

AT C LEVEL

Bernard Lord, Premier of New Brunswick, Canada

Part of a series of talks with top-level executives on the subject of learning and performance.

**New Brunswick premier
stresses learning and
skills development to
spark economic growth.**

By Pat Galagan and
Jennifer Homer

Thinking

BIG

THE CANADIAN PROVINCE OF NEW BRUNSWICK, about the size of Ireland with a population of only three quarters of a million people, proves that size is no barrier to thinking big.

Using financial incentives, state-of-the-art Internet infrastructure, and the assets of its labor force, New Brunswick has made itself fertile ground for entrepreneurs in the knowledge industry. Today, New Brunswick is the leading provider of call center services in North America and home to a host of e-businesses, including some e-learning companies.

Led by Premier Bernard Lord, the provincial government has become a major user of employee training and development to support economic growth. Learning is one of four pillars of Premier Lord's Prosperity Plan. "Without learning," he says, "there won't be any growth."

Q. *In August 2005, the premiers of Canada came together for a meeting of the Council of the Federation. A report listed developing a national plan to create a better-educated workforce through education and training as a top priority. If such a plan is implemented, what will be the strategic benefits for Canada? How does learning support Canada's plans for growth?*

A. Without learning, without knowledge, and without skills, there won't be any growth. We live in a world of globalization. We can build walls around our province, our country, or our region, or we can tear down walls and compete. I believe we have the natural resources to compete. I think we have the knowledge and technology. But to be really competitive, we need even more knowledge. We need more skills if we want to continue to enhance our quality of life, to deal with poverty, and to sustain healthcare services for seniors and families. We need more knowledge and skill in order to maintain a stable democracy, and to provide security in our communities, better jobs, and a better standard of living. I believe that without knowledge, without skills, without training, and without education, we can't reach those goals. And that's why learning is so essential for us.

Four years ago I launched the New Brunswick Prosperity Plan, a strategic, 10-year, economic growth agenda focusing on four areas that matter most if New Brunswick is to succeed in today's fiercely competitive world. The four pillars of the plan are investing in people, creating a competitive fiscal and business environment, embracing innovation, and building strategic infrastructure. Notice that investing in people—that means education and training—is at the top of the list.

We see education as an economic driver. I firmly believe that you can have the lowest taxes in the world, the best roads in the world, and the fastest computers, but if you don't have skilled and educated people, you're still not competitive. That is the key. And frankly, if you have smart, skilled, educated people, you can create the rest. That's been our driving force.

When the premiers of Canada met this summer, there was a growing sense that we must address the issues of post-secondary education, training, and skills development across the nation. We felt it was important enough that we called for a First Ministers Meeting. That's where the premiers and the Prime Minister get together to talk about one issue. At this meeting, we will focus on Canada's future productivity and innovation capacity.

Q. *Unemployment in New Brunswick has been high in the past—as much as 15 percent, but now it's falling. Are you facing a skills gap and if so, what are the plans for dealing with it?*

A. Unemployment has declined significantly in New Brunswick. In 2004, for the first year in over 30 years, we had a full year of unemployment below 10 percent. So far this year, the numbers are better than last year, so this will be our best year on record.

That being said, we still have thousands of jobs in New Brunswick that are open and waiting for skilled people to fill them, and we have thousands of people, unfortunately, who are unemployed and who do not have skills to offer employers. That's the gap that we're trying to fill. We may not be able to close that gap for everyone today, but we have to at least try to close it five or 10 years from now. I actually believe that if we continue down our path—unless the world comes apart—that our challenge will shift from chronic unemployment to a labor shortage. I don't want to end up in a situation where we have both chronic unemployment and a labor shortage. To prevent that, we must focus on learning, skills, education, and training.

There are four components to our Quality Learning Agenda. There's K to 12, which is the public school system. There's post-secondary education, for which we launched some programs this year. There will also be two others: lifelong learning (post post-secondary education) and early learning. That's pre-kindergarten. Those two components of the Quality Learning

ing Agenda should be launched within a few weeks. Our strategy supports learning and education in the province of New Brunswick from cradle to grave.

