

Education Can Help Cure Health-Care Woe

Hand in hand with the massive demonstration in front of the New Brunswick legislature, expressing outrage at the possibility that the Lord government may close, and downgrade or replace four hospitals in the upper river valley, some lifelong Tories threatened to resign from the party if the government accepts the recommendations of the local hospital board which proposes such changes.

In response, Health Minister Elvy Robichaud stated that his decisions in regard to this controversial issue will reflect his concern solely for the health of all the citizens of that area, and not for that of his party in those ridings.

It has been said that a politician thinks of the next election, but a statesman thinks of the next generation. M. Robichaud, it seems, falls into the latter category.

If M. Robichaud is genuinely concerned about the health of future generations of New Brunswickers, though, he should be looking beyond the immediate storm-in-a-teacup over the distribution of hospital services.

According to Education Indicators in Canada, the report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program 2003 recently released and authored by the Canadian Education Statistics Council, at 6.6 percent Canada spent more of its gross domestic product on education in 1999-2000 than did any of the other G-7 countries including the USA.

This, however, is not necessarily good news.

Canadian students hardly benefit at all from how much more than other countries this nation as a whole allocates to this particular social envelope. The relative handful of them who are going to be competing directly in the international economy may be, notionally, better educated than their foreign counterparts, but that's about it.

The provinces having constitutional jurisdiction over education here in Canada, in fact it is only increases in the percentage of any given province's GDP from which they are likely to

benefit - and the provincial statistics often fail to reflect the rosy international picture painted in the report.

Here in New Brunswick, for example, the percentage of the provincial GDP allocated to post-secondary education has actually fallen almost by 17 percent in the last ten years.

However, in the year 2000 the provinces spent two percent more of the overall GDP on health care than they did education for the first time ever; and, as the population of New Brunswick, as in the rest of Canada, ages at an ever-accelerating rate, no doubt this trend towards an allocation of resources which is increasingly biased in favour of health care at the expense of the education envelope is likely to grow as the years go by.

Nevertheless, to follow this particular social policy path too slavishly would be extremely shortsighted.

Successive studies conducted worldwide, both by the private and public sectors, have shown that an educated population is, generally speaking, a healthy population.

The Lord government is currently experiencing some short-term difficulties with its health care options for the immediate future.

Putting enough resources into education at all levels, however, will eliminate many of the long-term health care problems which are sure to arise if they do not.

The release, announced this week by Finance Minister Jeannot Volpé, of \$46 Million earmarked for capital projects in the education portfolio is a major step in the right direction.

Let us hope it is spent wisely.

(Desmond Morley is the Executive Director of the Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations.)