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WE HAVE TO GROW OUR OWN

Adult basic education and a made-in-the-north educational strategy in Manitoba

Jim Silver



CCPA
CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

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Major new developments are about to come to Northern Manitoba. Bill C-5, now the *Building Canada Act*, and the newly created Major Projects Office located in Calgary — intended to fast-track major economic development projects across Canada — will likely create new economic opportunities in northern Manitoba. Premier Wab Kinew has written to Prime Minister Mark Carney proposing the development of critical minerals in Manitoba's North and the expansion of the Port of Churchill for export purposes (Macintosh 2025a). Any new major projects will bring risks to Indigenous communities and to the fragile environment in Northern Manitoba. It will be important, indeed essential, that the 2012 Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission serve as a guide to what will unfold in Northern Manitoba, and that the fragile environment of northern Manitoba be fully protected. These concerns are of paramount importance.

It will also be important to avoid the failures of past Northern economic development strategies. Northern Manitoba has been shaped over many decades by forces that have left it relatively underdeveloped, to the detriment of most who live in the North. Rates of poverty are higher

and education levels are lower in the North than elsewhere in Manitoba. Myriad unmet needs — housing, sustainable energy, food production and enhanced health care, for example — are the result.

To meet these needs, and to meet the additional labour force needs that will be created by new major economic development projects, and to create the skilled workers needed to build local communities in ways of those communities' choosing, a "made-in-the-North" educational strategy is emerging. It has great potential.

Key to this educational strategy is the University College of the North (UCN), which has the legislative mandate, governance mechanisms and policies that are needed.

An important missing piece, however, is adult basic education, which could and should be the starting point, the foundation, of a made-in-the-North educational strategy. By adult basic education, I mean adult learning centres that offer the mature high school diploma for adults who have not previously completed high school, and adult literacy programs that bring adults' literacy and numeracy skills up to a high school entry level.

The underdevelopment of Northern Manitoba

At least three broad forces have contributed to the underdevelopment of Northern Manitoba.

The first is the long-time commitment to resource extraction, especially mining, forestry and hydroelectric production (Loxley 2010: 11; 131–139). The resources extracted in the North, and the bulk of the profits produced by their extraction, have not been reinvested in the North but have been sent south and beyond, with only enough remaining to build the regional hubs — Thompson, Flin Flon, The Pas, for example — needed to accommodate those doing the work of resource extraction. Most of Northern Manitoba has derived little benefit from resource extraction. Some Northern communities, particularly First Nations, have been badly damaged by resource extraction and past Hydro development (Kulchyski and Neckoway 2007; Waldrum 1993).

The economic, social and environmental costs of these developments have been massive. Past Hydro developments alone forced financial compensation of hundreds of millions of dollars. For example, by 2016, \$169 million had been paid out to First Nations for damages caused by the Keeyask dam project (CBC 2016), while First Nations — Berens River

(Gowlriluk 2025) and South Indian Lake (Sanders 2023), for example, continue to take legal action against Manitoba Hydro for damages caused by Hydro-induced flooding. The short- and long-term damage to rivers, lakes, and traditional harvesting and communities is far higher than can be measured in monetary value. The two most recent Hydro projects, Wuskwatim and Keeyask, only happened because the First Nations in those territories voted to allow the developments in partnership with Manitoba Hydro. This will be the model for any future such developments.

Second, most decisions affecting Northern Manitoba have been made not in the North but in the south, in southern Manitoba and beyond. One effect, perhaps the most important, has been the drainage of profits from Northern Manitoba. Another has been the making of ill-informed decisions by those who have power but are remote from the real needs of the North. For example, the Manitoba government's 2017 *Look North Report and Action Plan for Manitoba's Northern Economy* identified Northerners' frustrations with those "who drive or fly in and out, and do not have a vested interest in the well-being of the communities in which they operate" (p. 19). Yet another such frustration has been the common phenomenon of making decisions for the benefit of "the province as a whole," which simply has meant setting aside the interests of Northern Manitobans to meet the needs of those living in the south. Decades ago, Ken Coates and William Morrisson (1992: 10) described this phenomenon:

Time and time again, from the early mining activities to contemporary hydro-electric megaprojects, the so-called 'provincial interest' has overridden regional concerns and priorities, establishing a pattern of underdevelopment and impoverishment.

