



MATT FREHNER

**NOT SINGING A DUET** Ted Morton (left) and Lyle Oberg (right) trying to hit the right notes on advanced education.

# Better access to education key to Alberta's future, candidates argue

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Managing Editor

In February 2005, Premier Ralph Klein promised Albertans he would establish the most affordable tuition policy in the country, provoking a review of postsecondary education whose recommendations have yet to be implemented. And with Klein set to submit his letter of resignation on Saturday, his potential replacements aren't waiting to put their education platforms on the table.

An early kick off to campaigning took place in St Albert on Tuesday, as all nine candidates gathered at the Arden Theatre to debate before a packed house of Conservative Party members.

"We're turning away Alberta kids by the thousands, literally the thousands," said Mark Norris, MLA for Edmonton-McClung, to whom the question about education was randomly addressed by the moderator of the event. "We have to get away from the old mantra that it's cost pressures; it's not cost pressures, it's an investment in our future, and it should be treated that way."

Norris was particularly concerned with creating spaces in technical institutes to create a steady flow of skilled workers for our booming economy, which demands more labourers.

Alternately, Victor Doerksen, MLA for Red Deer-South, suggested allowing students to leave high school at a younger age to attend trades charter schools.

Ed Stelmach, MLA for Vegreville-Fort Saskatchewan, pointed to the lack of Métis and First Nations people in the postsecondary system and encouraged greater emphasis on integrated learning programs.

These statements were echoed by Dave Hancock, former minister of advanced education, who went on to explain that the 40 per cent of Albertans don't have appropriate levels of literacy—something that needs to be changed.

"That's a huge drain, not only our economy, but on their ability to be full citizens. So we need to look at education right across the scope, to make sure it's accessible to all Albertans," he said.

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**MARK NORRIS,  
MLA EDMONTON-MCCLUNG**

Alana DeLong, MLA for Calgary Bow, discussed Campus Alberta's distant education program and pointed to the Alberta SuperNet, which makes the Internet more accessible to rural communities, as a method to increase resources across the province.

"We need to put those two together to provide the opportunities for students across the province to access postsecondary education from their home communities," she said.

Jim Dinning, who was an elected

member of government from 1986-97, advocated student loan reforms that could see Alberta drop out of the Canadian Student Loan Program, something Minister of Advanced Education Denis Herard has promoted.

Despite the leadership campaign and Klein's pending departure, Herard told the Gateway in a phone interview on 13 September that business will go on as usual.

"Nothing changes until such time that the new premier hopes to appoint a new minister of Advanced Education," Herard said. "There's nothing, as far as I'm concerned, no hiatus. There's no stopping of trying to move forward and progress with these changes."

Immigration was another major topic of debate, and Ted Morton, MLA for Foothills-Rocky View, said that Alberta should play a greater role in this area, much like Québec.

"And if we do that, we can prioritize skilled workers," Morton said. "I support that as another way of meeting our workforce demands."

Lyle Oberg, former minister of learning in Alberta, was similarly concerned about immigration.

"We have to ensure that Canadians get our jobs—jobs that are needed—but still there are going to be jobs left over," Oberg said. "We have to set up an immigration system that brings people in on a temporary basis—that brings people in on work visas—and quite simply, if the job goes, those people must go back to their countries."

The ninth candidate at the forum was Gary McPherson, who doesn't have a seat in the Legislature.

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