



BEYOND
THE

NUMBERS HEART

A MATTER
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{ SHOULDERS TO THE WHEEL:
WHAT QUEBEC CAN DO TO
REDUCE THE DROPOUT RATE

L. JACQUES MÉNARD O.C.

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WHAT QUEBEC CAN DO TO
REDUCE THE DROPOUT RATE

This book, as well as the report of the Groupe d'action sur la persévérance et la réussite scolaires, can be downloaded from L. Jacques Ménard's blog, *Si on s'y mettait...*, at www.sionsymettait.com.

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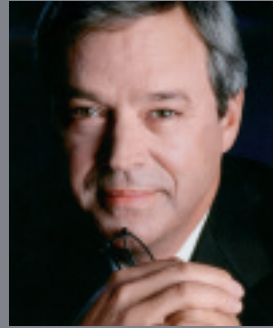
- The systematic use of the masculine to refer to persons of either gender is intended solely to facilitate reading.
- Unless otherwise specified, the data, tables and figures used in this book are taken from the *Knowledge Is Power* report of the Groupe d'action sur la réussite et la persévérance scolaires.
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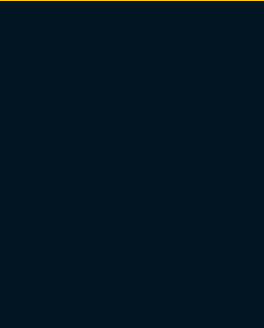
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I dedicate this book to the thousands of women and men in our childcare and daycare centres, in our schools, in community organizations, in the youth centres and in society at large who every day devote themselves to supporting our young people and helping them succeed.

L. Jacques Ménard, O.C.



**“HERE IS MY SECRET, A VERY
SIMPLE SECRET: IT IS ONLY WITH
THE HEART THAT ONE CAN SEE
RIGHTLY; WHAT IS ESSENTIAL IS
INVISIBLE TO THE EYE.”**

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

THE CURRENT SITUATION:

41.2% of Quebec students enrolled in secondary 1 in 2002 did not obtain their diploma in 2007, that is, within the normal time frame. And only 69% had obtained it by their 20th birthday.

OUR OBJECTIVE:

That by 2020 more than 80% of young Quebecers will celebrate their 20th birthday having earned a high school diploma or the equivalent.



TO FIND ONE'S WAY THROUGH THE JUNGLE OF DROPOUT-RELATED STATISTICS:

58.8 %

Percentage of students who were enrolled in secondary 1 in 2002 and had obtained a diploma in 2007, at the end of the normal five-year period (data from the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, based on the number of enrolments in secondary 1 in 2002 and the number of those students who graduated in 2007).

69 %

Percentage of young Quebecers who celebrate their 20th birthday with a high school diploma or the equivalent in hand (*Knowledge Is Power* report).

11.6 %

Percentage of 20- to 24-year-old Quebecers who do not have a high school diploma or the equivalent (Quebec, ninth out of the ten Canadian provinces, figures taken from the Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey for the 2005–2006 and 2007–2008 school years).

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INTRODUCTION

LET'S GET ON WITH IT: A STRUCTURED FIGHT TO LOWER THE DROPOUT RATE

In my book *Si on s'y mettait...*, published in the spring of 2008, the chapter on education is titled *Éduquer, c'est donner la vie une seconde fois* (Educating is giving life a second time). Education is my top priority, the starting point of every action aimed at building a healthy, happy and vibrant society.

My friends asked me, "Jacques, now that you've talked about it, what are you going to do about it beyond your involvement with groups of disadvantaged youth and the organizations that focus on them?"

The idea took root. I've met extraordinary people who work with these young people on the ground. Who support them every day to convince them and their families not to give up. A diploma matters, and you have to say so to young people, to their parents, to all of society. And yet it's clear that, while saying so is well and good, it's not enough.

By chance, I crossed paths with the managing director of the Montreal office of McKinsey & Company, Éric Lamarre, who wanted to become involved in a volunteer activity, as the firm does every other year. Several months earlier, I had met with Michel Perron, a researcher and the founder of the Conseil régional de prévention de l'abandon scolaire au Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean (CRÉPAS), a community which had done very well at reducing the school drop out rate over the years.

The connection was made. It was like a switch had been flipped. I called 15 or so people to help us set up a project and offer every region of Quebec a strategy inspired by the best practices in the field and adaptable to each region's needs. The original group of 15 grew to nearly 30 committed, involved individuals ready to devote time and energy to developing the project.

Our report is now published. It's called *Knowledge Is Power* and is downloadable from several websites and my blog. It lays out a strategy for

embarking on a genuine Quebec-wide effort to support student retention and success.

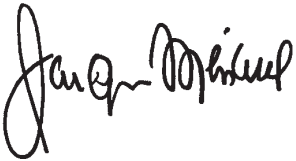
This process led me to meet with hundreds of people, who told me about their convictions, experiences and deepest hopes. *Knowledge Is Power* is a quality scientific report, and I'm very proud of it. However, beyond what is verifiable, documented and quantifiable, there is a whole other reality described to me by people who deal directly with these youth. I'm thinking, for example, of Dr. Gilles Julien, who works in some of Montreal's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods to help young people build their future. I'm thinking of the people at Centraide/United Way who are in daily contact with the youth we want to help. I'm thinking of the staff of the youth centres, whose mission has them straddling the line between the possible and the impossible with youth whose lives, too often, are already stigmatized. Many others also shared their concerns and hopes with me.

It is for them and for the young people they help that I've written down these thoughts, responsibility for which is mine alone, I hasten to add. They are the fruit of my reflection on the work of the Groupe d'action sur la persévérance et la réussite scolaires. Some of them have also been prompted by meetings that took place after the *Knowledge Is Power* report was made public.

In the weeks since, several persons have pointed out to me that various facets of the dropout problem weren't addressed. The class sizes in our schools, for example, or the public-private debate, the illiteracy of a significant percentage of Quebec's population, the post-teen returners to the school system and many other issues that the report doesn't consider. In this book, I wanted to look at the student retention problem from a more human perspective than is possible in a report restricted

to quantifiable experiments subject to systematic, measured monitoring. My scope is thus broader than the report's, though I wouldn't begin to claim that I've touched on every issue.

In the end, I've written down these reflections thoughts because I believe that the fight to reduce the dropout rate is, beyond the numbers, a matter of the heart.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Janice Minick". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Janice" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Minick".

PART I

THEY DROPPED OUT BECAUSE...

On my blog, I asked dropouts to send me a few words explaining what led them to leave school. Below I've summarized several reasons that came up often. You can view the complete replies on my blog. Of course, the causes of dropping out are much more complex than the following points would indicate. Still, this list gives you an idea. Here, then, are some of the replies I received:

- School's easy. You can breeze through it without doing any work. But then, toward the end of high school, you realize you're going to have to get a job and you're in tough because you've been goofing off for ten years. So, you drop out...
- I dropped out because what we were doing in school had nothing to do with what I wanted to do with my life.
- I left school halfway through secondary 5. I didn't feel motivated, except in the visual arts and technology courses.
- I wasn't good at school. The school administration put me in a special class. I wasn't making any progress, so I left.
- I dropped out because I wasn't happy at school, just drifting without a goal. But I'm going back because I want to be a mechanic and I need a diploma. Now I have a goal.
- I dropped out of secondary 3 because it was too hard for me. Couldn't concentrate, memorize stuff, study. Away from school, it was easy for me to memorize song lyrics. But not in school. No help—the teachers were overloaded. I gave up.
- Not motivated enough when it comes to creativity, imagination, playing. A dull, bitter education that just gets worse and worse.

If you're a dropout and want to share your thoughts, I encourage you to visit my blog. You'll be able to talk with others in the same situation and—who knows?—maybe even discover some new paths.

PART II

DROPPING OUT: A HUMAN TRAGEDY, A COSTLY PROBLEM, A THREAT TO SOCIETY

A HUMAN TRAGEDY

I want to make one thing clear from the outset. My reflections do not in any way constitute a value judgment about people who don't hold a diploma. I know several such people who make exceptional contributions to society, raise happy families and are role models in their communities.

I want only to draw your attention to the risks facing young people who are preparing to embark on a life without an education attested by a diploma. What was possible until recently is no longer possible. Or, at least it's less and less possible. Jobs for the unskilled are disappearing quickly. It's expected that about 700,000 positions will have to be filled in Quebec over the next three years. Skilled positions, of course. Why? Because more and more baby boomers will be retiring, and modern technology comes with a set of demands that require training. There's no need for everyone to rush to university, but there is an urgent need for everyone to acquire training in a field to which they're suited, the training they need to become a plumber, truck driver, nurse or nuclear physicist.

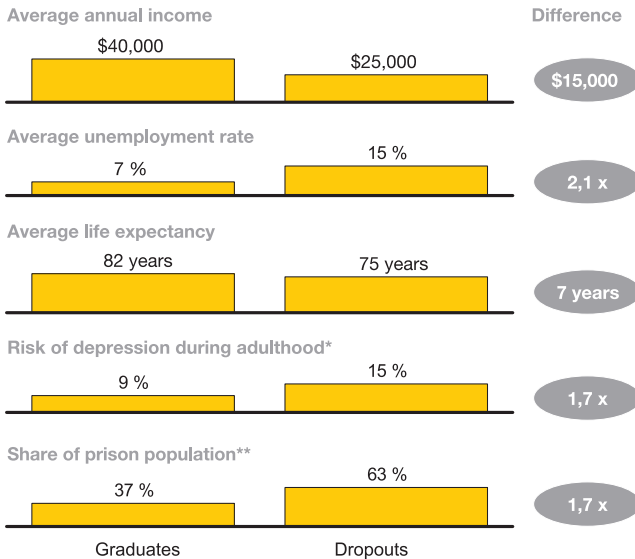
The harsh reality is that life today is difficult for the unqualified and their families, as Figure 1 illustrates.

Lower income, more frequent unemployment, a shorter life expectancy and a higher incidence of depression during adulthood. Those are the proven, documented, statistical facts.

I don't want to go into details, but people working in the field tell me that not only do non-graduates often live shorter lives than others, they also tend to have poorer health. None of which comes as a surprise. Poverty is one of the main determinants of overall health, a fact acknowledged by public health authorities. It is one of the findings

Figure 1

Non-graduates are penalized in several ways



* Data for women

** All prisoners being 100%

Sources : Statistics Canada; Institut de la statistique du Québec; Health Affairs; Ministère de la Sécurité publique; OECD; McKinsey & Company

that stood out during the work of another group I chaired in 1995, which dealt with funding for health care and social services system in the Province of Quebec. The lack of a diploma often leads to poverty. And poverty goes hand in hand with poor health. Always? Certainly not. But all too often.

Beyond the numbers, it's often a hard life to bear. And the resulting problems inevitably weigh heavily on every member of the family.

What's more, it's often the case that the children of dropouts follow their parents' example and drop out themselves.

The dropout's tragedy is also being told "no" more often than not, even if the desired job is open. It's feeling like you're not quite on the same playing field as others because you don't always understand labels, instructions or procedures. The human tragedy lies in seeing your résumé discarded with barely a glance, going straight to the "unqualified" pile. The human tragedy lies in lacking the means to keep pace with a society that's moving at breakneck speed.

All these things are what I mean when I say that dropping out is a human tragedy. You can understand why I believe that beyond the numbers, the fight to keep people from dropping out is a matter of the heart.

ASTRONOMICAL COSTS

Let's not mince words: Quebec is a poor province. It's true that we're reasonably well off compared with Mali, Tanzania or Ethiopia. But compared with our neighbours and our economic partners, we're poor. You might even say very poor. We have to stop kidding ourselves. According to economist Alain Dubuc (*Éloge de la richesse*, Les éditions Voix parallèles, 2006, p. 23), Quebecers' wealth position (GDP per capita) places us 54th among the 60 U.S. states and Canadian provinces. That's not something to be proud of.

How can we reduce our collective poverty level?

I know of only one way: educating our people, especially our young people. They are our main natural resource and we need to make them our main competitive advantage. More than that, our young people must become Quebec's brand, our trademark. Let it be said the world over that young Quebecers are well trained and well educated. We need to make Quebec an incubator for innovative ideas. And if you're

going to generate innovative ideas at a blazing rate, it helps to be young. At a conference in Paris last year, Bill Gates said that a large majority of new ideas at Microsoft are developed by employees under 30. After 30, he said with a hint of irony, “we just know too much” to be innovative.

