

A BUSINESS APPROACH TO CHARITABLE GIVING AND EDUCATION

Imperial's philanthropic strategy of supporting math and science education is more than just charity: it's about ensuring Canada's future success



PERSPECTIVES

By Tim Hearn

Sir John Templeton, the renowned investor and philanthropist, once said, “An attitude of gratitude creates blessings. Help yourself by helping others.” These words guided his efforts to build some of the world’s most successful investment funds. They also inspired his philanthropic undertakings, including the Templeton Foundation, which donates millions of dollars each year to support university research. His words are also a powerful reminder that community giving today should be more than charity.

In this issue of *The Review*, you’ll read about Imperial’s strategic approach to community investment (see “A New Approach to Giving,” p. 20). This has involved selecting causes that are both relevant to our business and well suited to the resources and capabilities we possess.

One such priority is strengthening support for education, particularly in math and science. Supporting math and science education is not just about helping select students – it’s about enabling our country’s future success.

It used to be that a country enjoyed a favoured position in the world if it simply had plentiful natural resources or access to technology or readily available investment capital. Today, however, there’s growing evidence that competitive advantage in our global economy also lies in having a superior workforce.

In fact, Lester Thurow, economist and author of *Head to Head: The Coming Economic Battle Among Japan, Europe and America*, has suggested that “in the 21st century natural resources will be irrelevant. Capital will move around the world. Technology will move around the world. The only strategic asset is the skills of the workforce.”

Now, you won’t catch me saying that natural resources are irrelevant. Far from it. But when Thurow talks about the value of education, he’s clearly on the right track. Certainly, in my view, the skills of our workforce are a highly strategic asset and key to defining our country’s future.

Here in Canada we enjoy several advantages. First,

there’s our abundance of natural resources, including oil and natural gas. Next, there’s the strong global demand for these commodities, which in turn has contributed to a strong economy (witness the parity of the Canadian dollar with U.S. currency). And finally, there’s our significant human resources potential. We have a solid public education system. Our students perform well above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average in areas such as mathematics. Nearly one out of two adult Canadians has a post-secondary education, a level of education that’s one of the best in the world. Our well-educated workforce has contributed to our prosperity and conditions that make Canada an attractive place to live.

And while this is good news, we cannot afford to be complacent. Today’s and yesterday’s accomplishments provide no guarantee of tomorrow’s successes. In a rapidly evolving world, Canada needs to stay competitive. Others are catching up, or in some cases passing us.

Other countries believe that the effectiveness of their human resources dictates how well their country will do on the world stage. They understand that education is critical to prepare their young people for a changing global economy. They recognize the urgent need to develop a technologically capable workforce for today’s knowledge-intensive work environment. Many of these countries have made education in the sciences, especially math and engineering, a key strategic priority.

In Canada, about eight percent of undergraduates earn engineering degrees. Contrast this with Japan, Germany and Korea, where engineers make up about one-fifth of all graduates, and with China, where about 38 percent of all undergraduate degrees are in engineering.

Furthermore, science degrees in Canada (math, computer science, physical and biological sciences, and engineering) make up about 22 percent of all new degrees, placing Canada right on the OECD average. In Korea, science degrees comprise almost double that of Canada at 38 percent.

In the global competition to employ science graduates, Canada is beginning to falter. According to the OECD's new report, *Education at a Glance*, there are 1,163 science graduates per 100,000 people employed in Canada ages 25 to 34, a number that falls below the OECD average of 1,295.

Of course, global competition is not the only reason we need to emphasize math and science education among our young people. The global demand for energy continues to climb, in part because of rapid economic expansion in the developing world. And Canada, with its abundant energy resources, is well positioned to help meet this need. Yet Canadians, rightfully, do not want energy development to come at the price of environmental harm. Finding and developing new sources of oil and natural gas, all the while achieving cleaner air, water and fuels, and addressing major environmental issues such as climate change, will require sophisticated technological skills that start with science education.

Clearly, improving the quality and effectiveness of science education in our country has little to do with charity. The fact is, our success, our competitiveness and our future depend on it.

Improving the math and science skills of our young people is an important step toward maintaining and enhancing our economic growth in the coming decades. Besides producing more technologically literate Canadians, a strong focus on science education will also increase the number of scientists, economists, engineers and other professionals who drive innovation in our industry and economy.

So if this is the situation we face, what can business do?

One of the practical ways business can help is by providing a substantial measure of financial support to education-related organizations. At Imperial, for example, we've invested about \$20 million in education-related initiatives over the past five years. This has included investments in a wide range of math and science initiatives, everything from programs that support science experts to volunteer and share their experience in local schools to computer science camps that encourage young women to study computer science in university. These are examples of money well invested.

In particular, we've donated more than \$2 million to Let's Talk Science, a national science education organization. The Partnership Program, one of the four programs that Let's Talk Science runs, trains a growing network of science outreach volun-

teers, primarily graduate science students, to lead children from kindergarten through grade 12 in hands-on science activities in schoolrooms, university laboratories and communities. Our support has helped the program reach more than 67,000 children and youth directly.

So far, I've shared some of the strategic reasons why business should get involved in investing in science education. But, ultimately, there's no experience more compelling than seeing the smiles on the faces of young people when they are involved in math and science programs that are engaging and fun.

Since 1993, Imperial has been a founding sponsor of the Learning Partnership, a national non-profit educational organization. A number of years ago,



Imperial helps to promote hands-on science education through organizations such as Let's Talk Science.

I had the opportunity to visit a junior high school in Toronto and see one of the Learning Partnership's programs in action: Investigate! Invent! Innovate! (I³ for short), an integrated science and technology program for students in grades 7 and 8.

From that visit, I remember the enthusiasm of the teachers, how keen the students were to talk about their work, and how proud they were of their inventions. I also remember

thinking that here was a program that was making a real connection to young people, encouraging them to solve problems, think like entrepreneurs and work in teams – very much the same qualities we need to encourage in all students to help them succeed.

It's important to build on education initiatives of this kind. It's also important to remember that innovative education initiatives do not happen by chance. They require companies and organizations to step forward and help.

I have travelled and lived internationally as a business executive, I've seen firsthand how well Canadians can compete internationally. We have a talent for innovation and technology and some of the richest natural resources in the world. This combination of brains, innovation and resources should provide Canada with an unbeatable natural advantage in the global marketplace.

The opportunity is clear: improving education remains one of our country's best investments. Give people the right education and training and you not only develop individuals, but build more prosperous communities. Young minds trained in math and science are a foundation for this success. By investing in Canada's students today, we're doing our part to inspire a generation of young minds that will ensure Canada remains a vibrant, prosperous country for years to come. ■