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HOST: As many kids head off to school - in whatever form that takes for them in the midst of a pandemic - it's easy to pass off the issue of education to the actual humans involved - the parents, the kids and the teachers. But according to Annie Kidder, we all need to be thinking about educating the next generation of Canadians. Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is Annie Kidder, Executive Director of People for Education:

ANNIE KIDDER: Hello, thank you very much. My name is Annie Kidder and I'm the Executive Director of People for Education. And I feel like my job here tonight is to kind of connect some dots. And it's partly because I come from the world of education and schools and that world is, is oddly. And I'll explain the odd part in a minute. It's oddly often left out of conversations like this, but if we think about cities and communities and how we could do a better job at ensuring that cities and communities thrive, that they are able to be resilient as this talk is about, um, or this evening is about then probably to me anyway, people would be a good place to start. And when we think about people, um, it's probably a good idea to go back to the where people start and they people start at the very beginning and then very quickly that conversation gets to school.

That's where a lot of people from being very young and up, um, 95% of Canada's children, uh, who are going to grow up to be the adults who live in and run and build our cities and our communities. 95% of those kids, uh, who are going to be the next generation of society are educated in our publicly funded schools. And it's really important than that, that all of us, not just parents, not just teachers, not tips, there's people who work inside the education system, that all of us think about what our publicly funded schools look like, what they're doing and what kind of skills that they're building. So we can have the cities and communities we want. So we want to know, we should want to know, um, what kind of skills our schools are building, what kind of capacities they support, what kind of values our schools are developing.

And we should want to know how much resilience our schools are kind of growing, uh, in our kids because all of these things, um, have an impact. And the impact again, is not just on those kids or on the parents of those kids, but the impact is on our whole society. So if we all which I think we do, uh, want cities that can thrive. And maybe even more importantly, if we all want cities where everybody has at least a fairly equitable chance to prosper, and I mean prosper in the sort of biggest possible sense of that word, um, then we have to make sure that we're building, if you will, the right kind of kids, we have to really look at what kind of people we're building in those schools. And if we're getting, weren't going to get what we want and need for cities and our communities, our province, our country for the last two or three decades, um, we've had a pretty narrow focus in our schools and in our education systems.

And it's been partly based on what we measure. Uh, we have things we can measure. We're looking at that. And we, we, we work on them. We decided for lots of very important reasons to focus on what we've called, the core skills, literacy and numeracy, and we've set standards. And we felt a lot of policy around, uh, those skills. We spend a lot of money. We have targets for success, uh, in those areas. And partly as a result of all that, um, we're, we've, we've seen quite a lot of improvement all across the country. We're doing pretty well in those areas, but the problem with that, um, and it goes without saying that being able to read and write and do math are vitally important skills. I'm not saying they're not important. They are very important. But the problem with that is that by focusing so narrowly on those goals and targets, we've actually ended up kind of narrowing the very definitely of education.



And yeah, then that creates two other problems. At least two, there are probably a million other problems, but it creates two very important ones. The first problem is that even though Canada does a better job than most other countries in the world at overcoming the impact of socio and economic status on kids' chances for success, we have a fairly equitable education system in that way in terms of the gap. So even though we do a pretty good job in Canada, it's still the biggest indicator. If you're poor, you come from, if you come from a family, living in poverty, you are less likely to succeed in school. It is a fact, um, and this is where resilience, the first instance of resilience. This is where resilience is incredibly important because resilience can help overcome those intergenerational cycles of poverty. Problem. Number two, with that narrow focus is that it doesn't take into account.

All of the things that we know now that are, are incredibly important for kids, longterm success, for their sense of engagement and belonging, uh, their health, their physical and mental health, their sense of social responsibility, their ability to live, to be active citizens, their ability to get, uh, and keep a job or multiple jobs and their capacity to live with precarity, my new favorite word, and these days, very precarious times that capacity is incredibly important and resilience is part of that capacity. So the problem with that narrow focus is it leaves out this raft of other vital skills and resilience is key piece of those skills. Now, sadly for resilience, um, is it lives in a family of skills, uh, that unfortunately ended up being called soft skills or noncognitive skills or social emotional skills, which makes them sound not very important or kind of nice, but you know, something we'll do if we have time later.

Um, and it certainly doesn't make them sound as important as for instance, knowing your times tables, which is important, but the, the thing is that it turns out that they're all important and they're equally important. It's not right to say, we've gotta get this one first. And then we'll do the rest. The conference board of Canada says it is important that the next generation possess a broad range of skills that supports their ability to think, learn, communicate, collaborate, and innovate. So the big question then to us is so what can we do to ensure we're providing all the right skills and the people for education, the organization that I am heading, we've launched a new initiative called measuring what matters and we're working with experts from across the country. Uh, and in consultation with everybody we can consult with, um, to come up with a broader range of goals and skills, uh, goals and measures of success in education.

Um, and the areas that we are looking at the goals and measures, we're looking at our creativity and innovation, citizenship, health, writ, large social, emotional skills and resilience as a huge part of those social emotional skills. And just as education is again, oddly often left out of conversations about cities and communities or the country or the economy, um, especially public education, K to 12 education education usually leaves all you out of the conversation about education. Uh, it's actually hard to engage in a conversation from our little tiny group with this big group. That's thinking very big things about what they want our world to look like. So we need, uh, to do this together. We need to connect all of the dots when we're thinking about cities communities, a fair society. And we need to think about the kinds of kids that were growing in our schools so that they can help ensure that in the next generation or in a few years, we all live in cities and communities that are great, that are strong and that are resilient. Thank you very much.

HOST: Annie Kidder spoke at The Walrus Talks Resilience in 2014, and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked and wheeled the stage at The Walrus Talks.

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Annie Kidder from The Walrus Talks



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