Why should we do all that here in Quebec? Because we love our children, of course. But also because we have no choice.

Job fairs are already breaking attendance records. Employers no longer know where to look to find the people they need. Qualified people, of course. On March 18 and 19 of this year, more than 1,800 exhibitors attended the Montreal Job and Training Fair. A new record. And organizers are expecting even more employers to show up next year.

You have to understand that within barely ten years there will be just over two people of working age for every person 65 or older, compared to almost five to one today. I can hardly imagine what’s in store for us as a society if we wind up with an even higher proportion of young people who don’t have the necessary training to hold quality jobs. It’d be like trying to win the Stanley Cup with a third of the players glued to the bench!

While we’re on the subject of costs, I want to clarify a few things. It’s true that the dropout problem is not only about numbers. I’ve just discussed that. It’s also about money. A lot of money. It’s inescapable.

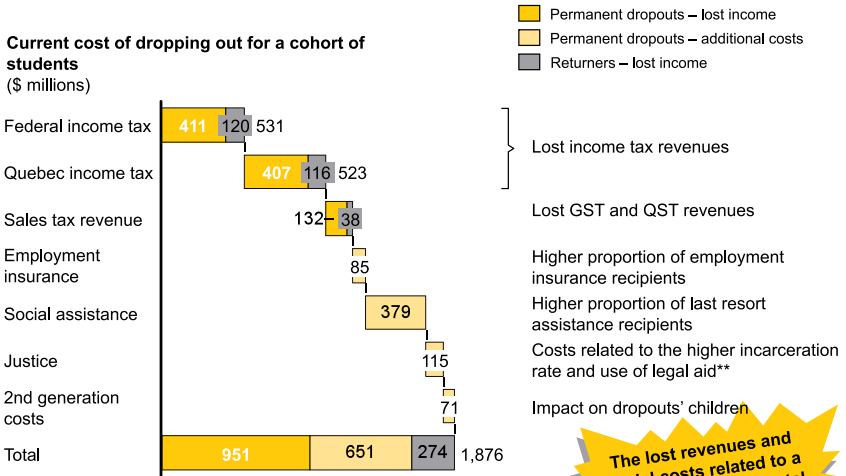
Pierre Fortin has costed it all out. According to the noted economist, a single cohort of dropouts costs the government \$1.9 billion.

That’s what Figure 2 shows. Quebec definitely doesn’t have the means to let that kind of money slip away. Think about the schools, hospitals, highways and everything else we have trouble funding adequately, even when the economy is going strong.

Figure 2

Cost of a dropout cohort in Quebec

Current cost of dropping out for a cohort of students
(\$ millions)



* Cohort based on 89,574 students, 15% of whom are permanent dropouts and 16% of whom are returners

** Excluding court fees

*** The cost represents the difference between a dropout and a high school graduate

Sources: Statistics Canada; Institut de la statistique du Québec; Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport; McKinsey & Company

The lost revenues and social costs related to a permanent dropout total \$120,000 in current dollars***

And that's not all. When we released our report on the dropout problem, *Knowledge is Power*, Pierre Fortin told me that we also need to consider the income that dropouts won't earn over the course of their working lives. How much is that? Around \$439,000 per dropout. That's the average difference between a dropout's lifetime earnings and those of a graduate. Do you really think Quebec society can keep losing such astonishing sums of money? As the saying goes, if you need to ask, you can't afford it.

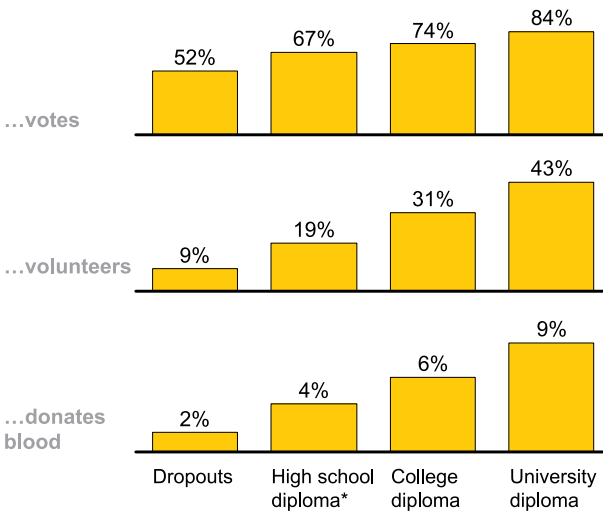
A DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

I've called dropping out a human tragedy. I've also said it's a financial disaster for the individuals involved and their families as well as for the public purse. But dropping out is also a tragedy for our democracy, as Figure 3 shows.

Figure 3

Graduation and citizen participation

Percentage of the population segment that...



*High school or vocational diploma

Sources: *Journal of Public Economics*; College Board; McKinsey & Company

That education increases earning power is clear. Nobody questions that. But education is so much more. I'm convinced that what education means, above all, is freedom. The freedom to develop your talents to the maximum, for the benefit of society as a whole. The freedom—and the ability—to fully carry out your duties as a citizen. The freedom

to achieve personal fulfillment and to do so independently.

Not that this has anything to do with one's generosity or willingness to be socially involved. Dozens of non-graduates are. I know people with little formal education who have the biggest hearts in the world. They are extraordinary assets to society. What I am talking about is the need to give every person as many tools as possible so they can reach their potential to contribute, to the fullest of their ability, to the development, governance and well-being of their community.

Maurice Duplessis, who was premier of Quebec for nearly 20 years and not a big supporter of education, once quipped that educating the citizenry amounted to giving it the means to criticize politicians!

EVERY YOUNG PERSON IS UNIQUE AND SO IS EVERY DROPOUT

In the weeks since our Knowledge is Power report was published, several people have told me we should simply copy what Ontario is doing. Our neighbour to the west has—with understandable pride—just announced impressive gains in student retention. Ontario has boosted its graduation rate from 68% five years ago to 77% today. “Just copy the Ontario model,” people say, “and everything will be fine!”

To paraphrase Reno Dépôt's famous tagline, if it were that easy, we'd have done it already.

Unfortunately, it's not that easy. In the first place, there's no single Ontario, U.S., European or other model for improving student retention and success. Every child is unique, and so is every family and community. Because there are multiple reasons for dropping out, we need multiple tactics to fight the problem.

However, there are a certain number of determinants that set students

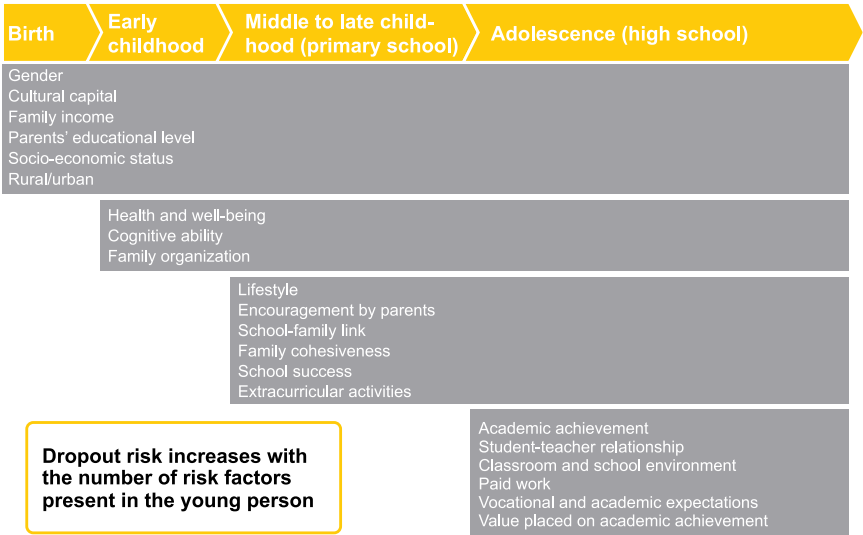
up to become dropouts. These should be identified at the earliest possible age, particularly in at-risk youths, and then countered. Figure 4 illustrates the sequence of factors that lead youths to drop out and that we must work to change.

As Figure 4 shows, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that the earliest dropout determinants sometimes appear at birth, particularly in the children at greatest risk. As children grow older, the factors change. Or, rather, their effects compound, especially if nothing has been done to counter them.

I can still hear the voice of Dr. Julien at a meeting of the Action Group.

Figure 4

Determinants to monitor from birth through high school graduation



Sources: Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon; Groupe d'étude des conditions de vie et des besoins de la population; McKinsey & Company

“We must act on the entire continuum of the child’s life,” he said. “Above all, when it comes to the children at greatest risk, we must start at birth.” Gilles, your message was received loud and clear. I hope everyone understands. Waiting until high school to prevent kids from dropping out is a little like throwing a life jacket to someone who has already drowned.

SAVING CHILDREN BY HELPING PARENTS

A lot of things happen at home, and the Quebec government is right to remind us that parents have an important role to play in supporting their children’s efforts to earn a diploma. That being said, parents still need the means, tools and competencies (to use an educational buzzword) if they are to help their children.

The release of the Action Group’s report sparked numerous reactions, including a letter I received from the chief executive officer of the Literacy Foundation, Maryse Perreault. Her letter moved me deeply. In it, Ms. Perreault referred to an OECD study on literacy released in 2006. The results are sobering. I quote Ms. Perreault, referring to the study:

- 800,000 Quebecers (16%) between 16 and 65 years of age are ranked in the lowest level of reading ability and considered completely illiterate. Among them, 40% are between 26 and 46 years old and some are parents. A sample comment from one of these illiterates: “I can write my name and address on a form. But the rest of the questions are too hard.”
- 1,700,000 Quebecers (33%) between 16 and 65 are ranked at Level 2, or “weak,” in terms of reading ability. In practice, these people are able to deal only with short texts that use a limited vocabulary and refer to familiar topics. A sample comment: “I never go to parent–teacher meetings because I’m scared I’ll be asked to read something in front of everyone.”

-
- In all, 2.5 million Quebecers between 16 and 65 lack adequate reading skills. That is 49% of that age group.

Asking these people —again, many are parents— to read to their children and help them discover the wealth of language is quite simply futile. Worse, these parents are unable to process the written information that is part and parcel of everyday life. That is these people’s reality. It’s time to get rid of our rose-coloured glasses, and fast!

Children who live in such families are unlikely to attend daycare. Why? Their parents often avoid any situation where they might be asked to read and react to a document. As we’ll see, even when spaces are available and there’s no charge, these parents refuse to enrol their children.

A child who is born into a disadvantaged home and whose parents are under-educated, or even illiterate, will spend more time watching television than other children do. No one will read that child a bedtime story. There’s a high likelihood of the child’s starting school without having acquired what is called “school readiness.” Even before the first report card, which the parents won’t be able to read (whether the grades are numbers or letters, with or without rankings and averages, etc.), the child will be on the losing end. How are the parents supposed to identify their child’s academic weaknesses? From lesson to lesson, the deficits will accumulate. What started as a small problem, often reading-related, can quickly become insurmountable. That child has every likelihood of being slotted into a “special needs” stream with classmates who get branded as slow by other children. There is a very high risk that these children will see themselves as dropouts even before they finish grade school.

Above I summarized much of the letter I received from Ms. Perreault, who closed by writing: “Has it occurred to anyone that these parents

have developed an aversion to school, because for them school is associated with failure, and they're overwhelmed by the situation? To fight this battle effectively, *we absolutely must help yesterday's children so we can save tomorrow's adults.*"

I'm in complete agreement with Ms. Perreault. We can't cut corners on effective programs to raise the literacy levels of parents who need it. Otherwise, the best intentions in the fight against dropping out may come to naught. And the way to do so is to offer these parents instruction to improve their basic skills and develop a positive attitude toward learning. I, too, believe that the fight against dropping out requires a significantly more consistent effort to raise the literacy levels of the children we want to help. I'll return to this subject in the part of the book that deals with the proposed actions, where I'll offer up ideas for moving forward and discussing who's best positioned to lead the way.

PART III

THE SITUATION IN QUEBEC

THE QUEBEC DROPOUT RATE: A HUGE CHALLENGE

Five years after beginning high school, only 58.8% of young Quebecers have obtained their diplomas (2002–2007 cohort). Canada ranks 16th out of 30 OECD countries in this category.