Third, Indigenous peoples, the original inhabitants of Northern Manitoba and still the majority of the population of Northern Manitoba, have been largely excluded from meaningful participation in the resource extraction and decision-making processes, and from the benefits that flowed from those processes. This exclusionary process has a long colonial history that continues in important respects.

These forces have produced the relative underdevelopment of Northern Manitoba, characterized by — except for a minority in the regional hubs — a standard of living considerably lower than elsewhere in Manitoba. There are few linkages from the export economy to local economic activity, and poverty is widespread (Loxley 2010: 156–160). Among the consequences are that high school graduation rates are much lower in the North than in the rest of Manitoba (UCN n.d.: 27, 32; Look

North 2017: 7), and that Northern Manitoba suffers from labour shortages and has had to import skilled workers from elsewhere.

More economic activity will require more skilled workers

The labour shortage problem may soon worsen. Demand for critical minerals, some of which are found in Northern Manitoba, is growing and is likely to continue to grow, reversing recent trends. Mining, one of the major industries of the past century in Northern Manitoba, declined in recent years with the closure of multiple mines. According to the Manitoba Mineral Sector Profile, only four mines are currently operating in Manitoba. Manitoba has 30 of the 34 minerals that the federal government deems critical (Piche 2025)

However, mining is likely to expand with the increased importance of critical minerals and the rise in the price of gold due to global economic insecurity. Unlike the past, new mines will only go forward with the consent and participation of the Indigenous communities. An example of this is the current partnership between Alamos Gold and Marcel Colomb First Nation to develop a mine at Lynn Lake, the first new mine in Manitoba in fifteen years.

The Port of Churchill will take on greater importance as Canada seeks new market outlets and shores up Northern defences. The Port and railway system are owned by the Arctic Gateway Group, a company majority-owned by the First Nations, towns and peoples of Northern Manitoba and the Kivalliq Inuit Association. A proposed Hydro line from Northern Manitoba to the Kivalliq communities is under negotiation, with Manitoba committing power from existing Hydro developments to serve that region. An east-west electrical grid involving Manitoba Hydro is a possibility.

At the same time, Indigenous communities are increasingly organizing to meet the needs of their communities.

Such developments will need skilled workers. Yet labour shortages are the norm, and the underdevelopment of Northern Manitoba — including the severe shortage of housing and high cost of groceries — is making it more difficult to attract people to work there and to retain those already working there.

The solution is an educational strategy that builds a skilled labour force in Northern Manitoba, including in smaller Indigenous communities.

A made-in-the-North educational strategy — one that moves large numbers of Northerners through a revamped and Indigenized educational system and into the paid labour force — is essential for Northern Manitoba's future.

In order to understand the educational strategy emerging in Northern Manitoba, I conducted interviews with senior educational leaders at the two major campuses of the University College of the North, educational leaders in three Northern Indigenous communities, and leaders in the Frontier School Division, Kelsey School Division and Assiniboine College. I also examined recent scholarly and government documents relating to the underdevelopment of Northern Manitoba, the skilled labour shortage that has been a consequence, and the innovative educational strategies currently being undertaken to effect solutions.

