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FAST FACTS

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Manitoba's At-Risk Youth. What can a public-private partnership do?

Noralou P. Roos and Leigh Cunningham provide interesting food for thought in their article "Take a chance on at-risk children". The 'good news' is that at birth, high-risk children have just as much potential as other children in Manitoba. This fact may not be news to many, but it reinforces the importance of investing in preventive programs to improve opportunity and outcomes for all Manitoba children.

While most would agree that "we must work together to make investing in high-risk kids an urgent priority..." the prescription offered -- that Manitoba needs a "private-public sector partnership committed to investing in at-risk kids" - is perplexing. But, the idea of a 'private-public' relationship to help at-risk kids presents important questions. What is meant by the idea of a 'private-public partnership'? How can the private sector help? And what is the role of the public sector?

As Roos and Cunningham note, "we know how to help these kids". The excellent research conducted by Roos and others at the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP), shows very clearly the risk factors that contribute to the likelihood that children will drop out of school, and all the problems that follow for those with low levels of education. The catch-all risk factor is as clear as it is insidious: poverty.

Poverty and at-risk youth

The Free Press article makes brief mention of the role that poverty plays in creating obstacles for youth, but it should be noted that MCHP's excellent research and other research, makes a much stronger connection between poverty and educational outcomes than is presented in the article. Given this strong causal relationship, alleviating poverty should be a central focus for those interested in improving outcomes for kids. And while we know clearly what the problem is, solutions are not simple. Poverty is an extremely complicated issue, often deeply rooted, geographically concentrated, gendered and racialized.

While business and community leaders are to be commended for taking an interest in improving outcomes for at-risk youth, and should be engaged in the dialogue, the suggestion that the problem can be solved through some sort of abstract notion of a public-private partnership is at best naïve. At worst, it buys into the erroneous notion that the private sector knows best how to resolve complicated and evolving social issues.

And while Roos and Cunningham note "this is not a problem that we can leave to government", I would argue that government will continue to have the most critical role.



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Roos and Cunningham point to examples of government programs with proven track records that work. In their 2004 report, the MHCP makes reference to several important programs that have been supported by Healthy Child Manitoba and others that have been initiated by provincial government departments. Given their findings, it is important to ensure that government continues to support these programs with solid sustainable funding. And the 2004 report recommends other public-policy measures that could be implemented to improve outcomes for at-risk youth.

Other important ideas have come forward from several community groups and should be included in a comprehensive strategy to address poverty. These include increasing the minimum wage, increasing income supports, increasing the supply of housing for low-income families, and increasing childcare spaces and subsidies. Further, we need to learn from the hard lessons of the past and ensure that Aboriginal children and newcomers are provided with culturally relevant education to increase the likelihood that they remain in school. All of these initiatives require government leadership.

What then is the role of a public-private partnership?

We elect our governments to provide leadership in addressing the social and economic issues that we are presented with. This is not to suggest that citizens and the business community should not have opportunity to provide input. They should. But we also have a responsibility to ensure that our governments have the resources they need to do what is necessary.

We do this by paying our taxes. This is perhaps the most important public-private partnership of all. But this partnership appears to be out of fashion. Instead our business leaders have led the charge calling for tax cuts, smaller government,

and a move towards their version of public-private partnerships – a version that benefits business but has questionable results for the public.

As Roos and Cunningham note, we know what we need to do.

But we can't do it without a strong government role and a healthy public purse.

It is encouraging that Manitoba's business community joined community leaders and government to explore these critical issues and are keen to roll up their sleeves to be part of the solution. The many talented and committed people working in communities with at-risk youth and families in trouble will welcome the attention to the issues that they are fighting every day.

But ask any of these folks what the main problem is and they will likely say that it is the incessant and pervasive poverty that traps people and often leads to a downward spiral of hopelessness and exclusion.

So yes, let's all roll up our sleeves as a community. But let's also open up our wallets at tax time. In doing so we can more adequately support the experts and front line workers do what they need to do, and we can ensure that families have adequate resources to give them hope. This is the first step to creating opportunity and hope for at-risk youth.

Not until business leaders join community leaders to support government budgets that do not decrease taxes but rather put our tax dollars to good use by implementing comprehensive poverty reduction strategies, will we have a real public-private partnership focused on increasing opportunity for at-risk youth and their families.

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