When they celebrate their 20th birthday, 69% of Quebecers hold a high school diploma or the equivalent. More young women than young men stay in school through graduation (75% versus 64%). Among dropouts, more young women than young men return to school to earn their diploma (20% versus 9%). We might do well to begin by asking ourselves why. On the radio I recently heard a school principal—from Ontario, if I'm not mistaken—proudly announcing that they've started opening boys-only and girls-only high schools. Maybe that's what the full flush of adolescence requires. It's nothing scientific, mind you—only an impression. But I know the idea is already being discussed in several European countries and has been put into practice in several U.S. schools. Perhaps it's time for a pilot project to test this hypothesis here?

Fully 11.6% of Quebecers between age 20 and 24 don't have a high school diploma or the equivalent. This puts Quebec in ninth place among Canadian provinces in this category. In 1992, we were in seventh place. We're falling behind.

By their 30th birthday, 85% of Quebecers have successfully completed an educational program leading to a diploma.

Of course, some people trumpet this 85%, which looks encouraging provided you don't scratch the surface. It's rarely mentioned that this statistic applies only to people age 30 and over. And, of course, no one talks much about the quality of the content of some of those diplomas... In any case, this obsession with what appears to be a positive statistic changes nothing about the basic problem. Even if our young people get

back on track by taking courses later in life, they're still dropping out at an alarmingly high rate. There's absolutely no excuse for congratulating ourselves on our high returner rate when we're the dropout rate leaders! What's more, we know that during all the years that dropouts are without a diploma, they will probably contribute less to society. At an individual level, they may miss out on opportunities that may not come around again. And let's not forget the financial losses they'll rack up. Pierre Fortin estimates the cost of a single dropout to be \$439,000 (he is, of course, referring to the cost for the dropout's entire working life).

But I don't see why we should be content to wait until the last possible moment before helping dropouts to return to school and celebrating the eventual awarding of another diploma. I appreciate that a public relations exercise can put a more positive spin on unsavoury statistics. But is that really the goal when we know the consequences for both the individual and society during the years a dropout spends without a diploma?

I'd much prefer that this bright and shiny 85% apply to the obtaining of a regular high school, vocational or technical diploma, at the age when a large majority of our young people are supposed to have completed their high school studies. But I'm optimistic. By working hard, we'll get there.

ARE WE MOVING FORWARD OR BACKWARD?

The question's important. Are we gaining or losing ground? We need to know.

In some ways, it's like what the bus driver would say when I was a student: "Go ahead, move to the back!" That's the way it is, at least for our 20- to 24- year-olds. I repeat: 11.6% of these young adults do not have a high school diploma. That puts Quebec in ninth place among the Canadian provinces, as Figure 5 shows. In 1992, we were in seventh place. Political correctness be damned, that's what I call moving backward. How about you?

Figure 5

Quebec's unenviable position 2008 rankings

Ranking of OECD countries*

% of population obtaining the equivalent of a DES or DEP** within the normal time period

1	Germany
2	Greece
3	Finland
4	Korea
5	Japan
6	Norway
7	Iceland
8	Czech Republic
9	Switzerland
10	United Kingdom
16	Canada
18	United States
28	France

Ranking of Canadian provinces***

Graduation rate, population 20–24 years

1	British Columbia
2	Ontario
3	New Brunswick
4	Nova Scotia
5	Saskatchewan
6	Newfoundland and Labrador
7	Prince Edward Island
8	Alberta
9	Quebec
10	Manitoba

Since 1992, Quebec has fallen to ninth place in Canada

* OECD *Education at a Glance 2008*; data for 2005–2006

** High school or vocational diploma

*** Statistics Canada, average for the 2005–2006 to 2007–2008 school years

Sources: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; Statistics Canada; McKinsey & Company

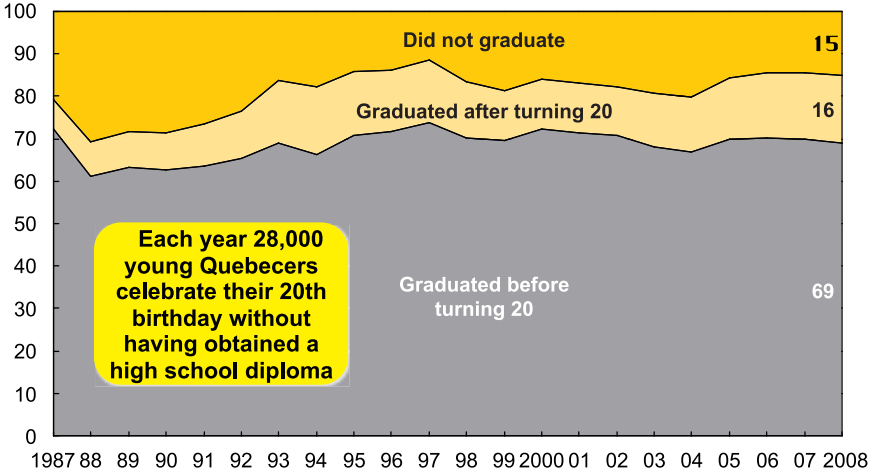
Given that reality, I fail to see how we can speak of Quebec as a leader in Canada. And, yes, I recently heard someone say that on the radio. Yet, adult education is supposed to be one of Quebec's great strengths. I'm probably missing something here because, for me, leading is when you're out in front, not bringing up the rear.

Especially among the youngest, those of high school age, have we managed to make any progress? Figure 6 shows us the current state of affairs at a glance.

Figure 6

Graduation rate among under-20-year-olds essentially unchanged for two decades

High school graduation rate,* population age 16 and over
%



*High school or vocational diploma

Source: Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport; McKinsey & Company

Setting aside all the fancy words, after 20 years of endless discussion and reforms, of going from one cross-curricular competency to another, we remain stuck in the same place. Life has become incredibly more complex in the last two decades. Job requirements are stiffer. The need for training has never been higher. Yet our percentage of 20-year-old graduates remains unchanged...

AND ELSEWHERE IN THE WORLD?

Figure 5 shows Canada's position among OECD countries with respect to obtaining a high school diploma within the normal time frame: 16th out of 30. And it's certainly not Quebec's performance that's pulling Canada higher in this category.

On the other hand, it's important to emphasize—and even re-emphasize—that our young people who stay in school perform very well in the international tests organized by the OECD through its Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). The 2007 PISA study measured the performance of a representative sampling of 400,000 students age 15 in 57 countries (30 OECD members and 27 partner countries) that together make up 87% of the world economy.

The tests focus on math, reading and science. Figure 7 shows how Quebec students ranked in these tests.

Congratulations to our young people on obtaining such excellent results. Even as we shouldn't hesitate to forcefully denounce the pabulum we're so often served, we should proudly celebrate our successes when they occur. Quebec's ranking in these international tests shows that our education system works well for young people who are still in school when the tests are given. But there's a catch: everyone is anxiously waiting to see the results of the next set of tests, which will be

Figure 7

Students who stay in school do well

Ranking of OECD* countries, 2006 PISA tests**

Mathematics	Reading	Science
1 Taiwan	Korea	Finland
2 Finland	Finland	Hong Kong
3 Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Canada
4 Korea	Canada	Quebec
Quebec	Quebec	Taiwan
5 Netherlands	New Zealand	Estonia
6 Switzerland	Ireland	Japan
7 Canada	Australia	New Zealand
8 Macao – China	Liechtenstein	Australia
9 Liechtenstein	Poland	Netherlands
10 Japan	Netherlands	Korea
11 New Zealand	Sweden	Liechtenstein
12 Belgium	Belgium	Slovenia
13 Australia	Estonia	Germany
14 Estonia	Switzerland	United Kingdom
15 Denmark	Japan	Czech Republic
16 Czech Republic	Taiwan	Switzerland
17 Iceland	Germany	Austria
18 Austria	United Kingdom	Macao – China
19 Germany	Denmark	Belgium
20 Slovenia	Slovenia	Ireland

*Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development

**Programme for International Student Assessment

Sources: OECD; McKinsey & Company

given to our first cohort of students who have gone through the education reform of recent years. In the meantime, we live in hope as they say...

The main conclusion to draw from these international comparisons is that we would be smart to focus on our 30% who drop out because school holds little interest for them. I say school. But I should also add that it's all of society that's responsible for the dropout phenomenon, not just the schools. As I mentioned earlier, a whole set of factors leads to dropping out, and school has nothing to do with several of them. There's the family, the social environment, socio-economic conditions, the value that Quebec society as a whole places on education. Of

course, some of the factors are school-related. That's why we should speak of a responsibility that's shared by all of society.

WHY DO QUEBECERS BELITTLE THEMSELVES?

We Quebecers also need to learn to value our successes. Why don't we celebrate when we succeed? I know the expression "small is beautiful" popularized by E. F. Schumacher in 1973. But I'm fearful that, even though the world has changed significantly in the ensuing 35 years, Quebec hasn't moved on. My friend Julie Snyder recently told me that Quebec is probably the only province or state in North America that delights in diminishing itself. For example, take our iconic cheese, Le P'tit Québec. "*Un p'tit café avec ça*" maybe? And why not *un p'tit biscuit*? I wonder whether a brand built around a diminutive would do as well elsewhere as it does in Quebec. We're comfortable here at home. Yet there's no denying that we're not especially tolerant of those who do a little too well. It's fine to be stuck in the middle of the pack. And from there it's only a short step to the traditional expression *on est né pour un p'tit pain* (we're born into the underclass). Here, another *p'tit* something...

Frankly, I hope that's not the type of attitude we instill in our young people at school. I hope we push them to excel, to succeed, to celebrate their successes. I worry a little when I hear that every effort is being made to eliminate all kinds of comparison and competitiveness in our schools. Is it frowned upon to work hard in order to do better than others? Could there be a connection here with the young people who drop out and tell us they don't find that school motivates them to give their all? Perhaps we should reflect on that "*un p'tit peu plus.*"

PART IV

GOOD—BUT UNHERALDED—WORK IS BEING DONE HERE

AND YET...

Throughout Quebec, extraordinary efforts are being made to help young people who are thinking about leaving school prematurely. But these efforts are rarely as well known as they ought to be. Hundreds, if not thousands, of dedicated individuals are devoting much time and energy to a large number of projects.

I'd like to say a few words about some of these attempts to help Quebec's youth, without making any claim to being even remotely comprehensive. I'll simply discuss a few examples that I know better than others. I'm convinced they constitute a solid base for action. My goal is not to describe these initiatives in detail; that discussion can be found in *Knowledge is Power*. Here I want to share some thoughts on a few initiatives and, possibly, contribute something of my own by suggesting some courses of action. Nothing scientific, something far more impressionistic. And I'd be interested in hearing what you think, if you have a few minutes to leave a comment on my blog.

The figures show that in the past 20 years we've failed to make any real progress on the dropout problem. I don't feel that the existing initiatives are to blame. In fact, I'm convinced we're doing many things right, though too often without the necessary intensity, without giving the admirable people involved all the resources they need. The organizations behind them, often grassroots and community-based, rarely know whether their modest funding will continue for much longer. When funding is never assured beyond the next few months, we rob children of precious time in order to work on the next grant application. It just isn't right that initiatives that work should grind to a halt because their budgets aren't renewed. And yet it happens well too often.

I've spoken with people who devote their lives to supporting children at risk of dropping out, to giving them the kind of guidance that many of them don't get at home, to taking on the role of intermediary between families and the many services they have to deal with but without knowing how. I assure you there's no shortage of generosity or skills. I believe that by better supporting the individuals and organizations already involved in recognized actions, we will take a major step toward achieving our goals.

CHILDCARE AND DAYCARE

I've said it before and I'll say it again: with at-risk children, success is largely determined by how early we intervene. It has to be at the earliest possible age. In this respect, Quebec's parents are the envy of other Canadians and parents in many other countries. Our \$7-a-day daycare centres are an innovative initiative that must be given its full due. From a very early age, our children are able to benefit from professional guidance. Our childcare centres (CPE) program is a major success. There are still not enough spaces, but we'll get there eventually. The government has committed to soon creating spaces more quickly.

We need to be aware that the full impact of this important initiative has yet to be seen on the graduation rate. The program is still young. Soon, the first wave of children who've gone through the new daycare system will complete high school. I'm convinced we'll already see a difference. The competence and devotion of the women and men who look after our children fill me with confidence. I once asked someone working in a daycare centre what led to their choice of career. The answer went straight to my heart: "I don't know of any other job in the world where you hear 'I love you' a hundred times a day." Availability, expertise and love: I think this is the recipe for success with children.