Q. *Which part of the Quality Learning Agenda do you think will be the most helpful to employers?*

A. In the next five years, the way we will change our training programs and transform our community colleges should make them more in tune with the needs of employers. The plan will also meet the needs of future employees to gain the skills employers are looking for, which will enable them to get jobs in our job market.

There is a government program in Canada called Employment Insurance. If a person works a certain minimum number of weeks, he or she is eligible for the insurance. People would go to their local MLAs (Member of the Legislative Assembly), who would then petition the government to create so-called “jobs” so that people could qualify for the insurance. As you can imagine, it created a certain dependence.

In New Brunswick, we’ve basically put an end to that. We’ve taken that money and refocused it into training programs for long-term skills. We told people, “We’re not going to help you short-term with insurance because it perpetuates the cycle of dependence. Next year you’ll be back. But if you need skills, we’ll help you get training so you can get a full-time job.” And it’s worked remarkably well. In some parts of the province in the last six years, we’ve cut back the number of people who receive social assistance by as much as 35 percent in some places. We didn’t change the rules. We didn’t make it any harder for anyone to qualify. We’ve just made it easier for them to get the training they need to get a job.

Q. *One component of the New Brunswick Prosperity Plan is to embrace innovation. Can you give us some idea how you promote that and encourage it?*

A. I believe the need for innovation never ends. There’s always a place for a new idea, for new thinking, or for an improved way of doing things. Even when something is working, it might not necessarily be the best it could be. Innovation in our thinking will carry us further than just making changes in programs or equipment.

In New Brunswick, we support hard innovation through enhanced research and development. And while it is fun to talk about our successes, to really move ahead we have to acknowledge our weakness-

es as well as our strengths. That’s how to face weaknesses and correct them.

When we looked at the New Brunswick economy and what was affecting our quality of life and our standard of living, we saw clearly that we weren’t as productive as we should be. One of the reasons was that our education and training levels weren’t high enough. Our innovation capacity wasn’t as strong as it could be and therefore it affected our productivity. So we created the New Brunswick Innovation Foundation, which combines the efforts of government, the private sector, and academia to leverage more investments in each sector.

What became apparent to us was that while we had the desire and the capacity to innovate in research and development, we didn’t have the structure to support investment. By making some changes, we’ve leveraged six or seven times the money we’ve put in so far. It’s still not a lot of money in terms of the problems we face, but it is changing attitudes and thinking. The University of New Brunswick and the University of Moncton, which used to trail the pack of universities in Canada in terms of new research money, have led the way in the last two or three years with the largest increases every year. And that’s because of the Innovation Foundation.

We also support innovation in our schools. We have a pilot program that we put in place to provide universal access to broadband in the schools. So far no other province in the country has embarked on such comprehensive access to broadband. In the next wave, which has already started, we’re looking at being as wireless as possible.

We also innovate and support innovation by example. The government of New Brunswick provides more services online than probably any government in North America. In fact, we export our know-how and our systems to other places in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.

The links among education, innovation, and strategic infrastructure, and competitiveness and productivity are very clear to me. They all go hand-in-hand.

Q. *How will you know when you’re successful? How will you measure success?*

A. There are a number of broad measurements that we keep track of. For the Prosperity Plan, it’s GDP per capita compared to the rest of the country. When we started the Prosperity Plan, we were at 75 percent of the average Canadian GDP per capita. We set the target at 85 percent. We’ve closed the gap some but we want to close it even more.

We have other indicators too: real wages and real

New Brunswick, Canada

Quality Learning Agenda

“A culture of excellence and high achievement exemplified by innovation and lifelong learning.”

The goal to achieve economic and social prosperity is grounded in the New Brunswick Prosperity Plan, a strategic framework put in place by Premier Bernard Lord and the provincial government. Underpinning the goal of prosperity is a drive to be globally competitive through building innovation capacity, productivity, and exports.

Premier Lord recognizes that the number 1 building block for achieving prosperity is investing in people. This means the province invests strategically to ensure that New Brunswick’s education sector reaches further to be relevant and internationally competitive.

How will the province achieve this? Through its “Quality Learning Agenda,” a 10-year action plan to strengthen and position education and training for future growth. It encompasses the full continuum of learning: early childhood, K-12, post-secondary, and adult and lifelong learning.

