drug addiction, low self-esteem and peer pressure, and accessing seminars, conferences and workshops that identify warning signs; it's about giving parents the tools needed to deal with their concerns and challenges. Most of all it is about enjoying the small things together like a game of catch, a trip to the movies, or a walk and encouraging youth to see parents as allies rather than as adversaries.

“I think the most important thing that people need to realize is that the youth in their schools need to feel like somebody’s listening to them. The only reason I succeeded is because I had teachers that took the time to listen and took the time to assess where my strengths and weaknesses were. And instead of focusing on my weaknesses, they focused on my strengths, and eventually my weaknesses kind of faded away.” Listen Up video participant

This group also felt that showing interest in their child's school experience would demonstrate parental support and help to better connect with their child's school experiences. They believed that becoming more involved in their child's educational experience by regularly meeting with teachers, or becoming more involved in school council activities to shape the policies and budgets that affect their children were some of the most promising actions to pursue.

Youth

While parents primarily identify the need to improve relationships with their children, youth participants identified the need to be more mutually supportive within their peer group. That is to say, youth identified actions where they take the lead in supporting one another and they provide the tools to help each other find success. Whether by acting as positive role models for one another, or becoming friends with someone who is experiencing negative peer pressure to influence a more positive choice, youth feel that they can make a difference within their peer group.

However, youth identify that they can't go it alone, and in order to be taken seriously, they need to work with authority rather than bypass it. They identified the need to be proactive in raising concerns that they may have with the teaching process and with educators, and by initiating regular conversations with their parents about the value of education as well as other matters that are critical to youth.

“There are people who don’t respect you and don’t listen to you because of your age, and I think that events like this will really start to have an effect. It shows that [young people] have something important to say.” 18 year old participant

Youth also expect consistency in the actions of authority figures. They identified a need for clearly outlined and frequently reinforced expectations, limits and rules. This was cited for the school environment and society as a whole, where disciplinary actions are inconsistent and the repercussions are often minor. Within the school environment, students want to be acknowledged and rewarded for achievements. They also feel that the exercise of discipline through expulsions and suspensions are counterproductive and alternative discipline approaches, such as community service, could be more effective in changing behaviour. Involving students in developing rules and expectations was identified as an approach that may promote their willingness to abide by rules.

At the same time, it seems as though youth don’t feel they have all the tools they need to be successful in school, particularly as it relates to their emotional well-being. Within school, students want greater access to peer counseling, school counseling and social workers with whom they can discuss the consequences of poor choices. However, youth also identified a number of actions that would need to be implemented by others, that they could support. Suggestions included the need to increase the number of available life skills courses, implement a bullying awareness campaign, initiate more pro-active educational anti-substance abuse programs, organize school clinics to combat destructive behaviours such as smoking and drinking, talk openly about drug and alcohol abuse, and update educational promotional videos to ensure that they show realistic experiences.

Some suggestions from youth also included establishing a school policy to enforce mandatory meetings between counselors and students. Other youth suggested developing a more complete resource list that gives students information about supports from a variety of community resources.

School board administrators (Superintendents and Trustees)

“The ideas that the kids come up with are the most important. If the kids are giving us solutions to some problems, we better listen.” School board trustee

Consistent with the general feeling that emotional issues faced by youth are of key importance in the context of high school completion, fostering emotional well-being of students was the primary focus of actions suggested by this group.

At the level of schools and school jurisdictions, school board administrators suggested increasing the focus on assessing the ‘health’ of the school climate through the use of student surveys, and making school climate assessments part of accountability requirements. Similarly, administrators indicated that they could involve students in developing a more relevant and meaningful Career And Life Management (CALM) curriculum that could be taught as early as Grade 7. This could serve to provide younger students with skills and knowledge that could better help them cope with some of the issues that they may face as teenagers.

At the level of helping individual students, school board administrators suggested strategies that could include setting requirements for student/counselor ratios, providing training to help teachers more effectively identify at-risk students, and providing those students with the resources they need. In line with the youth suggestion for consistency from authority figures and for having a continuing relationship with at least one staff member at school, school board administrators also suggested creating mechanisms to ensure that each student has at least one person in the school who would monitor individual student progress, attendance, career planning, tutoring and so on. This staff member, who could act as a homeroom advisor, would be trained to identify behavioural issues, recognize needed supports, and monitor student progress throughout high school.