Innovative education in northern Manitoba

Innovative, Northern-based educational strategies are quietly unfolding in Northern Manitoba. Several post-secondary institutions are working in Northern Manitoba communities, including Assiniboine College, which is located in Brandon and has educational projects in some Northern communities (Cameron July 21, 2025). However, the University College of the North is especially important because of its physical location in northern Manitoba and its legislative mandate. UCN has two main centres, in The Pas and Thompson, along with twelve regional centres, nine on Northern reserves, and has the unique legislative mandate “to serve the educational needs of Aboriginal and Northern Manitobans and to enhance the economic and social well-being of Northern Manitoba.” UCN is partnering with Northern communities and organizations in many creative educational undertakings. In most cases, the character and particulars of these educational initiatives come from organizations and companies located in Northern Manitoba, and from the residents of Northern communities anxious to meet what those communities themselves identify as their real educational needs.

Central to those needs is the fact that many Northern communities do not want their young people to leave, and many in small Northern communities want to pursue post-secondary education close to home (Simpkins and Bonnycastle 2015). A strategy of young people going south for educational opportunities has not worked well. It has created a decades-long “brain drain,” because most of those who go south for

education do not return to live and work in the North (Warnar-Brown, April 23, 2025). A strategy developed by Northerners is the better option, so that the analytical and other skills acquired in post-secondary education are not exported to the south but are used locally, to the benefit of all.

An important example is UCN's Kenanow Faculty of Education, which has developed a Northern-focused, Indigenous-created method for training Northern teachers in Northern communities. Kenanow took over from the Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP), which had a long and successful track record. Kenanow is a Cree word for "all of us," and an important feature of the Kenanow method is that it is based on partnerships with Elders, local communities, parents and extended families, as well as school divisions, educational authorities and the provincial Department of Education. Central to the Kenanow method is merging the Manitoba curriculum "with the cultural and physical contexts of Aboriginal and Northern communities" (Gardiner 2017: 13).

Kenanow is an Indigenous-driven approach to teacher training. Land-based activities and experiential learning are part of the *Kenanow* approach. It is delivered at the two main UCN campuses in The Pas and Thompson, as well as in many Northern communities, so that Northerners living in smaller communities can become fully qualified teachers without having to leave their communities for long periods of time. This is consistent with the long-held Indigenous view that education should be delivered locally, that is, in the North and in local Northern communities, and should be shaped by First Nations people themselves. Most graduates end up teaching in their home communities (Williamson and Loewen, April 11, 2025; Timlick 2017), a good example of the benefits of a made in the North educational strategy. The importance of such a made in the North approach is made clear by the fact that teacher turnover in Northern communities is now between 30 percent and 50 percent per year (Macintosh 2025b).

The objective of the *Kenanow* method is to create in students a belief in themselves, called *Kiskenimisiwin*, a Cree word for the positive sense of identity needed to live a good life, i.e., to experience *Mino-Pimatisiwin*. The concept of *Kiskenimisiwin*, the importance of developing a positive self-identity (Gardiner 2017: 13), is the same as a major benefit of adult basic education, which is to create graduates who have the self-esteem and self-confidence to achieve their goals in life.

UCN works closely with Northern Indigenous communities on other educational initiatives and, as is the case with Assiniboine College, strives

to do so in a way such that those communities take the lead. For example, leaders in Bunibonibee First Nation (Oxford House) have been working to develop a decolonized education strategy that fits the needs of their fly-in community. Bunibonibee has gone through a local process that is beginning to shape a locally appropriate education that is delivered in the community, as described by Elder Tommy Weenesk. UCN has worked with them in a supportive role. Rather than saying, “here are the courses we offer,” UCN meets with community leaders to find answers to the question, “what are your educational needs and how can we work with you to meet those needs?” Rather than prospective students having to fit into the system, UCN is helping to reshape the system, to the extent possible, to fit the needs of students, and to do so in the community where students live (Weenesk, April 10, 2025; Plett, March 10 and March 31, 2025).

At the same time, gains are steadily being made to advance digital connectivity across the North, although much more remains to be done. Digital access is a basic need not only for education but also for health and all forms of economic activity. Northerners are training to do skilled digital work in the North. For example, one former student, Lakota Blackbird, completed an Information Technology Readiness Program (ITRP) at UCN and says, “It changed my whole life” (March 11, 2025). Now employed by UCN, she and the ITRP are part of building the digitally skilled Northern labour force that is needed now and into the future.

