

“Our high school graduates trail the rest of the country in post-secondary achievement.”



It's a good thing we've got smart kids. Otherwise, they might never survive Alberta's schools.

Despite crowded classrooms, stressed-out teachers and crumbling bricks and mortar, our elementary, junior high and high school students are consistently ranked by national and international testing results as among the smartest, best-educated and most scholastically advanced on the planet. As they work their way through the school system, these members of the so-called echo generation have the benefit of teaching methods, technology and other resources their baby boomer parents would never have dreamed of. But they also have to contend with larger class sizes and cuts in personal instruction, often while attending the same schools their parents did years before but which are now older and in much worse condition.

In the three years from 1994 to 1997, when Alberta's school-age population was growing most rapidly, the provincial Conservatives took more than \$900-million out of basic and post-secondary education in their battle against the debt and deficit, and have only grudgingly put it back, in an unpredictable feast-or-famine fashion. The demographic bulge peaked in 2001 and is now on the doorstep of Alberta's universities and colleges, trying to get in. But instead of preparing for the onslaught, Alberta's colleges and universities struggled with budget pressures of their own, and are now turning away thousands of qualified high school graduates due to lack of space.

While the number of students in K-12 increased by 12 per cent in the last decade, post-secondary enrolment grew by 26 per cent and our universities are still unable to meet the demand. The University of Alberta capped enrol-

ment last fall for the first time. The University of Calgary, running at 126 per cent of capacity, hauled trailers onto campus as makeshift classrooms, known sarcastically as “portable centres of excellence.”

The sad irony is no one can say today's Grade 12 graduates aren't prepared for higher education. They're intimately familiar with the crowded classrooms and deficient teaching resources awaiting them.

Had they known what was in store, perhaps they might not have been as eager to score well on the internation-



al exams that have made them the envy of the nation. One of the consequences of their high scholastic achievement has been to keep education funding off the public radar. With health care getting all the attention, it has been difficult to sell taxpayers on a crisis in education when their children appear to be doing so well.

“We don't have the equivalent of people lined up in a hospital emergency ward,” laments Carl Amrhein, provost and academic vice-president of the University of Alberta. “We don't have the sort of front-page issue that gives evidence to the erosion of education.”

There are indications education will eclipse health care as the top-of-mind issue this year. On the heels of last year's Learning Commission report, the Conservatives are trying to reinvent themselves as the education administration. But without any attention to higher levels of learning,

post-secondary education risks becoming the weak sister of the system. While K-12 enrolment peaked three years ago and is projected to decline for the next 12 years, post-secondary pressures are expected to continue without any end in sight as the system tries to catch up with pent-up demand.

Even with their academic prowess, our high school graduates trail the rest of the country in post-secondary achievement. Fewer go on to college or university than anywhere else in the country, which makes Alberta all the more dependent on other provinces for trained professionals. “Alberta lags behind other provinces in the share of high-school students moving on to post-secondary education, highlighting the region's reliance on luring well-educated individuals from other provinces for its pool of skilled workers,” warns TD Bank Financial in its economic report on the Calgary-Edmonton corridor.

Senior governments are doing little to change that. Tuition at universities all across Canada has doubled in the last decade to make up for declining government funding. In 1980, federal and provincial governments paid more than \$10 for every \$1 a student paid in tuition. Now, the senior governments pay only \$2.30 for every \$1 the student pays. Albertans increasingly view higher education as financially unattainable. According to Alberta Learning's own surveys, only 52 per cent of respondents think post-secondary education is affordable, compared to 75 per cent in 2001.

Facing mounting tuition costs and a post-secondary system stretched to the limit, college-age Albertans aren't getting much encouragement to better themselves through higher education.

Fortunately, they're smart kids. They will figure it out for themselves.

**Larry Johnsrude** is a political writer for the *Edmonton Journal*.