“This Symposium is important because it identifies how we can all work together. It’s not going to happen with some sort of curriculum that’s developed by Alberta Education and rolled out to the schools. Businesses are interested in opening up partnerships and allowing students to come in, whether it’s a Grade seven student job-shadowing or a Grade 12 student interested in the registered apprenticeship program. All the players have to be in sync at the same time. That’s what the Symposium [did].” Associate Superintendent

School staff could also be trained to organize and provide a variety of emergency support mechanisms for at-risk students. In this way, as part of a quick response team, school staff could act immediately to identify potential problems, access available resources and ensure that students have a comprehensive set of supports they need.

Similar to parents and youth, who identified a greater need for resources to address their knowledge gaps, administrators indicated that there is a huge need for knowledge-sharing among school administrators and teachers and for professional development for school staff. Actions in this area could include establishing a website that would provide information about best practices used by schools to improve high school completion rates, and providing professional development programs specifically targeting high school completion issues.

Administrators discussed a number of ways in which information exchange could increase the knowledge base within the school system. Local-level conferences as well as province-wide sessions could be effective methods of sharing best practices and bringing together key educational stakeholders to identify action plans to address high school completion.

School administrators also suggested that providing a greater variety of course options, giving students credits for extracurricular activities, partnering with businesses to demonstrate the link between what is being taught and what is needed at work, encouraging students to identify what would make courses more interesting and changing student evaluation mechanisms could improve high school completion rates.

Educators

When asked to rate the importance of factors impacting high school completion, educators identified family-related and individual factors (such as low resilience, i.e., the inability to overcome difficulties or deal with problems) as being more significant than teaching and learning factors. However, educators mostly focused on actions that more directly relate to teacher/student relationships.

In addressing many of the pressures facing youth today, educators recognized the importance of schools as a place where youth should be able to find a sense of belonging, acceptance and support. Ideas from educators centred around providing teachers with the skills and training to develop more positive relationships with individual students, spending more one-on-one time with students, and creating mentorship programs between educators and at-risk youth. Providing professional development opportunities allowing teachers to increase their relational skills and help bridge the gap between adults, or authority, and youth were also suggested.

In addition to recognizing their responsibility to build positive relationships with students, educators also acknowledged the important role of other professions in supporting the emotional health of youth. A significant theme that emerged throughout the discussions related to the importance of increasing co-operation and communication between schools, community organizations and businesses. There was the realization that efforts need to be taken to ease the transition of youth from school to school, from school to community, and from school to work.

A variety of actions related to the early identification and assessment of at-risk students were also identified. These suggestions are in line with school board administrators' actions to increase supports for teachers to help them identify at-risk students.

Educators also identified actions related to “learning and teaching” as being important. Introducing expanded and flexible program delivery options, changing the structure of the school year, changing requirements for a high school diploma and expanding course offerings with flexible funding, recognizes that students are more likely to be engaged in academic activities if the program of studies as well as teaching practices are more adaptable to their needs and way of learning.

In line with the “learning and teaching” actions, educators recognized the importance of strategies to enhance teacher training and professional development, including increasing the length of pre-service training and creating mentorship relationships between experienced and new teachers. This suggestion echoes the suggestions of parents and youth who identified a need for new resources and an increased awareness of existing resources to help them cope, and school board administrators who suggested a need for knowledge sharing and professional development for school staff.

Many of the above-mentioned actions related to curricular and pedagogical concerns requiring collaboration between government, post-secondary institutions and education stakeholders.

Community groups

“If agencies in our sector can establish partnerships with schools on a specific project like students doing community service - that would be good. We can create activities that engage kids to get involved in this.” Community services representative, session two

Community organizations indicated that they are a valuable, but potentially underutilized source of supports for youth and their parents. Working closer with schools, they can significantly enhance and expand access to available resources. By building partnerships and developing better relationships with educational stakeholders who have more direct access to at-risk youth, community groups have the ability to fill an information gap and enhance overall knowledge of programs and initiatives that are available. Community groups can enhance what schools do by providing students and parents with mentorship programs, extracurricular activities with equal access for all regardless of income, multi-disciplinary teams to provide career, psychological and social supports and other social services.

Community organizations also see a role for themselves as providers of informational programs to help parents and students deal with issues such as bullying, low-self esteem and increasing resiliency to the pressures and challenges faced by youth today.

Post-secondary institutions

Representatives of post-secondary institutions identified actions that focus on improving teaching and learning in schools. While they acknowledged that curriculum needs to be relevant to students and taught in ways that engage students, there is an opportunity for faculties of education within post-secondary institutions to influence how future teachers are trained and work with others on helping teachers keep their skills current. Yet, post-secondary institutions cannot do this alone; their efforts must be coordinated with schools, educational professional development organizations and government.

Post-secondary institutions also identified that there is a need to match teaching and learning styles more appropriately. Increasing a teacher's ability to adapt to a student's learning style should allow more students to be engaged in the classroom.

