

# Shape Schools to Meet Student Needs

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The Government of Quebec should be congratulated for linking education to economic prosperity in last month's budget and for making students its top priority. Spending almost \$270 million to assist students with learning challenges and reduce high school drop-out rates is a smart investment, given that rates of learning challenge diagnoses are on the rise in Quebec and that high school drop-out rates in this province remain alarmingly high.

However, if we do not change our strategy for dealing with learning challenges and drop-out rates, we should not expect a better outcome, no matter how much money we throw at the problem.

As a society, we need to invest in creating an academically and socially inclusive education system in which learning is both accessible - and meaningful - to every student:

- A system that incorporates the latest advances in the science of learning;
- A system that embraces the many different ways in which individuals learn;
- A system that creates optimal learning conditions for all students, both inside and outside the classroom;
- A system that enables "traditional" and "non-traditional" learners to learn side-by-side, in a spirit of mutual respect;
- A system that can continually shape itself to accommodate a diverse and evolving student population;
- A system that takes into account the different ways in which knowledge can be accessed in today's technology-driven digital world.

What does this mean, in practical terms?

It means moving toward the adoption of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL): a scientifically-driven approach to education that addresses the main barrier to learning: an inflexible, one-size-fits-all approach to teaching. By removing obstacles that can get in the way of learning, UDL aims to create a level playing field within the classroom. UDL recognizes that students absorb information in different ways, express information in different ways, and are engaged and challenged in different ways. It therefore requires that knowledge be taught - and tested - in a variety of ways.

At Centennial Academy, we strive to apply UDL to everything we do and shape our environment to fit the needs of all of our students. This means creating predictable routines and straightforward structures; using multimedia teaching tools and assistive reading technologies; and coaching students to develop effective work habits that prepare them for college and university.

UDL is becoming the norm in many universities and schools across North America, including our very own McGill University. It should also be the guiding principle behind the Quebec Government's investments into primary and secondary education.

So, instead of increasing the number of staff to specifically help students with learning challenges, the Government should look instead at decreasing class sizes and providing teachers with the training they need to create more accessible and meaningful learning experiences for all of their students. The teacher has to move from being "the sage on the stage to the guide on the side," which means focusing on inclusive and accessible learning experiences instead of teaching styles and methods.

Our education system is broken, but it can be fixed.

The answer does not lie in creating "special" classes for students with learning challenges. Nor does it lie in creating quick-fix programs for high school students who have fallen through the cracks. It lies in creating a truly inclusive educational framework in which all students can learn together effectively and in which we teach our students how to be autonomous and resilient learners for life.

Quebec is filled with bright, creative, young minds. If we are to prosper as a province, we can't afford to lose any of them.

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