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Better Measures of Educational Attainment Needed—GPIAtlantic Report

HALIFAX, NS – “What we don't know about education in Nova Scotia is the really important information—the aspects of knowledge needed by adults that will shape the future of the province,” says Karen Hayward. “In fact, a great deal of what we do know about education in Nova Scotia is either not helpful or misleading.”

Ms Hayward is co-author of *How Educated Are Nova Scotians? Education Indicators for the Nova Scotia Genuine Progress Index*. This landmark report was released today by GPIAtlantic, a non-profit research group dedicated to constructing new and better measures of wellbeing for the province.

“In measuring genuine progress in learning, what’s important isn't just test scores and graduation rates,” Hayward explained. “We wanted to indicate what Nova Scotians actually know, no matter where they learned it. Do they have the knowledge they need to improve their health, livelihood security, environmental quality, and wellbeing; and are they well informed about politics, ecology, and their own and other cultures, for example?”

“If we're getting the education we need, we should see positive results in those areas. But we don't know whether those things are improving, because we don't measure them properly. They certainly can be measured, but Statistics Canada and other agencies haven't properly measured whether Canadians and Nova Scotians are actually becoming wiser and more knowledgeable in key areas. We believe they should.”

Current measurements of educational achievement remain narrowly focussed on superficial indicators like high school completion rates and university graduation rates, says Linda Pannozzo, another co-author of the GPI report. Those rates have risen steadily, and today are at their highest level in history. Yet basic literacy rates have not improved, while some other basic competencies—like political understanding—have actually decreased.

The researchers also related learning outcomes to social behaviours. For example, they documented for the first time that the most highly-educated people place greater stresses and strains on the environment than their less-schooled neighbours—indicating that our school systems are not effectively teaching environmental stewardship.

“Another anomaly,” says Pannozzo, “is that Alberta has the lowest graduation rates and the second-highest drop-out rates in the country, while the Atlantic Provinces have low drop-out rates and high graduation rates. Does this tell us that Atlantic students are more dedicated to learning? Not at all. It tells us that there are more jobs in Alberta, and that young people there have more incentives to leave school and go to work.”

“That's a perfect example of a really misleading set of indicators. They *seem* to be describing educational attainment, but in fact they're describing the regional labour markets.”

By contrast, the *GPIAtlantic* report attempted to measure multiple literacies, and to determine how literate Nova Scotians are not only in language skills and numeracy, but also in their understanding of science, ecology, health, nutrition, civics, arts, culture, statistics, Indigenous knowledge, and the media.

Hayward noted that researchers broadly agree that education encompasses a four-step hierarchy, proceeding from data to information and on upward to knowledge and wisdom. Understanding—otherwise known as literacy—is the factor that connects all four levels. Without a broad spectrum of literacies, there is no possibility of attaining wisdom.

“But we don't know how literate our people are on all those dimensions, and we don't know whether their literacy levels in these and other knowledge areas are improving or not,” said Hayward. “After three years of research and study, we realize that essential data in this field simply don't exist.

“That's why I believe that the most important recommendation we've made is our call for the development of a Canadian Knowledge Survey. The CKS would be administered by Statistics Canada on a regular basis, just like the Census, Labour Force Survey, and health and social surveys, to tell us whether knowledge in these areas is improving, deepening and expanding.

“It's not an impossible task by any means. In fact, a lot of what we are proposing is already being done in the U.S. and in some European countries, so we have models and examples to draw on. That's why the last section of this GPI report is a comprehensive list of our ideal education indicators—for most of which there are presently no Canadian data but for which data should be collected.

“And of course, once we know what's actually happening in education and in society's knowledge levels, we can shape our education policies to encourage the outcomes that Nova Scotians, as a society, desire.”

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