We know that at least one-third of children from disadvantaged areas don't have what it takes to make a successful start in school. Expanding our daycare network is a bright ray of hope for them.

Unfortunately, a quality daycare centre isn't a panacea. It has been noted that children from disadvantaged homes are less likely to attend daycare than other children. Why? The answer is not as obvious as you might think. The factor that comes up most often is that some families in disadvantaged areas don't trust public services for various reasons. Some fear that their ways will be judged unorthodox by "the authorities." Others want to prevent their children from being compared with more advantaged children. Some don't see the value of having their children babysat by others when they don't have a job and are home all day. And still others, particularly illiterate parents, refuse to get involved with a daycare centre's administrative requirements for fear of being unable to meet them.

It will be necessary to get to the root causes and find ways to convince these parents to entrust their children to professionals who can better prepare them for a successful transition to school. Grassroots and community organizations can certainly play an important role. They often have well-established relationships with people in these situations. Trust already exists and there's often an opportunity to build on positive experiences. Why should we reinvent the wheel when we can provide the tools to people who have already laid some of the groundwork for success?

I've already mentioned Dr. Gilles Julien several times. He's the founder of the *Fondation pour la promotion de la pédiatrie sociale* (FPPS). He frequently stresses the necessity of taking action throughout the entire continuum of a child's life, particularly when at-risk children are concerned. That often means from birth to graduation.

Gilles knows what he's talking about. He's not generally given to speechifying. He spends long hours with children, their families and all kinds of people who work with youth. He provides encouragement, helps solve problems and, of course, also serves as a physician to the children. Health is such an important issue for these children. It's one of the major determinants of poverty, which in turn is a significant contributor to dropping out.

You need to listen in on a conversation between him and one of the children to understand how important his work is. It's said that the bond of trust between children and the people who want to help them is essential. I've seen trust in children's eyes when I've gone to visit Gilles in the neighbourhoods where he does most of his work, Hochelaga-Maisonneuve and Côtés-des-Neiges. Trust: that is the key word in every initiative aimed at helping children persevere—in spite of everything, I would add. And it goes both ways. The child whom we trust—and who knows it—is capable of great things. The same goes for adults.

Dr. Julien's foundation has three goals: supporting social pediatrics projects; encouraging the teaching of social pediatrics to young doctors and other professionals who work with children; and popularizing his approach as widely as possible.

His work in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve is aimed at children ages 0 to 12 and their families. The delivery path is through a health services system deeply rooted in the community. These services have been developed in close cooperation with the area's community and public networks. Dr. Julien has established a bridgehead for his activities, called *Assistance aux enfants en difficulté* (help for kids in difficulty).

In Côte-des-Neiges, children have full access to preventive services adapted to their needs and to reinforcement activities. The key is a holistic approach involving both networks and direct, sustained contact with families and the area's organizations.

The task is both important and difficult. It requires that these children be given the tools they need to meet the same requirements as other children when they start school. Same system, same school, same requirements. And yet, some of these children's lives are entirely different. In some cases, their parents have never left the city of Montreal or even their neighbourhood in their whole lives. That's just a fact of life for them, nothing more. No one is acting in bad faith. When you walk out of certain inner-city metro stations, you feel like you've landed on another planet. The children living there will not be able to prepare adequately for school by watching images flash by on television. Without help, how are these families supposed to find their way to the services they need so badly? That's where Dr. Julien and his team come into play. They know the neighbourhoods and their organizations, and they inspire trust because their history shows that their future actions will be worthwhile.

Initiatives like these take place on the front lines, day in and day out. They provide direct assistance to children who would otherwise have only a slight chance of growing up healthy and who would have even

slimmer odds of earning a diploma one day. It's an effective way to save children who would otherwise be likely to slip through the cracks in the system. Children who are also our own.

I focus on Dr. Julien because I know him and I've seen the results of his work in these neighbourhoods. I'm sure there are others like him working elsewhere in Quebec. We must quickly increase the availability of this kind of help for these particularly high-risk children. There's no need for major studies or five-year plans—we don't have time for that. The model exists and is being continuously improved. Let's be confident in our ability to reproduce such actions. Should we clone Dr. Julien? That might not be such a bad idea... Bravo to you, Gilles, and to the people working with you. You are living proof that the fight against dropping out is much more than just numbers: it's also a matter of the heart.



1,2,3 GO

Another worthwhile initiative is the 1,2,3 GO centres. I've been associated with this program since its inception nearly 15 years ago. Centraide was one of the founding organizations and has supported the centres from the start, together with other partners. This is yet another proven initiative grounded firmly in the community. While on the subject of Centraide/United Way, I'd like to mention that this organization supports a dozen programs and initiatives directly or indirectly related to the dropout problem. They include the Maison de Jonathan, in Longueuil, which helps dropouts ages 12 to 17; Ancre des jeunes, in Verdun, which provides services for young people who are either on the verge of dropping out or who have all but given up on school; Je

passee partout, which works with primary school children in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve; Carrefour des 6–12, in Pierrefonds, which works with families at home, among other things. And that's to name just a few. Other Centraide/United Way in Quebec also do this kind of work.

Back to the 1,2,3 GO centres. Their mission is to promote and support community action around childhood development. Why yet another community initiative? Because for all children, everything starts with the community they live in. And for all too many of them, that's also where it ends. Which is why it's absolutely essential that action start with the community, not in office towers. 1,2,3 GO also has the virtue of working with children from the earliest age possible.

Here, too, parents are systematically involved. The centres help them make an active, effective contribution to their children's development. They help them do the right things, provide encouragement, support their children. Parents' role is really critical in the fight against dropping out. And it goes without saying that every parent in the world wants their children to succeed.

In this case, the emphasis is on social innovation and disseminating knowledge. Often, that means simply making connections between natural partners within a structured organization and helping establish professional coordination.

Are you surprised to see Centraide/United Way involved in the fight against dropping out via 1,2,3 GO? I hope not, because Centraide/United Way is involved in various social environments through the organizations that are best able to do the work effectively. Once again, grassroots and community organizations are often in the best position to reach people who need help, to marshal resources and to help people rebuild their trust. There's that word again: trust. It is

such a crucial ingredient.

Here's a particularly relevant example of an intervention: the *Enquête sur la maturité scolaire des enfants montréalais*. This study of school readiness among Montreal children is carried out by other organizations and the federal government. The goal is to better understand children's real needs, with the ultimate aim of delivering better adapted interventions in the real world. Understanding the Early Years is an initiative that supports stakeholders in digesting the study's results and developing strategies for improving the situation.

1,2,3 GO! is one more initiative that could be gradually adopted elsewhere in Quebec. We're off to a good start and shouldn't be stopped.



80, RUELLÉ DE L'AVENIR

This is a brand new project. I'm particularly proud of it because BMO Financial Group is one of its partners, along with Gaz Metro and others, including Radio-Canada, Dr. Julien's Projet 80, the Commission scolaire de Montréal, Garneau school, CGI and the Institut de tourisme et d'hôtellerie du Québec.

It is another fine, practical initiative. It comprises a holistic intervention with children and their families in one of Montreal's most impoverished neighbourhoods. In this case, the idea is to give children a fun learning environment where they can build their knowledge, skills and abilities by taking part in gatherings and hands-on experiences.

How will it work? First, we set up a custom space. The environment

where a child grows is so important, especially when the child lives in a disadvantaged area like the one where Montreal's Garneau school is located. So, we start by creating thematic workshops in an annex to the main school building. What kind of workshops? A test kitchen, a botany room, a multimedia centre, a science workshop and so on. The school's rooftop has been transformed into a terrace dubbed Place de l'avenir ("future square"). There will be a garden there for the children and their parents. The gym was completely renovated and turned into a hub for fitness and sports, naturally, but also a place for encouraging cultural and artistic expression. The schoolyard is now a place for recreation and family gatherings.

Taken together, these elements constitute a true model of coordinated action in the heart of the neighbourhood. It's a space of one's own, instead of a grey, dilapidated building with little appeal for children and their families. Place de l'avenir is also open to children from four nearby schools.

And what's the purpose of all this? There's a single goal: to make school a place that children like and where parents feel at ease and welcome. A place of real solidarity, where children's staying in school and success are highly valued. All this will make it easier to promote healthy lifestyles. It will also make it easier to help parents provide effective guidance to their children.

The project focuses squarely on children, families and their communities. The idea is to help children develop an appreciation for ways of life that are unfamiliar to them. We give them access to experiences they otherwise wouldn't even be able to imagine. Who knows? Maybe the test kitchen, botany room, multimedia centre or science workshop will lead to careers that would never have happened without them. That is our deepest hope.

CRÉPAS



CRÉPAS (Conseil régional de prévention de l'abandon scolaire au Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean) is, in a sense, the starting point for the Action Group. After a meeting with professor Michel Perron, an accomplished researcher associated with several universities and colleges and the founder of CRÉPAS, I put Michel in touch with McKinsey & Company, which did a fantastic job—*pro bono*—of developing a model inspired by best practices for supporting student retention and success. I discussed this briefly in the introduction to this document.

Mobilizing key players in the education sector is the core of the CRÉPAS approach. I can almost hear you thinking “the community, again.” And you’re right. Everyone is involved. With its partners, CRÉPAS has succeeded in sparking true social change in response to the dropout problem. They have worked hard to make people realize that the fight against this problem is the business of the entire community. A young person and the community are jointly responsible the young person’s staying in school through graduation. But—and this can’t be overstressed—the young person must remain at the centre of the approach, with strong support from the whole community. Seen this way, when a young person gives up on education, the entire community has failed. The same goes for success: it is shared by all, and should always be celebrated.

One of the key characteristics of the CRÉPAS approach is that all its activities are based on scientific research, very high quality research into young people’s lifestyles. That is the only way to determine, with

any degree of certainty, why these particular young people drop out, since each region and each city neighbourhood has its own unique characteristics.

CRÉPAS's success is closely tied to the quality of the research, and CRÉPAS has solid support from a research group—ECOBES (Étude des conditions de vie et des besoins de la population)—associated with the Cégep de Jonquière. The group's primary mission is to research the population's living conditions and needs. Michel Perron is one of the ECOBES researchers. Using solid research as a starting point, it is up to every community to develop approaches suited to its own children's needs.

In addition to mobilizing the entire community and the high quality of its research on young people's lives, CRÉPAS owes its success to its consistent, regular follow-up work with young people and their families. When a young person shows several signs of being on the road to dropping out, follow-up is essential until graduation. When there's a crisis or other circumstances in which dropping out is likely and a young person is left alone and unsupported, there's a very high risk of seeing all previous efforts go up in smoke. There's a need for uninterrupted sensitization, promotion and guidance efforts. As they say in the region: every child needs encouragement and support every day.

CRÉPAS's success didn't happen by chance. It's the result of an exceptional commitment from the entire community to supporting young people. That kind of involvement doesn't just happen overnight. As in any field, mobilization is the result of hard work by a competent, dedicated team. And, in most cases, it is also the result of the commitment of a capable "quarterback" who believes fully in the cause. That is where the CRÉPAS team gets its strength. It has convinced the entire region that student retention and success are matters of pride as well as

prerequisites for economic success and a high quality of life. At CRÉPAS, the quarterback is Dr. Michel Perron, who founded and remains the heart and soul of this extraordinary team. Bravo to you, Michel, and to your whole team.

WHO SAYS QUEBECERS ARE DOING NOTHING ABOUT THE DROPOUT PROBLEM?

The initiatives I've just described are only a few examples among many. The efforts are usually local, often driven by the hard work of people whose generosity and goodwill are their only resources. Commitment can accomplish a lot, especially when you're working with children. But it's no substitute for stable funding paired with flexible, competent support that leaves enough room to adapt a given action to a particular setting and clientele.

If there is a "Quebec model" of support for student retention and success, I think I've just sketched its broad outline.

First, as you may have noticed, all these efforts originate at the local level. The starting point is always the environment in which the child is born, grows up and studies. The initiatives are based first and foremost on children, their families and their environment. The closely coordinated efforts of the various stakeholders are all articulated around this core.