Finally, offering opportunities for school staff to better understand post-secondary choices, post-secondary institutions can provide resources that help school staff better understand the richness of career preparation choices for students. This serves to help school counselors, teachers, parents and social workers advise youth on the wide variety of available options.

Business sector

“In industry, we so often get insulated from what really happens. Even the basic statistic that 25 percent of people don't finish high school... you think, ‘That can't be right.’ We start discussing the ‘whys’ and it becomes very interesting.” Business leader

The actions suggested by business representatives focused on changing their practices to communicate to youth the importance of a high school education, and to ensure that the business community acts in a unified manner when it comes to expectations for educational requirements for employees.

Business wants to show that there are more opportunities for youth with a high school education than there are for those without one. This message may be reinforced through scholarships or through employee mentorship and volunteer programs or by working within existing programs, such as the Registered Apprenticeship Program, to demonstrate the demand for educated and qualified employees.

In addition, like community organizations who want to build partnerships and develop better relationships with educational stakeholders, businesses can provide support to community organizations and schools by speaking to students about the benefits of education in taking advantage of current and future opportunities in the workplace. Business leaders can also build partnerships within their own community to support high school completion initiatives.

Summary

“There has been a lot of hope instilled in people. Any kind of venue that has a group of people all interested in the same thing really helps to get things started. It has a ripple effect.”

18 year old participant

The Alberta Education High School Completion Symposium provided participants with a day and a half of genuine listening and commitment to the youth of this province. The voice of youth was central to the discussions. Participants’ discussions gave a good sense of where we are and where we need to go, but the story is by no means complete. What we do know is that when youth leave school, it is typically the culmination of a process that likely began years earlier. Furthermore, youth are less likely to leave school when they are in stable, well supported environments. How can we collectively provide this type of environment? It’s our responsibility as parents, teachers, administrators, business leaders, post-secondary institution representatives and members of a community and it’s our responsibility as Albertans, to do so.

The Symposium generated momentum to address how the community at large can help more youth complete high school. It also increased the participants’ recognition that no stakeholder can accomplish this goal alone. It will take a collective effort from all of us to achieve this important goal.

The Symposium helped open a dialogue between communities, youth, parents, educators, administrators and government on our individual roles in finding ways to help youth finish school. However, it is clear that neither government nor teachers, nor local communities can do it alone. Now that we know where to begin, it is time to take this information back to our communities and put it into action.

Next Steps

All participants from the Symposium, including the Government of Alberta, are committed to ensuring that non-completion of high school is a thing of the past. We live in a world that is increasingly more complex and demanding particularly with regard to keeping pace in the competitive global economy. A strong educational foundation is rooted in the successful completion of high school, and a key component in maintaining a healthy, cohesive and prosperous society.

There are many projects and programs in the education system that already target improving high school completion rates. There are also community organizations, businesses, school districts and individuals taking up the challenge to improve these rates. Some examples are included in the Symposium Discussion Guide which is attached to this report.

The following describes the next steps in seeking out solutions that will impact youth's ability to complete high school:

- Promote immediate action at the community level by distributing this report to all Symposium participants and providing access to it for all Albertans.
- Encourage school authorities to continue building connections with community groups that support students at-risk of leaving school. Identify promising practices in high school completion and work to expand these initiatives.
- Continue to review, develop and implement high school curricula that will enhance opportunities for high school completion.
- Work with other Government of Alberta ministries and other stakeholders to facilitate parental engagement in their children's education, and enhance youths' ability to access appropriate education opportunities, select career pathways and transition into the workforce.
- Assemble a community tool kit to help facilitate local and regional discussions and work with stakeholders to help develop community action plans.
- Establish a website for continued dialogue on high school completion issues.

Recognizing that the Symposium and this document are not the end of discussion but rather an opportunity for more Albertans, their communities and Government to take action, Alberta Education will further analyze the input received during the Symposium and work with stakeholders to identify and develop appropriate strategies and concrete community-based solutions. These will be profiled in a provincial action plan on high school completion.

High school completion is important to individual Albertans and their families. It's important to our society as a whole because we all benefit when people can support themselves and their families, enjoy healthy and happy lives and offer greater contributions to their community and society in general. The Symposium started the dialogue on how we could work together to help improve high school completion for a number of Alberta children and all Albertans will continue it to ensure that every Albertan and every child has the opportunity to learn and succeed in life.