The New Brunswick Quality Learning Agenda is based on the values of opportunity, quality, affordability, and equity, and on the following beliefs:

- The most important determinant in New Brunswick’s long-term success is the province’s ability to create a culture of excellence and high achievement, which is exemplified by innovation and lifelong learning.
- Education and training are integral to an economically competitive and socially compassionate New Brunswick.
- Education and training are central to good citizenship and a strong New Brunswick society.
- Education and training are essential to help individuals reach their full potential.
- Education and training systems must be dedicated to high achievement, and be innovative and accountable.

For more information, visit www.gnb.ca.

income. The basic objective of the Prosperity Plan is to close the economic gaps by half between us and the rest of the country within 10 years. This would be a transformational shift for New Brunswick.

In terms of the Quality Learning Agenda, we’ve set precise objectives in terms of how many students graduate. We have the highest high school graduation rate in the country now, but our test scores are not where they need to be. We want to be in the top three provinces in eight years in terms of test scores.

I want to say that these targets cannot be met just by government action. Frankly, it would be foolish to think the government can do all this. Government can provide the plan but the citizens must realize what’s at stake for themselves, their families, and the community, and then make an investment in their own learning and development. If the citizens decide it’s not important, there’s no government policy, program, or tax rebate that will change that thinking. But what I sense from New Brunswickers is a desire to achieve. We’re very hardworking people.

Q. Do you see the organizations and the companies in

New Brunswick setting some similarly aggressive targets for having a skilled workforce?

A. Yes, absolutely. That’s what we see from the private sector and from industry leaders. We created an enterprise network of 15 zones throughout the province. We mandated each of them to establish a strategic plan for the business community in the region. And in every single case, skills development and training were near or at the top of the list in their strategic plans.

I’m sure you’ll find some companies here in New Brunswick that don’t think about training. But the sharp ones do. When we hear from chambers of commerce, boards of trade, and business leaders, they tell us training is a big issue. And it is. We cannot compete by being a low-skilled, labor-intensive environment, especially if we want to maintain the standard of living and the social programs we want. Low-skill jobs become low-wage jobs. The days of having a plentiful supply of highly paid, low-skill work are behind us. Some people are trying to hang on to that, but the world is changing. To adapt, we need to focus on better training and better skills. It’s knowledge that will en-

able us to compete.

Q. *What about e-learning. Six years ago, the e-learning industry was just getting started in New Brunswick and it seemed to play a big part in the change and growth of the economy. Do you have any kind of long-term plan or goal for the e-learning industry?*

A. There have been some changes in the e-learning industry here. Six years ago, the bubble was still growing but when it burst, some e-learning businesses disappeared. The ones that had the fundamentals right are still here and have been able to establish themselves as world leaders.

The government of New Brunswick itself is expanding e-learning opportunities in the province. We want to double the number of online courses for high school students within three years.

More companies are relying on e-learning to upgrade their employees. There is a market for skills training online in New Brunswick.

Part of the prosperity plan addresses e-government...how we're leading the way in providing more services online. And there is e-business. We want to encourage businesses to realize the potential of doing business at the speed of light and the click of a mouse. We want more of our businesses to offer real transactions online. Large companies will do it because they see the benefits and they have the money to invest. I'm really looking to support the small businesses, the mom-and-pop shops that haven't changed their ways and don't realize the efficiencies they can create by doing business online.

And all of that is supported by an e-infrastructure, the broadband access that I spoke about earlier. We want to extend wireless access beyond the schools and our larger cities—Fredericton, Moncton, and St. John—to our small communities. It's all part of the overall E-New Brunswick Strategy: e-business, e-learning, and e-government services.

Q. *Any final thoughts?*

A. I'm very passionate about these things, and I truly believe that our future depends on them. When I look at my kids, who are 10 and 11, and when I visit classrooms around the province, I think of their future. Their future is going to be different than our present. If we don't prepare that future for them they may not have the future we want. Just wishing for it is not good enough. We can all wish for things to be better, but we actually have to

work at it. That's what we're trying to do. We're doing our best. **TD**

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