UCN is also involved in training Northern miners. UCN offers the four-week Mining Readiness Training Program preceded by a 40-hour preparatory week in conjunction with NORCAT, a long-established Northern training institute. The first cohort began in September 2024 at Sagkeeng First Nation. Four cohorts have completed the program at the time of writing. Almost all have been employed in the industry, albeit at an entry level. Tuition and materials are fully covered by the federal government for all adults accepted into the program. So successful is the program that, according to Jamie Grant (April 16, 2025), Associate Vice President of Community and Industry Solutions at UCN and coordinator of the Mining Readiness Program, mining companies are now saying they will not employ entry-level workers until they have completed the mining readiness program. Assiniboine College also offers mining readiness programming in a number of Northern communities.

Mining companies are motivated to produce skilled mine workers who have grown up in the North because, as UCN President Doug Lauvstad has said, the costs of importing “contract miners” from the south have skyrocketed. Historically, Indigenous people have been effectively barred

from well-paid unionized jobs in mining due to racial prejudice. Today, some Indigenous people want to work in the industry. For those who do, the Mining Readiness Training Program is opening the door.

Another successful labour force development strategy has involved UCN working in concert with The Pas's Margaret Barbour Collegiate Institute. Selected grade eleven and twelve students have recently completed a specially tailored course aimed at producing fully certified health care aides (Johnson, March 11 and July 3, 2025; Lane, April 28, 2025). Students took regular high school courses in the mornings, and in the afternoons took the health care aide program. Practicums were conducted in local healthcare facilities where vacancy rates are high (MGEU 2024). The result is that eleven students graduated in June 2025, each with their health care aide certification, some with their grade twelve diploma and others returning next year to complete grade twelve. They will walk into unionized jobs that pay more than a living wage, in health care institutions in The Pas and elsewhere in northern Manitoba that are in desperate need of such skilled workers. The total cost was \$120,000 (Johnson, March 11, 2025). To attract eleven health care aides from southern Manitoba would have cost a great deal more. This made-in-the-North educational strategy can be and has been replicated in high schools and adult learning centres across the North, producing not only health care aides but also other skilled workers so much in demand.

Seeing the success of this program, the provincial government responded in April 2025 with an investment of \$619,000 in UCN to train health care aides in The Pas, Thompson, Swan River and smaller remote sites across the North — a recognition of the importance of UCN's approach to the local development of skilled workers (UCN 2025). As Trevor Lane, Superintendent of the Kelsey School Division said, "We need to bring more of these programs to the schools." Consistent with this approach, UCN's health care seats have recently grown from 30 to 130, and their primary care paramedic program has doubled (Lauvstad 2025a).

In addition, UCN has recently secured funding to enable them to accelerate high school graduation rates for Indigenous youth who have been adversely affected by colonial systems, and for whom high school graduation rates, particularly for those who have ever been in the care of Child and Family Services, are particularly low (Brownell et al. 2012: 34; Brownell et al. 2020: 33). The initiative, partnering initially with Oscar Lathlin Collegiate in Opaskwayak Cree Nation and Margaret Barbour Collegiate in The Pas, proposes to use wrap-around supports — childcare, food subsidies, transport assistance, academic advising and personal coaching, for example — and to integrate Indigenous cultural supports,

including connections with Elders, knowledge keepers, and land-based learning. The program will also work with students' families to build intergenerational cultures of learning. The goal is to graduate 35 of 50 Indigenous students by June 2026, and an additional 40 of 50 students in a second cohort by June 2027, and by December 2027 to have at least 45 of these 75 graduates enrolled in a post-secondary program or vocational training at UCN or some other post-secondary institution of students' choosing (Manych March 11, 2025). Wrap-around services and access to Indigenous Elders and teachings are known to improve graduation rates, as does the personal relationship building that this approach involves.

