Dear Editor,

The proposed Canada Jobs Grant has been touted as a centre point of the 2014 federal budget. It will take at least $300 million dollars out of the $500 million Labour Market Agreement with the provinces, ending employability programs for hundreds of Cape Bretoners. As Executive Director of the Adult Learning Association of Cape Breton County, I have seen the positive impact of existing Labour Market Agreement funding on our adult learners throughout the Cape Breton Regional Municipality.

From 2010 to Dec. 2013, 245 CBRM residents have gained computer training, work skills certifications and job readiness training in our Workforce Readiness program.  They have gone on to employment, adult high school programs and Nova Scotia Community College.

Other local organizations have used LMA funding to offer a wide variety of job preparation programs to local residents that have helped participants enter the workforce. All of this training will end on March 31, 2014.

Across the province 800 people in community learning organizations will lose this opportunity for a better future, and a total of 10,000 Nova Scotians engaged in a wide variety of employment related training funded by the LMA will see their programs end.

Given the huge impact of these proposed changes, it is disturbing to hear misinformation coming from our federal government about the existing Labour Market Agreement and the Canada Jobs Grant.

Employment Minister Jason Kenney and his cabinet colleagues have repeatedly said that the existing Labour Market Agreement programs conducted by the provinces are not working, and that they are “training for the sake of training”. This claim is quite simply not true.

An internal document, “ Evaluation of the Labour Market Agreements “, produced by Minister Kenney’s own department in March, 2013, found that nationally 86% of provincial LMA funded programs led to employment. In Nova Scotia programs had an 82% success rate. The study concluded that the provincially conducted LMA programs were overwhelming effective.

This is not “people learning how to write resumes three times”, as Minister Kenney continues to claim. The federal government has produced no evidence that the existing programs are not working.

To add to the haze of misinformation, our federal government has neglected to mention that the Labour Market Agreement was designed to help the most vulnerable members of our communities to connect with the workforce. The programs were targeted to people with low literacy, disabilities, youth, First Nations, New Canadians and others facing greater obstacles to entering the workforce.

As its own study has confirmed, it did this remarkably well, especially considering the considerable disadvantages that its target clientele faced. For each person who got a job, their future and their children’s future is brighter, and they contribute much more to our economy. We are all richer for this.

So where are we now with the latest version of the proposed Canada Jobs Grant?

This week’s budget proclaimed that the federal government is prepared to go it alone, contributing up to $10,000 with employers kicking in up to $5000 for each person being trained with the Canada Jobs Grant. For those provinces that do not sign on with the Canada Jobs Grant, they will not have to come up with $5000 per person to match the federal government’s contribution and the employer’s $5000, as was originally proposed in last year’s budget.

Think again if you think that this sounds like a good deal. The whole Canada Jobs Grant is to be funded by taking $300 million out of the existing $500 million Labour Market Agreement with the provinces. Anyway you look at it, the provinces are losing funding on this deal, a loss that will be carried on the backs of their most vulnerable residents, who will lose access to workforce training.

Moreover, while the initial Canada Jobs Grant was to fund itself by taking 60% of the existing LMA program dollars, the new version, with the federal government contributing up to twice as much money per trainee, stands to take even more dollars out of the former LMA funding. No new money was identified in the 2014 budget for this added contribution.

Federal ministers have stated that the provinces will simply have to choose which programs will get priority with their greatly reduced funding. So which of our marginalized fellow citizens will get the training that could help lift them and their families out of poverty? Which of them will get the chance to get a job?

Will it be the single mother of four children gaining the computer training and job skills certifications to get her a job? The young father struggling with mental illness getting the workplace training he needs to enter the workforce? Your neighbour with autism acquiring the job preparation skills and workforce experience to gain employment? The 20-something who gets the literacy training he needs to enter a high school program, to start working and to make plans to open his own business?

Who will win, and who will lose? How would you choose? It seems that the odds will not be in the favour of our most vulnerable neighbours. They will remain stuck, facing multiple barriers to employment, as they hunger for a job and a decent future.

Instead, it seems the odds will be in favour of large businesses who can afford to invest in training. A small circle of approved training institutions stand to benefit, as they will gain training dollars. Meanwhile, other training sites with proven track records of getting jobs for their participants will lose funding and some may be forced to close.

Yes, some people will get jobs out of the Canada Jobs Grant, as many have with the existing Labour Market Agreement. The federal government says it will help address the much ballyhooed “skills shortage” that is supposedly a national crisis. Strangely enough, the Toronto Dominion Bank found in its October, 2013 “Jobs in Canada” study that the supposed skills shortage is not backed up by evidence.

You may be sensing a disquieting pattern here. The federal government is planning to gut successful job training programs that have indisputable evidence that they work, in order to address a “crisis” that doesn’t really exist. This seems like “designing programs for the sake of designing programs”.

The final bit of confusion is Federal Finance Jim Flaherty’s assertion that the disputed funding ” is federal money, tax money. And it is not for a provincial government to tell the federal government how to spend it."

He is correct in saying it is tax money, our taxpayer money. It would seem prudent to manage our taxpayer money well by continuing to support successful training programs and by not creating new ones to address a non-existent crisis. We don’t need “new programs for the sake of programs”.

And as taxpayers, we can tell the government how to spend our money.

Respectfully,

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