



Education and literacy as determinants of health

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Whether you finished high school can affect your health. Though put too simply, this highlights one of the factors that determine how healthy a group of people is. More precisely, high school graduation in one of the “socio-economic determinants of health” used to predict the health of a population.

Income, education, literacy, housing and other social and economic factors have long been recognized as contributing to the health of a group of people (a population). Using this model for evaluating community health, the BC Healthy Living Alliance (BCHLA) in 2005 produced a “The Winning Legacy” providing a plan to improve the health of British Columbians. Many of their recommendations were taken up by the provincial government. A follow-up report, “Healthy Futures for BC Families,” makes new recommendations, building upon the earlier report. One of the areas covered is education and literacy as determinants of health.

Education, literacy and training are widely known to help transcend low socio-economic circumstances: more and better education and training helps land better jobs, increase pay and improve living circumstances. Individually, and more so in combination, these factors raise the health status of families. The BCHLA explains: “There is strong evidence that those who graduate from high school show significantly better health and family functioning than non-graduates.”

It turns out that the education level of parents is also strongly related to the school readiness of children — another determinant of health.

Literacy skills are more important than ever in this economy, yet many British Columbians are held back by poor skills in that area. One cause is that upon leaving school, many stop reading regularly (daily is best) which leads to deteriorating skills, especially if employed in work that does not require reading.

There are policies that help improve educational achievements and literacy levels. First is funding human resources to support early identification of students who may withdraw prior to graduation and to provide intensive, individualized instruction, tutoring or mentoring to engage them.

Integrating multiple support and assessment services. Combining services like counselling, suicide prevention, teenage parenthood and other mental and physical health issues can be most successful addressed comprehensively.

They also recommend increasing support for low-income students to pursue post-secondary education and vocational training, and strengthening support for adult basic education. Encouraging literacy programs in the workplace is an easy and potentially valuable strategy.

No one policy will be effective in itself. An integrated approach is needed to deal with the complex problem that is health inequity from a variety of angles.

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