These are just some of the innovative efforts now underway to decolonize and "Northernize" education in Northern Manitoba. This is education designed to meet Northerners' real needs and respond to their life circumstances. As Tara Manych, Vice-President of Transformation at UCN, put it, "flying people in and out for short periods isn't working, so we have to grow our own."

UCN has been criticized for not sufficiently meeting the needs of the many small Northern Indigenous communities that are looking for ways to develop forms of education that meet their particular needs. Some communities, Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN) in Nelson House, for example, have developed very successful post-secondary education programs (Linklater 2024; Warnar-Brown 2023; Deane and Szabo 2020). Their Atoskiwin Training and Education Centre (ATEC) was founded by the First Nation with support from Manitoba Hydro, and without UCN involvement. There are those in that community, such as Jody Linklater, long involved with ATEC, who believe they should be given the authority to establish their own, stand-alone post-secondary institution, equivalent in legal terms to Assiniboine College or UCN. However, the NCN case is not typical of most small Northern communities. It is likely that the educational challenges in other Northern communities are less a failing of UCN than of the limited budget the institution has for working in these communities (Warnar-Brown, April 7, 2025), most of which are relatively remote and some of which — Bunibonnibee, for example — are fly-in communities. The costs and the challenges of staffing post-secondary education in such communities are substantial. Failings in this regard are less attributable to UCN, which has a physical presence in the North and a legislative mandate for such work, than to broader geographical and fiscal challenges, including the severe government austerity measures implemented since 2016 (Hajer, Hudson and Keith 2025). While there is no doubt room for improvement, UCN is doing educational work that is

essential to Manitoba's future, and doing that work in a culturally sensitive fashion informed by Indigenous realities.

For example, underway now at UCN is the creation of the Centre for Indigenous Languages and Culture. Particularly important about this initiative — and about the entire UCN approach — is that it is rooted in the foundational role that Indigenous Elders have played, via UCN's Elders Council, in shaping the purpose and setting the direction of the University College of the North. The Elders see what UCN is doing as an extension of what the treaties envisioned. Ramona Neckoway, Associate Vice President of Indigenous Learning and Reconciliation, sees the Elders Council vision for UCN as being rooted in the treaties and the vision for the future embodied in the making of those treaties — what she describes as “giving life to the treaty understanding of education,” which was not about assimilation but rather about incorporating the importance of land and language into the educational process (Neckoway April 28, 2025). UCN is “not simply reproducing systems and structures” (Neckoway, April 3, 2025) but is striving to work with Indigenous people in ways consistent with Indigenous values and intended to promote those values.

In October 2025, the Manitoba government invested \$2.25 million in UCN's Centre for Indigenous Languages and Culture, including \$759,000 to launch a bachelor of Indigenous languages program, an important initiative in the building of a made-in-the-North educational strategy (Manitoba 2025).

The importance of high school graduation

Less than 50 percent of high school students in Northern Manitoba graduate “on time” (UCN n.d.:32), which is generally considered to be within six years of starting grade nine. Many later decide, as adults, that they want to earn their high school diploma as the first and necessary step in landing a well-paid job. Doug Lauvstad, President and Vice-Chancellor of UCN, has observed that once Indigenous students in the North earn their high school diploma, their chances of success in post-secondary education and the paid labour force are roughly equivalent to the chances of non-Indigenous Northerners (See also Statistics Canada 2023; Hull 2013). A fully developed Northern educational strategy, therefore, requires that there be a means by which these adults can earn a high school diploma. A high school diploma becomes a gateway to a better future.

