

At the present time, in an era of great fiscal constraint, it would appear that taxpayers are simultaneously financing programs which discourage people with disabilities from working and programs intended to foster their employment. Nothing could more strongly demonstrate the need for a comprehensive — and consistent — approach to disability issues. Aside from enabling existing programs to work better, such an approach may be expected to achieve significant cost savings, particularly where it enables persons with disabilities to move from complete reliance on income support programs to employment, supplemented by assistance, to defray the costs of disability.

2. Education

A low educational level is a major barrier to adequate employment, for all people including those with disabilities, and thus a central contributor to poverty. Conversely, education and training can provide a vitally important means for a person with disabilities to gain adequately-remunerated employment in a job market that is likely narrowed to start with, by other barriers.

According to Statistics Canada's 1986 Health and Activity Limitation Survey, persons with disabilities tend to have a lower level of formal education than their non-disabled counterparts. In 1986, fully one third of the population of disabled persons had no higher than a primary school education (versus 11% of the non-disabled population) and 61% had not completed high school (versus 38% of the non-disabled population). At the other end of the spectrum, only 4% of disabled persons had a university degree, versus 11% of the non-disabled population.

The impact of education on employment levels is striking. While disabled persons with only a primary school education had an employment ratio of 17% (versus 55% for non-disabled persons), those with a university degree had an employment ratio of 50% (versus 87% for non-disabled persons). The fact that disabled persons with university degrees still had an employment ratio that was lower than that of non-disabled persons with only a primary school education clearly indicates that education, alone, will not resolve employment problems. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the employment level of disabled persons improved more rapidly, as educational levels increased, than did that of non-disabled persons.

According to witnesses representing the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS), a national survey of post-secondary educational institutions revealed substantial variations in levels of physical accessibility as well as in levels of service required by specific disabilities, such as visual impairment or learning disabilities. The overall picture was summarized, in blunter terms, by Mr. David Leitch, of the Atlantic Centre of Support for Disabled Students, who said: