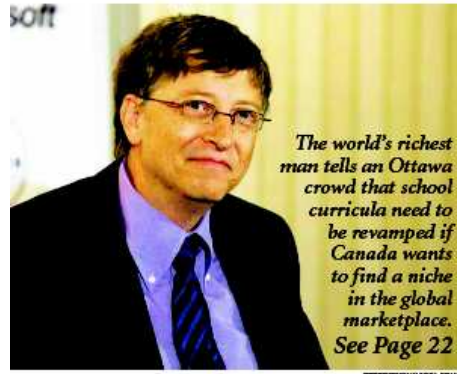


To Be Competitive, Invest In Education, Urges Gates

By Lee Berthiaume

BILL GATES: OPEN YOUR MATH BOOKS



With the exception of Asia, fewer throughout the world are pursuing studies in math and sciences, despite the fact that those are the areas where the majority of new jobs are being created, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates said yesterday.

As a result, he added, countries like Canada must reconsider their school curricula to better promote this essential fields as the transition to a knowledge-based economy continues.

“Clearly the curriculum we’re using, the way we’re making it sound like an inter-

esting field to go into, it’s discouraging a lot of people who would have great opportunities there,” Mr. Gates said.

“There’s a lot that needs to be done there.”

Mr. Gates was speaking at a conference in Ottawa that saw business and government representatives as well academics gather to discuss ways to create a skilled workforce, considered necessary in today’s global market.

With China and other countries emerging as the world’s manufacturing centres, nations like Canada are becoming ever more reliant on innovation and values-added products to boost their economies.

But with such fields as biotechnology and information technology emerging as important sectors of Canada’s economy, the need for highly trained science and math experts is more pressing than ever. According to a Conference Board of Canada report, Canadian students ranked seventh in mathematics and 11th in science scores amongst OCDE countries, lagging behind countries like China and the Czech Republic.

“One belief is we need to change the curriculum,” Mr. Gates said of addressing the overall decline in math and science

studies, citing examples of schools that have done so and seen significant increases in the number of students going into those fields.

The world’s richest man said countries like Canada must find their niches in the global marketplace, and inevitably those require highly skilled people, and “that often brings us back to the issue of investing in education.”

“The jobs, more and more, will be college-educated jobs,” he added.

“The jobs that are high school-only jobs are, to some degree, being eliminated.”

The challenges aren’t necessarily new, however, and the opportunities are immense, Mr Gates said.

“It’s an opportunity because the number of product, the amount of work, the quality of work, can be increased,” he said.

“Certainly we saw that when we moved from an agricultural economy into an industrial economy . . . to a service-based economy, that the opportunities world wide were incredible.”

Yet governments must continue to invest in education not only to keep their economies on the cutting edge, but also to keep up with emerging economies in Asia where post-secondary institutions are starting to come into their own.

Looking at the top 100 universities in the world, Mr Gates said, 75 per cent of them would be in North America.

“It’s fair say there’d be very few Asia institutions in that list today,” he said.

“But, it’s probably a great thing for the world that over the next 10 years, you can already see, given investments that have been made, that will change.”

“That’s an interesting challenge, a competitive challenge.”

One key is continuing to invest in education

“The investment has to be at the high school level . . . and then funding things at the university level so the research activities can lead to the spin-offs and jobs,” Mr Gates said.

But the private sector must also step up and start thinking about what role it can play in North America’s education systems, especially as research and development become increasingly important in maintaining a competitive edge.

“Responsibility to think about what have been traditionally government issues, business has a very substantial role to play here,” he said. “When we think about education, the business community needs to get involved in education.”

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