The Conference Board of Canada (2019:20) found that “Each additional high school graduate saves the Ontario government (on average) \$2767 each year on social assistance, health care and criminal justice, while each additional high school non-completer costs the province \$3128 each year.” Economist Robert Allen (1999) found that the fiscal benefits of completing high school are so high — i.e., benefits exceed costs by so much — that it would make financial sense to borrow money and invest it to increase the number of high school graduates. Such findings were confirmed in a recent study of graduates of five adult learning centres in Manitoba, including the Kelsey Learning Centre in The Pas. Graduation from an adult learning centre produced lowered Employment and Income Assistance costs and increased tax revenue arising from growth in full-time employment sufficient that over a ten-year period adult basic education in Manitoba pays for itself (Silver 2025). Producing more high school graduates, as adult basic education makes possible, is especially important in Northern Manitoba because it is the necessary starting point for the development of a made-in-the-North skilled labour force.

Much additional literature confirms the importance of high school graduation (Silver f/c).

The missing piece: Adult basic education

Because of the importance of high school graduation, and the relatively low rate of high school graduation in Manitoba’s North, adult basic education becomes the necessary foundation of what Tara Manych has described as a “grow our own” Northern educational strategy. Adult basic education is the missing piece. There is not nearly enough adult basic education in Northern Manitoba to meet the need, and the need is likely soon to grow.

Over the past two decades there have been new schools and high schools built in Northern Manitoba, primarily by the federal government but in some cases in partnership with the Province of Manitoba through the Frontier School Division. The decision by the federal government to increase funding for education on reserve to a level equivalent to schools off-reserve is a big improvement that will help staffing and graduation rates across the North (Hobson 2018). The recent school breakfast program of the provincial government will also help with school attendance and graduation rates. In addition, the Manitoba First Nations

Education Resource Centre (MFNERC) serves First Nations across the province, including the North.

While these important developments will improve high school graduation rates, there will continue to be a need for adult basic education across the North.

A significant increase in the provincial budget for adult basic education to make possible a dramatic expansion of adult learning centres and adult literacy programs across the North is the missing piece in the made-in-the-North educational strategy currently emerging in Northern Manitoba.

The principles of adult basic education are perfectly suited to the North. Adult learning centres are characterized by their welcoming, learner-centred environment. The atmosphere is friendly, respectful and non-judgmental. Building relationships is considered paramount. Real-life experiences are respected, and ways are found to build these into the learning process. A holistic approach is used, going beyond reading and writing to attend to the burdens so many adults bring to the classroom (Silver 2022a). This approach leads to a growth in self-esteem and self-confidence — equivalent to Kenanow's objective of *Kiskenimiswin* — which then becomes the foundation for high school graduation and the transition into post-secondary education, which leads to the production of skilled workers. In this way, adult basic education becomes the foundation for the made-in-the-North educational strategy needed to meet the needs of the North for skilled workers.

Adult basic education is particularly effective when it is part of an "adult learning hub" (Silver 2022b), which is the case for the Kelsey Learning Centre in The Pas. Adult learning hubs combine adult literacy, an adult learning centre offering the mature high school diploma, childcare facilities and a direct means of transition into the paid labour force. Because the Kelsey Learning Centre is physically located in UCN's campus in The Pas, there is a seamless transition from literacy upgrading through the mature high school diploma to the many post-secondary education programs offered at UCN — nursing, education, various health care professions, and a wide range of trades, for example. Being located on the UCN campus has made a big difference in the lives of the Kelsey Learning Centre students working to earn their mature high school diploma. Jo-Anne Walker (March 10, 2025), long-time adult educator at Kelsey, says, "you can see the growth in them." It changes an "I can't, I don't know how" attitude to an attitude of "Wow! I can't believe I did that. I didn't know I could," which is the foundation needed to build the skilled

Northern workers needed to improve social and economic conditions in Northern Manitoba.

Adult basic education can work well in smaller Northern communities when the right supports are in place. At Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, the community has used funding from Manitoba Hydro related to the building of the Wuskwatim Dam to establish the successful Atoskiwin Training and Education Centre (ATEC), which includes a mature student component that consistently graduates adults with their mature high school diploma. It is successful because of the wrap-around supports the community offers. As Jody Linklater has described it, adults are counselled about career goals before starting and are required to take a “social readiness” program that includes cultural teachings and life skills. Once they begin the adult learning program the available supports include: a van that picks up adult learners each day to offset the challenge of cold and long distances; free hot meals; childcare; a \$10 per day allowance to those who attend; and the prospect of post-secondary training in the community upon graduation.

