



September 12, 2005

The Canadian Immigrant Magazine
#12, 2910 Commercial Drive
Vancouver, B.C. V5N 4C9

Naeem "Nick" Noorani, Publisher

Dear Mr Noorani,

Congratulations on your magazine, which is distributed at Vancouver Community College. I hope it prospers as it grows to fill a niche for immigrants here.

I was away on holiday when your open letter to Gordon Campbell appeared on The Tyee website on July 6th so I am sorry I was not able to respond sooner. My union and I agree with most of your letter; however, we wanted to write to point out one troubling aspect.

First, a little introduction. Many of our members are ESL instructors and I believe it would be extremely rare for a class at Vancouver Community College not to have immigrant students. We have been the major centre of ESL instruction for immigrants in Vancouver, indeed in western Canada, for 40 years. On any day in the college year we have probably over 1500 students studying English. We have over 150 ESL teachers on our roster. While it always seems to us that our work does not get the media attention it deserves, we do feel we have made and are making a huge contribution to the lives of immigrants in BC.

Your open letter is spot on when you say it is time for Gordon Campbell and his government to "become a leader in immigration issues. After all, helping immigrants quickly and successfully ...is for the benefit of the labour market, the economy and our overall quality of life..." Whenever we get the chance, which is rare with this government, we say the same thing.

We can agree with the six of the seven points you have made. We will be looking at the Ontario websites you have cited to see how their models can help stimulate our thinking. Much of our work in ESL and increasingly in other VCC programming attempts to move immigrants along as quickly as they can go, either into further, more advanced ESL training, into academic programs if they require them, into the more than 30 employment-related training programs we have, or into other institutions such as BCIT.

However, we feel we have to mention that point seven suffers because it is based on the findings of the 2004 Inter-Provincial Report Card. The Faculty Association and the Dean responsible for ESL programs at VCC have pointed out to the Vancouver

Sun and to the authors of the Report Card that it is inaccurate because it is significantly incomplete. The report therefore leaves itself open to being dismissed by the government without forcing the government to address the fundamental issue--that it is not doing enough for immigrants who require ESL training.

Furthermore, when good points like yours are based on the Report Card then the government can too easily dismiss them as well.

The Report Card took an overly simplistic view of ESL in BC. It only included government-training dollars that go to ELSA and other settlement programs. It is true that BC does use federal money to fund such programming to level three. However, the Report Card based its failing grade solely on that portion of support funding, which amounts to roughly half of the total. We do not know why, but for some reason the authors did not include the ESL programming, such as that at VCC, which is funded through the Ministry of Advanced Education. This programming uses up the other half of the federal money BC gets-- which is therefore approximately an equal amount as that which goes to ELSA.

In BC, thousands of immigrants who take post level 3 ESL can continue on up to university level English if they wish but they do have to pay a fee similar to other public college students--a fee that covers about 20% of the cost of their program.

In another forum we would argue that all their training should be tuition-free, indeed that all post-secondary education should be tuition-free, but we have to recognize that has not ever been a majority view in BC.

Most of the public would agree that after a certain level of ESL competence, immigrants should continue to be subsidized but should be responsible for a portion of their training costs. Benefits of this approach are that it allows more immigrants to access high-quality public college training than would otherwise be possible and that it creates a level playing field between intermediate and advanced ESL learners and other post-secondary learners; thereby shielding them from criticism of getting something Canadian-born students cannot get. Of course, it can hinder economically disadvantaged learners. The government's ABESAP (Adult Basic Education Student Assistance Program) has been very helpful in this regard since eligible ESL students can have their fees covered as long as they continue to make progress but much more student aid is needed.

If the Report Card was to be fair to the BC government it should have included all the support funding it provides for ESL in BC: ELSA, settlement programs, programs for fee-payers in college, and that portion of ABESAP which goes to ESL students.

Now, such an approach might have gotten British Columbia's grade up to a C- or a C from a D but it would not have meant BC was doing a good job. We, and I am sure you would agree, would still argue that BC is getting a free ride. It's using federal money without topping it up substantially. As your letter points out, it's just not good enough and there needs to be more done.

In closing, I would just like to suggest that you might like to add an eighth point to a future open letter. Something along the lines of ensuring equitable access for immigrants to the programming they need at public colleges and universities.

After all, if a Canadian-born citizen needs Math 200, they do not have to go to a

private college to get it. Shouldn't it be the same for an immigrant who needs to get his English reading and report writing up to a relatively high level of language competence – enough for a technical program for instance. If native English speakers had to reach a similar level in French, they would be able to get their French upgraded at a public college or university. Immigrants who need the same level of competence in English should have access to public colleges and universities too. Their taxes are going to support them and they will become taxpayers in higher brackets all the quicker.

Again, thanks for your open letter, thanks for your newspaper. Please let us know if you would like more information.

Yours truly,

VCC Faculty Association

Frank Cosco
Vice President