There can be no success if we don't pay special attention to a child's family environment. That is the child's primary milieu. It is the soil we must fertilize if the child is to grow well, stay in good health and remain interested in learning.

These efforts involve the full continuum of the child's life. Especially in disadvantaged homes, that means starting at birth. We must never give up, even when the situation seems hopeless. Dropout factors are always present in at-risk children. A momentary loss of focus is all it takes to lose a young person. That's why we must be there all the time and provide constant guidance.

In some cases, an effort is made to share and spread knowledge gained

with the leaders of other initiatives. That is the only way to propagate success, to learn from others' experiences and help others learn from ours. This is an area where improvements are required. But it takes resources.

Generally speaking, measurement and evaluation are not really part of our way of doing things in today's society. But is that a shortcoming that's confined to our school retention initiatives? In Quebec, we haven't really developed the habit of systematically measuring and evaluating the things we do. It's something we need to consider because it's yet another prerequisite if we truly want to improve our ways of working and adjust our aim when necessary. As Albert Einstein once said, the definition of insanity is "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." That is what happens when we don't measure and evaluate, and it applies both to our private lives and to our social projects.

PART V

LESSONS TO DRAW FROM OUR NEIGHBOURS' EXPERIENCE

WELL-DOCUMENTED SUCCESS STORIES

Various initiatives under way in the rest of Canada and in the United States can inspire our efforts to increase the graduation rate, particularly as several of these programs have been extensively documented and closely tracked in terms of the results obtained and the costs involved. This isn't to say that we necessarily need to import one of these "models" lock, stock and barrel. I've already explained why.

I won't provide detailed descriptions of these initiatives; you'll find those in the *Knowledge Is Power* report. I simply want to share a few examples with you. I especially want to give you an idea of the main principles on which these unusually well-documented success stories are based.

HIGH/SCOPE PERRY PRESCHOOL PROGRAM HIGH/SCOPE

Developed at the University of Michigan in the 1960s, this program aims to encourage the cognitive and social development of 3- and 4-year-olds of low socio-economic status. The program has since been implemented in several U.S. states and other countries, including the United Kingdom, Ireland, Mexico, the Netherlands, South Africa, Singapore, Korea and Indonesia.

While not identical in every way, the program has some similarities with childcare and daycare services in Quebec.

Children are subject to intensive intervention for about 2.5 hours a day, five days a week. The program lasts two years. Weekly home visits are scheduled throughout the program. As you can see, much emphasis is placed on working closely with the family. That is essential. An interesting fact: the ratio is one educator to 5.7 children. The educators receive special training, particularly in areas such as adult-child interaction, setting up the classroom for best results, the materials with the

greatest potential, and establishing the daily routines most compatible with these children's development. Considerable attention is focused on approaches to learning development, development of reading, language and communication skills, social and emotional development, health and well-being, arts and science. All without losing sight of the fact that they're dealing with 3- and 4-year-olds.

Measuring, evaluating and documenting the various initiatives are integral to the program.

CHECK & CONNECT



The Check & Connect program was set up in 1990 by the University of Minnesota in partnership with Minneapolis Public Schools. Program workers identify at-risk high schoolers and provide them with individualized assistance adapted to their specific needs. The goal is to help the students stay in school until they've obtained a high school diploma.

The entire approach is based on detailed research and close collaboration between researchers, school staff, students and their parents.

The referred students are subject to daily tracking of dropout risk factors, such as absenteeism, tardiness, failure and behaviour problems. Nothing is left to chance. The students are monitored and mentored; they're shown understanding but no indulgence.

A monitor closely tracks each student enrolled in the program. The monitor plays a key role in the process, becoming a kind of mentor and coach to the young person as well as a coordinator of the services the student requires. The program's success is based on the quality of the relationship between the student and the monitor; the building of a

solid relationship of trust between the two is fundamental to the entire process. This special relationship lasts for at least two years.

Once again, the results are thoroughly documented and conclusive, as Figure 8 shows.

PATHWAYS TO EDUCATION



Pathways to Education was launched in 2001 in Regent Park, one of Toronto's most disadvantaged, densely populated and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. Significantly, Regent Park does not have a local high school for its youth to attend.

The Pathways approach is based on a commitment by the student and the student's parents and on close cooperation between them and the persons involved at the school and community level. The program provides intensive individualized and multi-faceted support adapted to the specific needs of each student and his or her family and social circumstances. Nearly all Regent Park youth (95%) take part in the program.

The student and parents sign a contract in which they undertake to comply with the program requirements for its five-year duration.

Each student is assigned an advisor, who acts as a coach, mentor and, most importantly, a person the student can trust. Students can also take advantage of a twice weekly, group-based homework assistance service. Once a week, 11th- and 12th-grade students have access to a mentoring program in which they learn to know themselves better, manage their personal issues and take calculated risks. These meetings also give students the opportunity to explore trades and professions, which does much to sustain their motivation toward achieving their goal of earning a high school diploma. In addition, students receive

financial support to help cover the cost of commuting to school and of the school supplies they require. Lastly, after receiving their high school diploma, students are eligible for a \$4,000 scholarship for post-secondary education, if that's the route they wish to take.

Pathways may be “expensive” but the results are spectacular. Figure 8 shows various aspects of Pathways, including its cost and its results, which, it's worth noting, are comparable to the graduation rates in Toronto's most affluent neighbourhoods. The Ontario government has found the outcome so attractive that it has invested significant resources in the project.

In Pathways, I also find several ideas that could inspire our efforts in Quebec in this field. Actually, the program is currently being implemented in the province, in Verdun, under the guidance of Pierre Côté, president and executive director of Toujours ensemble. Pierre was a member of our Action Group. The program is funded by the Richard J. Renaud family's Roasters Foundation and other partners, such as Centraide/United Way.



CAREER ACADEMY

Career Academy is another program that's been around for a while. In the late 1960s, the Philadelphia area was facing a disturbing rise in violence, poverty and unemployment among young people. Local businesses were finding it increasingly difficult to recruit competent employees in several fields. A group of visionary business people created an initiative aimed at motivating young people to stay in school.

The program is based on three main elements: adapting the curriculum to build better links between school and the local labour market; facilitating and expanding workplace internships; and establishing learning communities by providing stability to groups of students and their teachers for the two to four years of the program.

The program proved so successful that Career Academies are now implemented in more than 2,000 U.S. schools. Several other countries have also adopted the approach.

WHAT SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES HAVE IN COMMON

Whether in Quebec or elsewhere in North America, the successful initiatives have various points in common that it is in our interest to clearly identify so we can derive maximum benefit from our experiences and those of others.

One thing is certain: in Quebec and the rest of Canada as well as abroad, the most successful initiatives are based in the community and rigorously managed by enthusiastic leaders respected in their communities, leaders who are flexible in their actions and able to adapt the

models to the specific aspects of each social environment and to the needs of the young people with whom they work.

In football, even star quarterbacks can do nothing if they don't have a quality team surrounding and supporting them. So it is with successful initiatives, which are usually developed through cooperation between the community, government services, civil society and the business sector.

The initiatives that work well are those whose starting point is the young people, not some structure developed in the abstract. The only way to begin the process is by taking their interests, problems and characteristics into account. That is an essential condition if we want to influence the risk factors, to support young people. It is the young person who is square one, the focus of any process committed to success. Another condition is to begin taking action in early childhood, at the earliest possible moment.


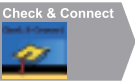


How many initiatives have got off to a good start only to come to a grinding halt due to inadequate funding? The financial support must be sufficient to provide the young people and their families with the conditions necessary to succeed in school. Later, I'll give an idea of the financial requirements for the various types of program. Not all programs cost the same. Then again, not all programs produce the same results.

Lastly, the successful initiatives I've just described all share another key feature: a rigorous process for measuring and evaluating the approaches and results. How do you know whether it's necessary to change directions in midstream—how do you even know which direction to take—if you don't measure anything? I've already said that the Quebec initiatives are somewhat lacking in this regard. Perhaps they require more resources? We need to learn the answer.

Figure 8 summarizes the scope of implementation, the age of the young people involved, the total cost per young person and the order of magnitude of the decrease in the dropout rate obtained for each of the programs I've just described.

Figure 8

Successful initiatives analyzed

	Implementation	Target age bracket	Total cost per young person	Reduction in dropouts Difference (%)
	Widely implemented	3–4	\$12,356 for 1–2 years	38
	Reproduced	11–15	\$5,000–\$7,500 for 5 years	33
	Beginning to be reproduced	13–17	\$15,000–\$20,000 for 5 years	86
	Widely implemented	13–17	\$1,500–\$3,000 for 5 years	34

Source:McKinsey & Company

PART VI

THE GAME PLAN

A REALISTIC OBJECTIVE

“If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favourable.” Seneca is reputed to be the author of this saying, which I like. No use in calling everyone to their battle stations if we haven’t bothered to set a clear and realistic goal that’s understood by all. That’s also true in business, of course.



OUR OBJECTIVE:

That by 2020 more than 80% of young Quebecers will celebrate their 20th birthday having earned a high school diploma or the equivalent.

Raising the graduation rate from 69% to 80% won’t happen by itself. I’m not a believer in magical thinking. Especially when, for more than 20 years and despite all the effort, we’ve made no progress. Telling me that we’re tops in “returners” doesn’t impress me much at all.

To reach the objective requires a game plan, and our Groupe d’action developed one. We drew inspiration from the best practices elsewhere and from our successes here in Quebec.

An ambitious goal, you say? Not particularly. With a pride I find easy to

understand, Ontario recently announced that their graduation rate has reached 77% as opposed to 68% barely five years ago. How did they pull off this feat? By working hard, adopting a structured approach, making education one of their top priorities. Hundreds of projects took root in communities. Several of these projects have the characteristics I've just described.

The Ontario government took the matter very seriously, investing significant amounts—adequate, sustained, predictable funding—in several projects. They did something else, too. The Ontario government raised the compulsory school age to 18 (it's 16 in Quebec) and implemented a series of measures designed to pressure young people—for example, restrictions on the issuing of a driver's licence to under-18-year-olds if they fail to meet certain scholastic requirements. Is anything more important than “having wheels” at that age? The carrot and the stick? You bet. Tried-and-true methods often get the best results, as Ontario has just demonstrated in its fight against dropping out. They've nearly reached the objective we've set for ourselves for 2020, so don't tell me we're too ambitious! Especially since we know that they and the others won't rest on their laurels and patiently wait for us to catch up. No, they, too, will continue making every effort to improve their performance.

Midstream readjustment of our objective shouldn't be ruled out either. Maybe raise it from 80% to 85%. On the other hand, we haven't made any progress—have been stuck at a graduation rate hovering around 70%—for two decades now, so let's keep our feet planted firmly on the ground. We can begin celebrating when 80% of our young people reach their 20th birthday with a diploma in hand.

Know what? Even if Quebec ranked in the middle of the Canadian pack

in graduation rate, we'd still lag behind the other provinces. Why? Because of the differences between our education systems. We should always bear in mind that young people in the other provinces have to complete an additional year of school before they obtain a diploma equivalent to our DES. In other words, before they can graduate, they have to stay in school a year longer than Quebec students do. For us to be as good as the other provinces, our statistics have to be even better than theirs!

Do I need to repeat that when it comes to people age 20 to 24 who hold a high school diploma, Quebec has dropped from seventh to ninth position among Canadian provinces since the early 1990s? And that's despite the fact that earning a diploma requires one year less of school in Quebec than in the other provinces.

The order in which I present the suggestions below differs slightly from that found in the Action Group's report. In this document, I've decided to start with the interventions that target young people—especially at-risk children—beginning in early childhood. In other words, the suggestions are arranged roughly in the order of a child's development phases. Structural concerns come last. That's intentional. Children first, structures second.

A CRUCIAL PREREQUISITE

Quebecers emerged from the *Grande noirceur* and joined the modern world thanks to a significant push in education. The effort began in the early 1960s and continued through the following decades. Accessibility to school, college and university rose sharply in every region of the province. And the results were quick in coming. Quebecers had access to more interesting and better paying jobs. We expanded our horizons. We produced world leaders in fields ranging from research and business to culture and beyond. Education was our last hope, our springboard to success.

And yet, it appears that, despite this convincing experience, education is less valued in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada, as Figure 9 shows.