This is expensive, at least relative to standard high school programming in the south, but it works. Failing to provide educational opportunities will lead to greater expenses in the future.

Adult basic education is the gateway to building a made-in-the-North educational strategy that can produce the skilled workers needed to build socially and economically healthy Northern communities. As Tara Manych, former Director of the Kelsey Learning Centre and now Vice-President of Transformation at UCN, put it (March 11, 2025), “Adult learning has everything we need to fill the vacancies.”

Invisible and marginalized

Yet adult basic education is almost completely absent from reports on and planning for the Northern economy. Even those studies that refer to the importance of community economic development (Fernandez 2016, Loxley 2010, for example) make no mention of adult basic education, despite the very close similarities — for example, in philosophies and in the population they work with — between community economic development and adult basic education. The 1993 report, *Northern Manitoba Sustainable Economic Development: A Plan for Action*, observed, “There is considerable demand for adult education as many Northerners return to complete high school after leaving prematurely”

(p. 33). A recent UCN report (n.d.) observed, “There must be an increased investment in education starting with adult education (including literacy and numeracy)” (p. 37). However, these are brief observations in longer reports, and other reports make no mention whatever of adult basic education. As is the case throughout Manitoba, adult basic education is a hidden gem, a “buried treasure,” largely unknown and underappreciated (Silver 2022a). Substantially increased investment in adult basic education would be a major contributor to the made in the North educational strategy that is so much needed.

In addition to producing the skilled labour force so essential for Northern Manitoba, adult basic education, with its Indigenous, decolonized pedagogy, would also promote the kinds of personal transformation described in previous publications (Silver 2025, 2022a, 2022b). It would produce, as it does elsewhere, a growth in self-esteem and self-confidence — essential for moving into the paid labour force and more broadly for building a better life. The increased sense of dignity that comes with gainful employment would contribute to stronger and healthier families. Those who have earned the mature high school diploma and found gainful employment would be more likely and able to participate in the decision-making processes and contribute to creating the communities they want. The ripple effects of all of this would be significant and long-lasting, growing ever wider and longer into the future. Adult basic education cannot, on its own, overcome the underdevelopment of northern Manitoba. But it is a necessary condition for doing so.

In the discussions, debates and decision-making about major development projects in Canada’s north, including the Port of Churchill in Northern Manitoba, mention is rarely made of the people who will be needed to do the work. These projects will require large numbers of skilled workers. This should be seen as an opportunity to meet the needs of those who have grown up and now live in the north. Yet we run the risk of failing to take the time and make the investments to “grow our own” skilled Northern workers. If that happens again, linkages from big projects to those who live in the North will be minimal. Profits will be extracted, sent elsewhere, and the history of underdevelopment will be replayed, with all its negative consequences.

The solution lies in large part with the innovative educational strategies that have emerged and are being successfully implemented in Manitoba’s North today. This is education committed to the belief that those now living in the North are those who should and can be the drivers and the beneficiaries of a form of economic development that actually

does meet the needs of Northerners. The missing piece is adult basic education.

In a broader sense, what is needed is a ten-year plan with full government and Northern commitment to supporting and expanding these emerging Northern-focused and Indigenous-shaped educational initiatives. Such a plan would include the expansion of the now largely missing ingredient of adult basic education with full wrap-around supports, which is the gateway into post-secondary education and the skilled, home-grown Northern labour force that is needed if Northern Manitoba is to escape its underdevelopment. This should be possible, given that the 2023 provincial election brought to office Canada's first Indigenous Premier and multiple Indigenous cabinet ministers and MLAs committed to developing the North in partnership with Indigenous peoples and other Northerners. All such developments must begin, it is essential to emphasize, with genuine consultation with and involvement of local communities and regional organizations — the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC), the Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO), the Manitoba Metis Federation (MMF), the Northern Association of Community Councils (NACC) and local communities.

