



# Royal Bank Letter

Published by Royal Bank of Canada

Vol. 75 No. 7

January/February 1995

## *Staying in School*

*Canada has a major problem in the fact that more of its youths drop out of school than in other countries. This detracts from our competitiveness. But it is far more serious than just an economic disadvantage. For it also detracts from human happiness...*

Parents in much of the world might look with amazement at the fact that so many young Canadians drop out of high school before graduation. A great many of these people can never muster the means to send their children to school at all, let alone to high school. Those who do so often have to make heroic personal sacrifices to see that their children get more than basic schooling. But to them it is worth any amount of labour and self-denial, because a decent education means the difference between a relatively good life and one of crushing poverty and toil.

In many underdeveloped countries, public schools are so overcrowded, badly run and ill-equipped that it is hardly worth sending one's children to them. Private schools (some not much better than the public ones) are beyond most families' financial reach. For the bulk of the young people in the Third World, attendance at a fee-charging technical college, much less a university, is out of the question. The relatively few who are fortunate enough to study at this level work assiduously, fearful that they might forfeit the precious chance to earn a certificate or degree.

By these standards, Canada would seem an educational promised land. Here, access to high-quality tax-supported schools is considered the birthright of all. In addition to thousands of primary and secondary schools, the country boasts hundreds of colleges offering post-secondary training and/or preparation for any one of 60-plus universities throughout the country. As measured by the proportion of funds allocated to it, Canada provides more public support for education than almost any other nation. To bring a post-secondary education within the financial reach of almost everyone, our governments indirectly subsidize college and university students to the tune of almost \$16,000 each.

Yet this national bounty seems to go largely unappreciated. By the most conservative measure, at least 18 per cent of young Canadians leave high school in the lower grades. This compares rather disgracefully with other economically advanced countries. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, about half of its 25 member states have higher rates of secondary school graduation than Canada. Our school-leaving performance is in a bracket with such relatively underdeveloped nations — industrially, that is — as Portugal, Turkey, and Greece.

The fact that more than 90 per cent of Canadian dropouts leave before completing their 10th year of school helps to maintain the appalling incidence of illiteracy and innumeracy in Canada. Well-grounded research has shown that a minimum of 24 per cent of Canadians aged 18 and over are functionally illiterate and/or unable to do simple arithmetic. This rate is approximately the same as the estimated average in the world, which takes in billions of peasants in underdeveloped countries. If anything, illiteracy is a worse problem for Canadians who suffer from it than for those in a less developed milieu, where it is a more normal and accepted state.

A person in a Third World country might reasonably conclude that most Canadian dropouts had to quit school to go to work and help support their families. Or, if that person came from a place with a low life expectancy, he or she might assume that the dropouts' parents had died, and they had to go to work to support themselves. Not so: according to Statistics Canada's School Leavers Survey, based on figures gathered in 1991, only nine per cent of them left because they were obliged to work in order to survive financially. Although they were somewhat more likely than the

youths who actually graduated to come from poor single-parent families or have parents who were unemployed, the majority came from financially viable two-parent families.

Another reasonable explanation might be the parental discouragement of education that exists in some cultures, particularly with regard to females. But 93 per cent of the Canadian parents questioned in the survey considered high school completion to be "very important," which presumably means that they urged their offspring to stay on. The high leaving rate underscores a cultural difference between Canada and more-traditional countries. It is that parents here by and large do not have strong control over what their teenage children do.

It might shock a responsible parent elsewhere to learn that one of the most common reasons for quitting school in Canada is simple boredom. In fact, boredom was the leading reason among the females surveyed in the StatsCan study, at 22 per cent. Boredom was also cited by 18 per cent of the males and was apparently a factor in their number-one reason: 28

per cent of the males said they would rather do "real" work than school work. Was that because they found school work too difficult? Not necessarily: more than half had passing grades in their last

*Attitudes in Canada  
lagged behind the  
nation's development*

year of school.

People from simpler societies might assume that there would be plenty of work for young men and women who drop out of school, as in their own surroundings. Most of the work in the great world outside of the developed countries is carried out directly by human beings. But in a developed economy, a great many simple tasks are done mechanically. There is little need for a man who makes a living with his back or a woman with her fingers, sewing, weaving baskets and the like.

There are, indeed, jobs in the service industries that do not require any great skill, such as waiting on tables or making deliveries. Most of Canada's dropouts gravitate to jobs like these, which carry poor pay. In 1991, the StatsCan survey showed, 51 per cent of male and 61 per cent of female school leavers had incomes of \$10,000 or less before taxes and deductions. Twenty-eight per cent of both sexes had been unemployed in the previous year, and a disproportionate number lived on social assistance. When they look around them, early school leavers must be aware that their decision to drop out carries a probable economic penalty.