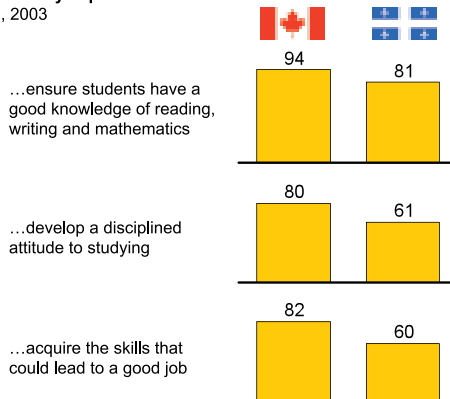
It's well known that young people are, in many ways, the reflection of the society in which they live. It strikes me as obvious that the low value placed on education in Quebec is a contributing factor to dropping

Figure 9

Education is less valued in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada

Portion of the surveyed population that feels it is extremely important to...

%, 2003



Source: Gervais, M. L. *Éducation: l'avenir du Québec*, 2005; McKinsey & Company

out. Whether it's in the family environment, the local community or even the society in which they're growing up, young people take in messages that influence their decisions, even if they never admit it. School is no exception. How do you motivate students to stay in school and graduate if the people around them don't value education?

I believe that a new, province-wide promotional effort is needed to convince Quebecers of the importance of education. All of us are called to action, not just the government and the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport. Everyone needs to put their shoulder to the wheel: the business community, the arts community, youth groups. We all have a role to play in this effort to restore education to its rightful place in Quebec.

In the field I'm most familiar with, business, I'm thinking particularly of companies that hire young people who are still in school. I know that in some regions this is done without a second thought. Even if a company needs workers, I feel that full-time jobs simply shouldn't be offered to students who haven't graduated from high school. At the very least, companies that hire students should agree to make it as easy as possible for them to continue their studies through graduation. It's also important to avoid imposing unreasonable work schedules on students who work part time and to make allowances when they're facing exams or course deadlines. In a phrase, it's essential to encourage young people to attach full importance to completing their studies.

In short, let's send out the message that education matters, rather than the opposite. That would be a good start.

A SERIES OF ACTIONS FOR COUNTERING DROPOUT DETERMINANTS

Dropping out has many causes, and the actions to support student retention should be equally numerous. They should extend throughout children's entire development continuum, especially in the case of at-risk children. I'm repeating myself, I know. But it's so important.

In this section I present an overview of some of the actions proposed in the *Knowledge Is Power* report but arranged, as far as possible, in a way that corresponds to the stages in a young person's life and specifying, when possible, who does what. I've added actions to the ones included in the report—paths that strike me as promising. I'll also have a few words to say about a project aimed at generating the greatest possible involvement in the fight against dropping out in every region of Quebec. In the last part of this book, I'll address the issue of cost.

HELP PARENTS SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN'S EFFORTS

Referring earlier to the letter from Maryse Perreault, the chief executive officer of the Literacy Foundation, I said that it's important to help illiterate parents acquire enough reading skills to be able to assist their children in school. I've already explained the goal of the process. These parents also need to come to terms with learning, which they often associate with negative feelings ranging from failure to rejection. Not easy to do, I know. But essential all the same.

WHO DOES WHAT?

The first step in this action is to identify the persons we want to help. It's a difficult and extremely delicate task. The approaches require great sensitivity, respect for each individual and a big dose of understanding. I believe grassroots and community organizations are probably best

positioned to perform this crucial job.

Literacy programs exist but the organizations that run them are too often underfunded. As a result, they are forced to rely exclusively on the goodwill and involvement of persons who care about the cause. Goodwill is not always enough. Our good intentions will have to be backed by adequate resources.

The Literacy Foundation has developed expertise in helping front-line organizations. Their efforts should be supported with financial and human resources.

In particular, I encourage companies, which may have illiterate employees without even knowing it, to contribute financially to this cause; it is the very foundation of the assistance we're seeking to provide to young people, especially those in high-risk environments. I also know of companies that have set up illiteracy screening programs for their employees and that offer training to overcome this limitation. Yes, the process can be delicate. But beyond the social value of literacy, it is in the interest of every company to help its employees acquire stronger reading skills.

ENCOURAGE THE PARTICIPATION OF AT-RISK CHILDREN IN INSTITUTIONAL DAYCARE SERVICES

I've said it before and I'm saying it again: in dropout prevention, everything often enters into play from the earliest age, especially for the children at greatest risk. Problems with training and supervision, with motivation, with the importance attached to education, with the lack of role models in the child's home and social environment, and more. Intervening at the earliest possible age becomes a necessity.

That's why it's so important to expand the childcare and daycare

network as quickly as possible. Then each child of enrollable age can be offered a place at a cost their parents can afford. And let's not stop until we reach the ideal: a place for every child and a child in every place.

At the same time, we have to continue improving the quality of the services provided in these centres. Much has already been accomplished in a short time. We'll forge ahead. We can never be too good at this. As we say in French, *trop fort ne casse pas*, it doesn't hurt to push harder.

Of course, we'll have to establish priorities, especially since our resources are limited. So, let's make a priority of childcare centres in the neighbourhoods with the most at-risk children. And what does that mean? First, creating places to fill the gap and providing qualified personnel. But also improving the quality of staff training in all childcare settings. Adapting the services to the requirements of the children and families identified as having the most need for this type of support. Effectively linking up the various players who work with the children and setting up the necessary mechanisms for ensuring a smooth passage from one level to the next—for example, between daycare and school. This means ensuring sufficient information is transferred between the pre-school and school levels, taking each child's strengths and weaknesses into account and skilfully identifying the types of support the child will require. Obvious, you say? Sure, but it won't happen by itself.

A special effort should be made to persuade parents resistant to enrolling their children in childcare and daycare programs to do their children this great favour. By informing them of the advantages for their children, by explaining the process to them, by making an effort to put ourselves in their shoes.

We'll also need to implement a set of made-to-measure services in the childcare and daycare programs in order to make the offering as flexible as possible in a world where needs are varied and changing. For example: variable-schedule services, drop-in daycare centres, activities on a flexible schedule, flexible attendance rules and so on.

WHO DOES WHAT?

Of course, it will be necessary to ensure that the government departments concerned take the necessary steps. I won't name them; you know which I'm referring to. We'll also have to ensure effective coordination among all the officials who are required to have a hand in the process. A structure for monitoring the entire process and dividing responsibilities is the last of the proposals.

It will also be necessary for the local bodies responsible for the childcare and daycare centres to be made aware of the issues raised, especially regarding at-risk children. To have explained to them what actions to take, why, how, with what aim, and so on. I'm referring not only to the managers of these establishments and the members of their boards, but also to the local bodies responsible for primary schools, school administrations, teachers and members of school boards.

Nor would it be a waste of time to augment the basic training of the CEGEP students who are our future childcare and daycare workers with course work aimed at enhancing their ability to understand and more effectively intervene with children from disadvantaged environments and with their families. This special type of intervention isn't something you learn on the job. Many young teachers tell me that they still lack this training in our universities.

We shouldn't forget the important contribution of youth centre work-

ers to this process. They know the neighbourhoods well. They spend their lives at the centre of the system. They often intervene in the most delicate situations, with the most vulnerable children. Expertise and practical knowledge like that should be put to use, allowed to benefit these children who've not been given an easy life.

A tall order, isn't it? Yes. But the stakes are so high. And this is the cornerstone of the huge effort that's unavoidable if we are to reach our student retention and success objective. You're right, Dr. Julien. We have to act throughout the child's development continuum. And we have to start as early as possible.

DEVELOP COMMUNITY-BASED PILOT PROJECTS COMPLEMENTARY TO DAYCARE SERVICES IN DISADVANTAGED NEIGHBOURHOODS

At-risk children in some disadvantaged neighbourhoods do not have adequate access to childcare and daycare services. And yet, they are the ones who need them the most. I've already discussed the steps that need to be taken to create more places in these neighbourhoods. But there's more to it than that. Often the children most at risk are deprived of these services because their parents are reluctant to enroll them. Another challenge to be met.

Start by deploying the means necessary to reach these parents and enable them to understand the advantages their children will obtain by attending organized childcare and daycare centres. Some parents are fearful, for various reasons (historical, social, even personal). I believe the local community is best placed to do this work effectively. The ties are often already established, the networks in place, the needs known.

It's a field in which we have much to learn. What's obvious in one case may not be so obvious in the next. That's why I think we should avoid

rolling out a Quebec-wide operation at the start, before we've done our homework. It's a mistake we've made too often in the past. Let's start with a few pilot projects in three to five disadvantaged neighbourhoods whose problems have been identified and well documented. I'm speaking of community-based projects that could be inspired by what is already being done in some neighbourhoods in Quebec and elsewhere. I'm thinking in particular of Dr. Julien's social pediatrics. Quebec is quite accomplished at this type of approach, as long as the support provided is adequate and sustained. Actually, lack of follow-through is one of the issues raised by several stakeholders. Personal commitment and generosity of spirit can't compensate for the lack of a necessary minimum of resources.

What should be done is to properly structure a few projects; give their leaders the means required to optimize their chances for success; provide effective but flexible oversight that will allow innovation and adaptation to specific needs; provide the front-line parties with documentation; and, lastly, perform high-quality monitoring.

Only when the results are conclusive will it be time to implement the successful practices on a larger scale, as skilled resources become available. And what's the best way to ensure we have enough skilled resources when the time comes? By beginning to train them now.

WHO DOES WHAT?

The grassroots and community-based organizations that have some experience in this type of work should be at the centre of these pilot projects.

The youth centres, whose staff members are often in contact with extremely high-risk families and children, can make a significant con-

tribution if effectively integrated into the process and allowed to act within the scope of their responsibilities. For example, we could implement a model that has proven its value in the United States, the Family to Family program, which provides increased support for families and foster families. Quebec's youth centres have also implemented various practices used in Great Britain and Ontario. They have been able to improve support for children by experimenting with the Looking After Children program. In short, what we have here are people with extensive experience in the field, who already devote their lives to helping young people and their families. We should make better use of them.

DEVELOP BEST PRACTICES FOR REDUCING EDUCATIONAL LAGS AT THE PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL

How is it possible to believe that children who lag behind in primary school can one day hope to obtain a high school or vocational diploma or finish a qualifying training program? As they fall further and further behind the group, their chances grow slimmer, despite the soothing words used to convince them that everything will be all right. I've received some extremely touching testimonials from parents whose children, unhappy because they increasingly felt left out, had no option but to abandon their studies. It was how they handled being rejected by their schoolmates because they were unable to keep up with the group. Or experiencing the ostracism of the special education ghetto and becoming the laughing stock of the entire school. Sad indeed, though we shouldn't be surprised; it's no secret that children are cruel. I've received some disheartening messages about this from parents who are at a loss, powerless to change the desperate situation their child is dealing with at school.

The action to take strikes me as obvious: screen for educational lags at

the earliest possible moment and provide adequate, personalized services to enable these children to succeed. While such programs can be found, they lack sufficient resources, according to the people who work in the field, and succeed in meeting only a tiny fraction of the needs. The critical lack of speech–language pathologists is a prime example of the shortage of resources needed to do the work at an extremely important stage in a child’s development.

And yet, it seems to me that this type of screening, which should be systematic, and the rigorous support it calls for constitute a priority. I know, it’s easy to tell others what to do, to play the Monday morning quarterback. That being said, I can’t see how such an action isn’t crucial to attaining the objective we’ve set.

How should we go about this? First, take an inventory of the existing programs and check their efficiency and performance. These programs include *Projet accès à l’école*, *Mesures de soutien aux élèves en difficulté*, *Projet FLUPPY* and *Famille-école-communauté*. An overall assessment will identify the programs’ strengths and weaknesses. After that information has been analyzed, ten or so pilot projects should be designed and launched to develop new approaches, with absolute priority given to the areas most at risk. Once the pilot projects have been documented, the most effective approaches could be deployed on a larger scale.

WHO DOES WHAT?

Needs identification should be done at the school level. It’s the responsibility of the local and regional authorities to provide the means, assess performance, assign resources and disseminate knowledge.

But schools can’t act alone, not in this specific action or in the overall

fight against dropping out. Other players in the community will have to sign on, at least to help identify needs and provide support to the young people who require it. And, careful! Experience shows that allocating funds does not guarantee commitment and results. As the saying goes, throwing money at a problem doesn't necessarily solve it.