Appendices

- **Appendix 1:** High School Completion Symposium Program
- **Appendix 2:** Discussion Guide for the High School Completion Symposium



ALBERTA HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION SYMPOSIUM

September 24 and 25, 2006

Shaw Conference Centre, Hall D

9797 Jasper Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta

Sunday, September 24, 2006: Opening Plenary

4:00 – 6:00 pm

Registration and Light Lunch

Youth Performances

Neeland Sisters Duo Bossa Nova Trio Traditional Jazz Trio
The Vissia Sisters White Buffalo Youth Dancers & Singers
3rd Street Beat

Blessing

White Buffalo Singers

National Anthem

Asani

6:00 – 7:30 pm

Welcome by Youth M.C.s

Adam Malenczak Victoria School for
Anna Abells Performing and Visual Arts

Greetings from the Honourable Gene Zwozdesky, Minister of Education

Youth Narratives Video Youth speaking to their own experiences.

Setting the Context

An overview of the current status of high school completion in Alberta, including key insights from youth roundtables held in Spring 2006 and other research. Additional perspectives on high school completion will also be presented.

Narration Victoria School for Performing and Visual Arts
Adam Malenczak Anna Abells
Amy Kitz Niharika Singh

Success Stories – Part 1

Brianna Olson Kaiser Foundation National Harm
Reduction Award Winner – a youth perspective
Sheldon Elter Actor, writer, standup comic, musician,
director – a First Nations, Métis,
and Inuit perspective

Youth Performances

Politic Live 3rd Street Beat 3SB Details

7:30 – 8:30 pm

Networking

7:30 – 8:20 am

Breakfast Buffet

8:20 – 10:35 am

Youth Performance – “Seasons of Love” *

Singers / Actors Andrew MacDonald-Smith, Elena Porter, Sheldon Elter, Kendra Connor, Kristi Hansen, Farren Timoteo

Musicians Liz Han, Mo Lefever, Thom Bennett, Shantel Koenig

Welcome by Youth M.C.s

“Listen Up” – Youth Narratives Video

Opening Remarks by the Honourable Gene Zwozdesky

Success Stories – Part 2

Debi Cautley Executive Director, Youth Emergency Shelter Society – a community organization perspective

Margaret Carroll & Melissa Lawrence Mother and Daughter – a family perspective (via videoconference from Fort Vermilion)

Patrick Laforge President and CEO of the Edmonton Oilers Hockey Club – a business perspective

Brad Volkman Principal, Eagle Butte High School – an educator perspective (via videoconference from Dunmore)

Youth Performance – “Life of the Party” *

Singer / Actor Andrew MacDonald-Smith and “Maurice Tipó”

Musicians Liz Han, Mo Lefever, Thom Bennett, Shantel Koenig

Table Session I

Participants will identify factors that have the most impact on high school completion.

10:35 – 10:50 am

Health Break

* Performance monologues written by Bridget Ryan

10:50 – 12 noon	<p>Youth Performance – “Come to Your Senses” *</p> <p>Singer / Actor Elena Porter</p> <p>Musicians Liz Han, Mo Lefever, Thom Bennett, Shantel Koenig</p>
	<p>Table Session II</p> <p>Participants will prioritize factors that they have the most ability to influence or change.</p>
12 noon – 12:15 pm	<p>Introduction to the Premier of Alberta</p> <p>Angel Peria, Astounding Announcer</p> <p>Grade 4, Parkview Elementary School, Edmonton</p> <p>Coached by Dawn Sundell, Teacher, Parkview Elementary School</p> <p>Address from the Honourable Ralph Klein, Premier</p>
12:15 – 1:15 pm	<p>Lunch</p> <p>Youth Performances</p> <p>Lindsay Ell Michael Carey</p>
1:15 – 3:00 pm	<p>Key Note Speaker, Farley Flex</p> <p>The importance of completing high school. A Q&A Session will follow, facilitated by the Minister of Education</p> <p>Table Session III</p> <p>Participants will identify actions that they can take within their own communities to address the issues identified in Sessions I and II.</p>
3:00 – 3:30 pm	<p>Health Break</p> <p>Youth Performance</p> <p>Michael Rault and the Mixed Signals</p>
3:30 – 3:50 pm	<p>Plenary – Report Back</p> <p>Overview of key themes from Table Sessions.</p> <p>Performance – “You Raise Me Up” *</p> <p>Monologue Bridget Ryan</p> <p>Vocal Group Black Pioneer Heritage Singers</p> <p>Vocal Soloist Sierra Jamerson</p> <p>Violinist Lauren Ross</p> <p>Musicians Liz Han, Mo Lefever, Thom Bennett, Shantel Koenig</p>
3:50 – 4:00 pm	<p>Closing Comments by Gene Zwozdesky, Minister of Education</p>

For more information about high school completion:

visit www.education.gov.ab.ca

phone **(780) 427-7219**

for toll-free access, first dial **310-0000**