Which leaves us with a puzzle: if, on average, they do not leave school out of necessity and they know there is a price to be paid, what overriding urge makes them do so? The search for answers must begin deep in Canada's historical background and collective psychology. It is a principle of the latter that when people "have it too good," they take their blessings for granted. And people in Canada have had it good in terms of educational opportunities ever since colonial times.

In an age when the most enlightened nations of Europe educated only a small privileged proportion of their young, the children of Canadian pioneers were able to attend school regardless of their parents' financial or social status. The first generations of *Canadiens* and *Canadiennes* in New France were taught mainly at church expense. The loyalist refugees from the American Revolutionary War duplicated the tax-paid public school system they had known in the former American colonies. To supplement their public primary schools, the future Canadian provinces began opening tax-supported high schools as early as the 1850s. Both levels of education were open to both sexes at a time when ordinary girls in most countries did not go to school.

But the attitude of born Canadians towards education was ambivalent. They were evidently satisfied to pay taxes for schools, but that does not mean that they were very keen to use them to their full extent. Most were satisfied if their children learned rudimentary reading, writing, and arithmetic before curtailing their schooling. This was regarded as only natural, since their labour was often needed to sustain their families in a society of scrub farms, lumber camps, fishing villages, and basic small towns.

With an economy based on natural resources, Canada remained essentially a frontier society until well into the 20th century. It gradually became industrialized, but the old-fashioned view of schooling prevailed. As recently as the 1950s, well over half of the men in the Canadian labour force had never gone beyond grade school. Only a third had attended high school, and fewer than 10 per cent had gone to a college or university. The educational shortcomings of the population at the time were masked by immigration, which filled much of the need for skilled and professional workers in an unsystematic but evidently effective way.

Lonely voices were raised in those boom years warning that Canadians were dangerously dependent on being hewers of wood and drawers of water. But anyone could see that, dropouts and all, Canada was getting along quite well. On a personal level, it was still entirely possible for bright young people who

had prematurely left school to look forward to a prosperous future. They could always learn on the job from older colleagues in an apprenticeship which was sometimes formal, but more often not.

A clear line was drawn between training and education. You did not have to be educated to be trained. When more-sophisticated equipment and techniques were introduced, the ordinary worker could be taught to use them with a minimum of formal instruction or written material. Few imagined that their jobs might one day become obsolete, and that an educational background might be needed to enable them to be retrained to do something new.

Then came the computer and other innovations in the traditional way of doing things, which required workers at all levels to work more with words and numbers than with physical objects, and often to understand the intellectual concepts behind the tasks they were performing. A machinist, for instance, might be faced with learning the intricacies of computer assisted design. A clerk in a travel agency might be called upon to find the best price for a travel package by searching an electronic quotation system. A

mechanic might have to relearn his or her trade to deal with the new electronic devices that now control the workings of an automobile.

No longer could most people expect to adapt to

changing demands at work through a combination of native intelligence and friendly coaching. They had to be able to understand written manuals, absorb classroom instruction, respond to computer prompts. High school dropouts — and even high school graduates who did not go on to college or university — increasingly found themselves cut out of the action. Even though they might have the ability to learn, employers were taking no chances. As more and more systems were introduced to improve productivity, companies raised their hiring standards. The result is that today, people without a high school diploma or a college certificate literally need not apply for a wide range of “entry level” jobs.

In the meantime, the need for an educated and adaptable labour force to compete in the global economy has become almost a cliché among Canadian luncheon speakers. Again and again, grim warnings have been issued to the effect that Canadians as a whole can expect a lower standard of living if they do not become better equipped educationally. A typical quotation along these lines came from the famed Canadian sociologist John Porter: “The technical,

scientific, and social problems of a highly advanced industrial society are so complex that no society can afford to waste its human resources.” The disturbing thing about this statement is that it was published in 1967, and Canada has continued to lose economic potential to our dropout habit ever since.

The problem seems to be that we have still not shaken the old attitude that made young people believe they could quit school with impunity because there would always be an opportunity sometime, somewhere. It was the same frontier attitude that led our forest industry to cut down trees without replanting more because “There are always more over the next hill.”

*A reversal of the old  
Canadian dream of a  
better life*

Such thinking is at least 30 years out of date, going back to the time when Canada was still a comparatively uncomplicated country living off its natural resources. You could drop

out and still go on to a good life in those days if you were moderately lucky; you would have to be very lucky to do so today.