Once again, because we are targeting mainly the neighbourhoods most at risk, grassroots and community-based organizations can be of great assistance. They often have irreplaceable knowledge of their milieu and are too infrequently called on to help. I believe it would be better to give these organizations the means necessary to do the job than to try to recreate in government programs a set of tools not always perfectly adapted to these very particular situations. It's another example of an area where the walls between official government services and the organizations rooted in these environments need to be knocked down.

The youth centres' terms of reference mean that these individuals working on the front lines are ideally placed to help identify the children's needs and track their progress. The rollout of the Qualification des jeunes program provides a good example. The youth centres also submitted a proposal called Plan de cheminement à la vie autonome that's based on cooperation with the local community. This kind of process requires the involvement of all the players and parties concerned; it's crucial to the success of the process. Let's hope that as soon as possible we manage to develop such initiatives, which would fill the yawning gaps in our efforts to support our most vulnerable young people.

SET UP COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS TARGETING HIGH-RISK YOUTH AT THE HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL IN THE MOST DISADVANTAGED NEIGHBOURHOODS

To obtain convincing results, I believe it's necessary to act mainly where the dropout problem does the most damage. Obvious, no? It may be harder to pull off, but that's usually where the action is. I've said it before: the dropout problem extends far beyond school walls. It's the business of the entire community, as Michel Perron, the guiding light of CRÉPAS, often points out. The success of every initiative to support student retention depends on the involvement of the community as a whole. Toronto's Pathways to Education is a perfect example of such an approach.

In disadvantaged neighbourhoods, we need to set up multi-faceted, community-based intervention programs, inspired in particular by Pathways but adapting the methods and goals to the local context.

One of the key success factors for this type of activity is establishing a deep and trusting relationship between the youth and the resource person (coach, mentor, coordinator, etc.) assigned to him or her. That is an indispensable condition for success.

It is also necessary to identify in each neighbourhood a recognized and capable leader who wants to mobilize the community. Someone who is ready, willing and able to become sufficiently involved to inspire the young people and all the players. An individual who is viewed with the greatest respect, especially by young people. This leader will be the face of the project. The leader's responsibilities will include helping to define a shared vision of the problem, establishing realistic objectives based on the resources invested and developing and supporting collaboration in the community, between the schools and the players.

Based at the community level, the team that the leader puts together will be responsible for identifying the youth most at risk and understanding their needs. A survey of the services already available and an assessment of their effectiveness will be carried out. The team will set up an assistance and support program for these youth, drawing inspiration from the best practices found in comparable initiatives.

A process for assessing the means implemented and the effectiveness of the resource allocation will be put in place to ensure optimum results are achieved and to make adjustments as necessary.

WHO DOES WHAT?

We're talking here about intensive intervention with youth who often have no reference points other than those in their immediate environment. That's why we require the involvement of people who are aware of the scope of the problem and ready to be part of the solution.

Once again, the staff of the youth centres have a deep knowledge of a significant part of the population to serve. They are on the ground. If their duties sometimes make it difficult for them to connect directly with the youth, their knowledge of the milieu will, at the very least, facilitate the process—by providing a “street view,” for example.

Grassroots and community organizations with an established presence in the neighbourhood will also provide crucial support.

Beware of established norms and standards, of traditional ways of doing things, whether allowable or not under government regulations. We're dealing here with another world. Special situations require special tools. If ever there were a field where innovation should be encouraged and not suppressed, this is it.

MAKE IT EASIER TO CHOOSE VOCATIONAL OR TECHNICAL TRAINING

I've always believed that a large number of students drop out because they're unfamiliar with the labour market in general or trades and technical occupations in particular. It's hard to stay focused if you don't have a specific goal, if you don't know why you're in the game or what to expect as a result. That's what several young people told me when I asked them why they left school. I also blame this acknowledged weakness in our educational system for the many changes in specialization that end up decimating the ranks of CEGEP students, whose graduation rate is nothing to brag about either. Only two-thirds of

CEGEP students in the general stream obtain a diploma after three years of studies, when it's supposed to take two. In the technical stream, one CEGEP student in two graduates after four years, when it's supposed to take three.

How, then, can we be surprised at the low enrolment and high dropout rate in the vocational training sector? It's also clear that the inflexibility of the education system has something to do with this problem that everyone decries but no one seems able to solve. Add to that the low prestige of trades and, often, even technical occupations in our society, and you're left with the labour shortages that already hit our companies hard and will only worsen with the demographic challenge we'll soon face. But even setting aside the economic consequences of this anomaly, in too many cases it's the lives of thousands of young people and the families they'll form that will be made more difficult because we weren't able to give them guidance when they needed it.

I believe the first step to take is to better inform young people and all of society of the many possibilities offered by the trades and technical occupations. A television commercial has already begun to do so. That's great. We should continue along these lines using all necessary means. But that won't be enough. We'll also have to equip our schools with professional guidance services and adequate and accessible career choices. Our children are still experiencing the consequences of the dramatic cuts made to non-teaching professional services not too long ago.

Our educational tracks should be more flexible. Our youth are forced to make decisions that will deeply affect their future career options at an age when they're more focused on having a good time than working. They need to be able to change or alter tracks in midstream if neces-

sary, without losing years they already view as interminable (yet another dropout factor).

We also have to open exploratory paths between schools and business. How can we hope that a teacher, all of whose work-related knowledge and experience is based in the school and its milieu, can instill in students an enthusiasm for a trade or technical occupation about which he or she often knows absolutely nothing? Not that I blame the teacher. Rather, I'm questioning the fitness of a system that leaves our young people so ill-equipped as they prepare to choose a career. The business community also shares responsibility for this. We have to develop effective measures for fixing such major flaws in our system. It always comes down to this: start with the kid. Is there an issue more important than the soundness and relevance of a choice that will impact the young person for the remainder of his or her life?

The increased efforts in career guidance and choice should be aimed not only at students but also at their parents, guidance counsellors and the business community. It appears to be a field in which action is best taken at the local level. It will be necessary to develop work/study programs that enable young people to make an informed choice of trade or career. Partnerships should be formed between the schools and local companies. School visits by business people, professionals, technicians and tradespeople should be organized, as should student visits to businesses.

WHO DOES WHAT?

This is a huge undertaking, where every skill and good intention should be put to use.

Adequate information tools about the trades, technical occupations

and professions should be developed at the provincial and regional level. The craft guilds, associations and professional orders, the colleges and universities, could be called on to help. The need to counter the biases that teachers sometimes display against trades shouldn't be overlooked. Materials are already available and should be evaluated and supplemented as required. The school boards should also be involved.

Schools should make a point of using materials that are relevant to their students. School administrations, in cooperation with businesses, should organize activities in their communities that introduce the trades and technical occupations, sometimes in schools, more often in the workplace. An admirable project of this type is currently under way, a partnership between the Chambre de commerce et d'industrie Les Maskoutains and the Commission scolaire de Saint-Hyacinthe.

Also at the local level, it would be interesting to develop tutorship or compagnonnage programs inspired by models that have proved successful in other countries, Germany for example. Here, too, the business community will have a role to play. It's in its best interests.

We also need to make a special effort to enhance the appeal of vocational training by using the latest technology, distance education, podcast courses and other electronic media that young people are attracted to.

And why not make vocational training in private colleges income tax deductible, since it fills an obvious need, for individuals as well as society? It's time to set ideological yokes and corporatism aside.

ADD STUDENT RETENTION-RELATED PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT TOOLS TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Student retention is one of the most important issues facing each young Quebecer and society as a whole. In recent years, significant funding has been allocated to helping children with difficulties. And yet, following a special investigation conducted in 2005, Quebec's auditor general complained that he had been unable to obtain a satisfactory accounting of how this money was spent. Isn't that disturbing? Especially when we know the importance of the issues and the relative meagreness of our collective resources.

In my meetings with people, I collected comments on the subject of students with difficulties from people working in the field. To recap: (1) shockingly, high schools' educational achievement plans do not give enough weight to student retention; (2) these plans do not undergo systematic evaluation and the professional quality of the services delivered is not adequately stressed; (3) the inflexibility of collective agreements is a significant obstacle to the creation of effective incentives.

It seems abundantly clear to me that the absence of meaningful controls and effective incentives is, as in any other field, not part of a recipe for success. To say the least.

I'm no expert on education and its many aspects. And I'll leave it to the minister and the department's staff to handle this problem, which seems to obvious to me. The law (formerly bill 88) that expands the minister's power over school governance will come into force as soon as the cabinet adopts a motion. What are they waiting for?

CREATE A QUEBEC-WIDE NETWORK OF UNDER-35 ROLE MODELS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH AND ORGANIZE SCHOOL VISITS

Young people at risk often lack role models with whom they can identify. This is especially true in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In many cases, the only paths disadvantaged youth can envision taking are those previously taken by the people around them. Whether on academic, technical or professional levels, they need contact with young adults who have succeeded in their fields and who would agree to talk about their experiences in the schools. Young adults who have succeeded by standards appropriate to their age, of course.

This idea became clear to me when I visited the students of a high school in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Montreal through a program run by the Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal that I've taken part in for a decade now. The last time, in the spring of 2009, I realized that the students probably saw me as just another old guy who'd come to lecture them on what to do. They were yawning like crazy! I started talking about my children, Simon and Valérie, who are working in fields that fascinate children everywhere: special effects for the movies and artist management. And the group lit up. We spent a fantastic hour together. I said to myself, why shouldn't my children be the ones to come next year, meet these students and talk to them about what drives them? There's no doubt in my mind that it's something they can do far better than I. And that's the root of my idea for a network of young people—under 35, whenever possible—who would talk to students about very real things that could help them set significant goals for themselves. Having a goal is often one of the key differences between a student who stays in school and one who drops out. For proof, all you need to do is read the testimonials from

dropouts at the beginning of this book and on my blog.

To the greatest possible extent, the people selected to give these testimonials should have things in common with the at-risk youth they meet. A similar social background, difficulties with school, childhood poverty, etc.

The idea is to spark the imaginations of at-risk youth in the hope that they'll embark on a new path toward graduation. Such efforts can never replace follow-up, support and guidance. This is just one more way to cause an attitude shift in at-risk youth. As motivational tools go, there's nothing quite like a clear view of the potential benefits of making an effort.

WHO DOES WHAT?

Youth chambers of commerce, young professionals' groups and trade associations are all well positioned to identify young adults who, I'm convinced, would gladly agree to take part in these kinds of sessions. I think it's important that this effort be local or regional. I believe the more a role model has in common with a young person, the higher the odds that the young person will identify with the role model, and the greater the chances for the initiative's success.

HEC Montréal has launched a project whose goal is to forge links between young people and HEC students who want to be involved in this kind of action. Aimed particularly at the CEGEP level, where dropout rates are also very high, the program is a type of mentorship for young people who need it. It is yet another initiative that I strongly support and that is completely in line with what my proposals. I have agreed to co-chair the project's fundraising campaign, and BMO will be taking part in the campaign for the Bal du commerce to be held in the

fall of 2009. It's heartening to see that citizen initiatives are even starting to emerge at the university level.

Schools should also help by identifying former students who have succeeded in their chosen fields and putting them in touch with current students.

Some companies hold open houses to make young people aware of their reality. In some cases, parents who work for the company bring their children to the workplace. This provides an excellent opportunity for parents and children to interact outside the family setting. Nothing is more inspiring for a young person than learning how their parents spend the day, what their responsibilities are, what other jobs and professions exist in the company and exactly how the day unfolds for the people involved.

STRENGTHEN REGIONAL BODIES IN PARTNERSHIP WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

The Instances régionales de concertation sur la persévérance scolaire et la réussite éducative (IRCs) are among Quebec's most important forces in the student retention effort. However, they are at varying levels of maturity in terms of their resources, skills and presence at the local level. It is therefore desirable to strengthen existing IRCs and create new ones where appropriate in order to support and integrate the local initiatives they launch and sponsor.

We must help these bodies to accomplish or help others accomplish the following tasks, in partnership with other stakeholders and with respect for everyone's responsibilities:

- Studying and diagnosing the regional situation, including preparing a thorough analysis of young people's lives and needs
- Developing a shared vision of the problem and its risk factors at the regional level

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- Planning and implementing a coordinated regional strategy
 - Coordinating concerted local actions and bilateral liaison with the local level in order to ensure their success
 - Assessing the mobilization effort and the results of action plans
 - Supporting innovative initiatives such as pilot projects conducted with partners
 - Sharing knowledge, tools and practices between the local and regional levels
 - Coordinating with the IRCs' partners and other regional advisory boards that work with young people and their families.