Conclusions

The decades-long underdevelopment of Northern Manitoba — caused by the resource extraction economy, by decisions made largely in the south and by the exclusion of Indigenous peoples — has created a host of problems, including labour shortages that in the past have been responded to by importing skilled labour from the south.

What is needed is an educational strategy that is made in the North, by and for Northerners; that is decolonized; and that responds to the real needs and life experiences of Northern Manitoba residents, especially Indigenous peoples.

Innovative efforts are underway to do exactly that. These include: the Kenanow Faculty of Education at UCN, which is shaped by and rooted in Northern Indigenous realities; the educational programming supported by UCN and driven by the residents of smaller Northern communities, like Bunibonnibee (although a good deal more funding is needed for this initiative); the Mining Readiness Training Program that seeks to open to Northern Manitoba residents the well-paid unionized jobs in mining; and the creative ways of moving young Northerners into occupations that are

in great demand and that pay above a living wage and the promotion of Indigenous Language and Culture.

These programs meet professional standards while being shaped by Northern and, in most cases, especially Indigenous peoples themselves. The University College of the North plays a major role in this process, with its open, participatory approach to Northern education needs and its legislative mandate to promote Indigenous and Northern education and to enhance the economic and social well-being of Northern Manitoba. Indigenous people are a part of this process to a much greater extent than was the case in the past, and in many cases are leading the process, with UCN and other institutions such as Assiniboine College shaping their efforts according to the expressed needs of local Indigenous communities.

Adult basic education is the missing piece. High school graduation rates are significantly lower in the North than in the South. Many adults who do not graduate from high school later want to earn their high school diploma so that they can land a well-paid job to support their families. Adult learning centres and adult literacy programs are the means to do this. They have a proven track record across the province, and they operate in a way completely consistent with the needs of Northerners and especially Northern Indigenous peoples. They are the gateway into post-secondary education and the production of a local, skilled labour force.

Because earning a high school diploma is the doorway into training for the skilled labour force that is needed in the North, an expansion of adult basic education would be fully consistent with the innovative educational strategies now being rolled out in Manitoba's North.

Yet adult basic education is underdeveloped, its budget having been flat-lined for the past quarter century (Silver 2025), trapping many in poverty and depriving the Northern economy of skilled workers.

We need expanded public investment in adult basic education as the pathway into post-secondary education that will lead to the development of a skilled Northern labour force. We also need expanded public investment in UCN and other post-secondary institutions doing important work in Northern Manitoba, so that they can continue to respond to the many requests from small Northern communities for support in developing local, decolonized educational strategies.

After decades of extracting wealth from the North, it would be to everyone's benefit to invest in the made in the North educational strategy, including the crucial foundation for such a strategy — adult basic education.

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The CCPA Manitoba publishes research on the original lands of the Anishinaabe, Anisininew, Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples and the homeland of the Métis Nation on Treaty 1 Territory. Beyond recognizing the importance of place, we acknowledge our responsibility to contribute to solutions to the problems caused by past and present colonial policies in Canada. We are committed to contributing research that builds on the strengths of Indigenous communities, respects the spirit and intent of Treaties, and that is done in partnership with First Nation, Métis and Inuit people and organizations.

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About the author

Jim Silver is Professor Emeritus at the University of Winnipeg and a Research Associate with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba. He is the author of "Unearth this Buried Treasure: Adult Education in Manitoba" (2022), "Building the Best Adult Education System in Canada" (2022), "The Fiscal Benefits of Adult Basic Education in Manitoba" (2025) and *Moving Forward, Giving Back: Transformative Aboriginal Adult Education* (2013). He has published extensively on poverty, education and housing in Winnipeg, Manitoba and Canada.



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