As the historian Arthur Lower once observed, the educational philosophy among Canadian parents in the frontier times was: “I’m going to see that my boy gets a better chance than I had.” That should no longer include the possibility of dropping out of school. Where the problem is terribly severe, as in some neighbourhoods of Montreal where the dropout rate runs to 50 per cent, there could well be a reversal of the old Canadian dream of a better life for each generation. Mohamed Hrimch of Université de Montréal, who conducted an exhaustive survey in the Montreal region published last year, commented that if present trends continue, “We will see many young people who will have a level of education — and probably a living standard — below that of their parents.”

The Montreal study went into some details that the StatsCan survey did not, such as the self-images of the school leavers interviewed. Surprisingly, the results showed little lack of self-esteem; for instance, more than 80 per cent believed they were very good or pretty good academically. Asked about their aspirations, 91 per cent said they wanted an interesting job. Sixty per cent said they wanted to make a lot of money. Sixty-five per cent said they wanted to marry and raise a family. On balance, then, they proved they have the same hopes and dreams as anybody else.

It appears from the Montreal study that one of the driving forces behind people quitting school is plain youthful inexperience. “They make the minimum wage

*For many jobs, non-  
graduates need not  
apply*



working at gas stations or as cashiers and there's a false perception that they can survive on those salaries," Mr. Hrimech remarked. They might be less sanguine if they knew about another more-recent Statistics Canada study, which showed that university graduates earned at least twice as much money as full-time year-round workers with zero to eight years of education: \$50,000 versus \$25,000 a year.

The operative term here is "full-time year-round workers," because those who drop out of school are much more likely to experience episodes of unemployment than others. The StatsCan leavers' survey showed that 34 per cent of the male and 26 per cent of the female leavers had been unemployed, versus 23 per cent of male and 18 per cent of female high school graduates. Graduates of colleges and

*It is easier to get out  
than to get back in*

universities, of course, were still more likely to hold down steady jobs.

What accounts for those expectations of making a lot of money and doing interesting work? One answer is that the great majority of dropouts — 85 per cent — intend to resume their education at some point. This fits with the fact that almost half of them say they regret having left school. The reason given by most was that they now recognize the value of an education. A high percentage of them said their regrets stemmed from an inability to get a good job.

And, to put the situation in perspective, Canadians do drop back into the system in large numbers. In 1991, one-third of the full-time students in colleges and universities were returning adults. The reason that Canada has the highest average age of trades apprentices in the world is that the system is full of dropouts who want to learn a trade after their experience with dull low-paying jobs and unemployment. Still, that leaves hundreds of thousands of adults who never realize their dream of a further education. They face a perilous future, given the demand in the labour market for people with the proven ability to learn that is signified by a diploma or a degree.

The key question to be asked of those who intend to drop back in is: Why drop out in the first place if there is no real need to do so? Put another way, Why make life any harder on yourself than it already is? The situation presents a reversal of Agnes Allen's law that "anything is easier to get into than to get out of." It is easy enough to leave the educational system. But

because people acquire habits and commitments that make their best-laid plans go astray, it is a lot harder to get back in.

One of the admirable characteristics of youth is that it is not easily scared, so that dire warnings have little influence on young people's decisions. It is perhaps useless to tell a potential dropout that he or she is headed down a dangerous road. But the argument can be put in terms of individual happiness, which, as the philosopher William James observed, is the goal of all human behaviour: "How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness is in fact the secret motive of all they do, and all they are willing to endure."

Potential dropouts therefore should be asked: Don't you think you will be a happier person in the long run if you stay in school than if you leave before you have graduated? Would you not be even happier if you went on to college or university? The weight of the world's experience is in favour of the proposition that the more people know, the more they appreciate living. The notion goes back to the ancient Roman orator Seneca, who said (with a degree of exaggeration to make his point) that "More is experienced in one day of the life of a learned man than in the whole lifetime of an ignorant man."

Also, education as a general rule gives you more control over your own life — not economic control, but the emotional and intellectual control that resists allowing others to do your thinking for you. An education is not an end in itself, but a set of tools for further learning throughout life. Many years ago the great English scholar, Cardinal John Henry Newman, wrote that learning "puts the mind above the influence of chance and necessity, above anxiety, suspense, unsettlement, and superstition, which is the lot of many." It brings freedom far beyond the illusory freedom of getting out of the classroom. For you cannot fully enjoy any other freedom without freedom of mind.

That sure approach to the world around them, that ability not to take what happens to them lying down, is perhaps the best argument for young people to pursue an education until they are within clear sight of the things that will make them happy over a lifetime. Sticking to it is not easy. "The roots of education," wrote Aristotle, "are bitter, but the fruits are sweet." If those fruits do not appear in the form of money, education at least allows people to make the best of what has been given to them. Rich or poor or in between, the educated person gets more out of life.