This is important and demanding work that requires a solid, competent organization. To reach our goals for supporting student retention and success, each region needs to be organized in a structured and effective manner so that it can assess the quality of previous work and coordinate activities. The success of CRÉPAS has amply demonstrated this point.

Unveiled by the Quebec premier in March 2009, the new youth strategy includes a partnership with the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon in order to provide financial and organizational support to regional bodies in the fight against the dropout problem.

This partnership between the foundation and the government will help solve one of the main problems faced by regional bodies working in this area: the level, continuity and predictability of the funding they rely on. Over the next five years, \$50 million will be contributed (\$25 million by the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon and \$25 million by the government of Quebec) to fund regional organizations working to improve student retention. Bravo to the foundation and the government!

Looking at the issue from a different angle, it's hard to overestimate the coattail effect that the presence of a CEGEP or a university campus in a region can have. Both help inspire young people in these communities to

continue their education, especially when the young people in question don't have the financial means to leave home to study in a larger centre. How many young people have decided to remain a student because they could, as far back as high school, see role models around them in their communities? Not to mention that CEGEP and university professors live in these towns and villages, bringing with them positive influences that are too often underestimated.

Not to mention the effects of these institutions' activities in helping regions retain their main asset, their young people.

CREATE A QUEBEC-WIDE STUDENT RETENTION COORDINATING BODY

The preceding proposals will require a great deal of work. There are many levels of responsibility and areas of operation and, as a result, careful coordination will be required if stakeholders are to avoid working at cross-purposes.

That is why I believe it is necessary to give an official coordination mandate to a responsible body. The body would be tasked with:

- Providing essential coordination between government interventions and those of other partners in the fight against dropping out, based on a shared goal. We all know how easy it is to pass the buck. We absolutely need to assign ultimate responsibility for the dropout issue, even if doing so risks causing friction and discord in a system where each component is prone to the tooth-and-nail defence of its prerogatives and, often, its privileges. To ensure that our actions are effective, we need to break down the barriers between fiefdoms.
- Providing direction to awareness-raising campaigns.
- Supporting knowledge transfer and the dissemination of best practices.
- Supporting training and the development of the skills necessary to implement the proposals.

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- Assessing results and the allocation of resources across the province and establishing evaluation criteria at the regional and local levels.

WHO DOES WHAT?

I believe that such a body should be under the aegis of the Secrétariat à la jeunesse, which is already responsible for implementing the Quebec government's youth action strategy. Especially since everyone agrees that the dropout problem goes beyond school and affects society as a whole. In other words, we need to knock down the walls between the sector-based departments that each have responsibility for part of this field.

I think all government departments and all organizations that have some responsibility for educating, developing and integrating children and families in Quebec society should play a role. Likewise for civil society, where every player—professional and trade associations, business groups and individual companies, unions, student associations and so on—has a role to play in implementing the proposed plan.

The multitude of stakeholders is an argument in favour of identifying and naming a person or position with responsibility for the issue at the provincial level. And because in Quebec the duties of the minister for youth are, at least for the time being, assumed by the premier himself, who is better placed to play this role effectively? Naming the premier of Quebec as the quarterback for a movement to improve student retention and academic success would, it seems to me, send a message of unprecedented power. I believe this issue deserves nothing less.

PART VII

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

MAJOR INVESTMENTS

It will take major investments to achieve the goals I have outlined. Figure 11 summarizes the overall estimate and allocation of the expected costs of successfully undertaking this major initiative that Quebec cannot afford to forego. Our children's happiness and our well-being and vitality as a society are at stake.

The investments required are on the order of \$35 million to \$64 million for the launch phase (one to three years), while the annual operating costs thereafter will be between \$137 million and \$237 million for the full set of initiatives presented in the Action Group's report.

We shouldn't forget that significant sums are already being invested in

Figure 10

Significant resources will be needed to meet targets

ESTIMATES

Actions	Annual start-up cost (1–3 years), \$M	Annual cost when fully implemented, \$M	Potential leaders
1 Promote education and student retention	3–5	3–5	Secrétariat à la jeunesse
2 Strengthen regional involvement	5–10	5–10	Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon; Ministère des Affaires municipales, des Régions et de l'Occupation du territoire
3 Expand support for disadvantaged youths and families	Via departmental budgets		Ministère de la Famille et des Aînés; Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux
4 Conduct pilot projects that complement daycare services	2	8–10	Civil society
5 Conduct pilot projects in primary school	2–4	To be determined*	Schools and school boards; Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport
6 Strengthen the <i>Agir autrement</i> strategy	6–12**	64–105**	Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport
7 Set up community projects in the most disadvantaged areas	12–24	54–102	Civil society
8 Facilitate and encourage the transition to vocational training	Via departmental budget		Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport
9 Incorporate incentives and performance management tools	4	2	Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport
10 Create a Quebec-wide body for joint action	1–3	1–3	Secrétariat à la jeunesse; Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport
	35–64	137–237	

some of the initiatives just discussed. A portion of these funds could be invested differently and, especially, more effectively. Better targeting, identification, guidance, documentation and evaluation are all required. It seems to me that it's well worth the effort.

Does all this sound expensive? Allow me to remind you of some of the estimates made by economist Pierre Fortin, who assumed a very modest increase in Quebec's graduation rate (from 12% to 9% non-graduates regardless of age at graduation)—a more modest goal than we propose. His calculations yield the following results:

Young people who graduate instead of dropping out will earn \$439,000 more throughout their working life. They will also contribute to society's wealth by paying more taxes and by generating fewer government expenditures, for an additional net gain of \$184,000.

The members of a cohort of 90,000 students who stayed in school through graduation instead of dropping out would collectively earn \$1.2 billion more by the end of their working lives. They would contribute to Quebec's wealth to the tune of an additional \$496 million. And that's just a single cohort. I'm not the one making this point; it was Pierre Fortin who made it during a presentation attended by representatives of every IRC in Mont-Sainte-Anne in October 2008.

And that's without even considering the incalculable intangible value of a diploma to the person who earned it, their family and their community, along with all the other benefits.

Do you still think our proposed initiative sounds expensive?

CONCLUSION

Quebec has not been inactive in the fight to prevent dropping out. Significant funding has been allocated to student retention efforts, particularly by the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, the Secrétariat à la jeunesse, the entities responsible for the children at highest risk (the youth centres, for example) and numerous grassroots and community organizations. Beyond our official programs, a large number of initiatives, usually local in nature, are working to support young people who desperately need help. All too often these organizations must work without adequate resources, with no hope of making their activities systematic or sharing their knowledge or, above all, sustaining their efforts over the long run. A few promising initiatives are always emerging. I have discussed some of them, without making any claim to covering every worthy one. Some even manage to mobilize a whole region to deal with the crucial issue that is student retention and success among their young people. Considering their minimal resources, that's quite a feat.

I say bravo to everyone in Quebec who is doing this essential work. Because they work in obscurity and obtain results that are sometimes disappointing in comparison to the effort expended, it is a thankless task. I don't think these disappointments result from a lack of effort. Instead, inconsistent access to resources is to blame, as it stifles any chance of pursuing actions long enough to produce more tangible results. We need to systematize our actions within a rigorous, well-supported approach, while still leaving ample room for initiative and flexibility. That's how we do things in Quebec. It's how we have succeeded in a number of fields, sometimes to everyone's surprise. The citizen initiative I've just outlined would unite Quebecers through an effort to structure, systematize and document our actions, drawing inspiration from the best practices developed here and around the world. Sounds

like an enormous undertaking, doesn't it? Indeed it is. But one absolutely necessary for the future of our children and our society.

Cette initiative citoyenne propose un plan d'action où tous et chacun sont conviés à mettre l'épaule à la roue, dans le respect des expertises et des prérogatives de chacun. Ce n'est que lorsque nous aurons enfin compris que la persévérance et la réussite scolaires de nos jeunes sont l'affaire de toute la société que nous commencerons à enregistrer des résultats significatifs.

This citizen initiative proposes an action plan that encourages each of us to put our shoulders to the wheel while respecting each other's expertise and prerogatives. Only once we have all finally agreed that student retention and our children's academic success are everyone's business will we begin to see significant positive results.

The urgency of doing something about this problem compelled our Group to take action. That same urgency must spark the action required at every level of responsibility. The steps recently announced by the premier, the education minister and other partners, such as the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon, give me hope that we are finally about to make progress in the fight against dropping out. Celebrating your 20th birthday as a graduate is not exactly an Olympian feat, but we have to start somewhere.

And believe me: in Quebec, we've only just begun to mobilize citizens to support student retention and academic success. The many testimonials people have shared convince me of the imminent arrival of a great surge in support for young people across Quebec. We're on the verge of a veritable "graduation bee." Well-organized groups active in every region are planning to become involved in this cause and some

already have a hand at work. I'm currently working with several partners to creating a Quebec-wide network of people interested in helping. We'll be making a formal announcement in the fall of 2009. I'm also working with prominent figures from a number of fields on launching a major awareness campaign aimed directly at encouraging young people to stay in school. These are high-profile individuals who youth admire. Expect the initiative to get a big boost!

I'm convinced we'll succeed. A Quebec that effectively supports its young people until they earn at least a DES or DEP or complete a vocational program leading to certification to work in a trade would be an infinitely wealthier Quebec, in every sense of the word.

Knowledge is power!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to all the men and women across Quebec who have dedicated themselves to working—usually in obscurity and with inadequate resources—with young people on the verge of dropping out of school. The generosity of these individuals has given hundreds of young people one of the best opportunities of their lives: to have a diploma that enables them to venture into the world with a much better chance at succeeding in their life’s adventure.

I also thank each member of the *Groupe d’action sur la persévérance et la réussite scolaires au Québec*, who generously answered my call to define this project’s main directions and track its progress. Their understanding of the educational field and invaluable contributions allowed this citizen initiative to come to life and, I hope, ultimately benefit thousands of young Quebecers.

Thanks also to McKinsey & Company, particularly Éric Lamarre, managing director of the firm’s Montreal office, and his entire team for donating their time, expertise and energy to developing the working paper that is the Action Group’s report, *Knowledge is Power*. Their goal was to produce a realistic, highly credible overview for the benefit of everyone in Quebec who appreciates the need for a structured effort to support student retention and success using a game plan inspired by the best practices in use in Quebec and elsewhere in North America.

Thanks to professor Michel Perron and his team at CRÉPAS, who for several years have led one of Quebec’s most promising programs to improve student retention, with results that should inspire others to embark on this wonderful adventure.

Thanks to all the field workers and managers from the youth centres and grassroots and community organizations who helped us by providing

practical, real-world advice, without which our suggestions would not likely have been as specific as they are.

Lastly, I want to extend special thanks to my friend Denis Beauregard of Percom and my assistant, Claude Gagnon, and his team at BMO in Montreal, for their invaluable help in the production of this work. Without them, it would have remained only another nice idea and would never have become a reality.



I've been interested in the fight against dropping out for many years. I'm convinced that a society's educational level is one of the main determinants of its standard of living and the quality of its democratic life. The Forum des générations, in which I took part in the fall of 2004, was a watershed moment in my awareness of the importance of this challenge in Quebec. The work of the Committee on the Sustainability of the Quebec Health Care and Social Services System (2005), which I chaired, convinced

me of the urgent need to attack the thorny problem of dropping out, which deprives dropouts and Quebec society of financial and human resources we can't afford to do without. This year I created the Groupe d'action sur la persévérance et la réussite scolaires, an action group on student retention and success whose report has just been published. As you can see, education has long been an issue dear to my heart, and it remains so today.

I share with you, in all modesty, these thoughts on the school dropout issue, because I am convinced that each of us can do much to prevent our young people from giving up. And also because I believe that, beyond the numbers, dropping out is a matter of the heart.

A FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTION TO DR. GILLES JULIEN'S FONDATION POUR LA PÉDIATRIE SOCIALE (PEDIATRIESOCIALE.ORG), DÉCLIC (DECLIC.CA) OR ANY OTHER ORGANIZATION IN YOUR REGION DEVOTED TO HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN, SCHOOLCHILDREN AND STUDENTS WOULD BE GREATLY APPRECIATED.

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