

## **Dr. Curtis Clark – Reshaping Education: Embracing Change**

Host: Jeremy Strachan

### **Overview:**

In this episode, Dr. Curtis Clarke joins us to discuss the urgent need to adopt new models of learning. Dr. Clarke has served in Alberta Public Service roles, including Deputy Minister of Advanced Education, K-12 Education, and Solicitor General. He was also Assistant Deputy Minister of Alberta Correctional Services and Cabinet Policy Coordinator. Clarke shares what the emergence of mid-career learners means for education and what's wrong with the "learn and pray" model educational institutions have relied on traditionally.

### **Highlights from our conversation include:**

1. Adaptive models of learning need to meet students, especially mid-career learners, where they are. Universities need to consider how they can assess a learner's competencies and make informed recommendations for future learning.
2. Through curriculum co-development alongside industry partners, learners can engage with sectors that are part of the workforce they will move into.
3. Policy structures have tied university funding to the ability to attract students, but changing dynamics need to incentivize building partnerships that better serve students of all backgrounds.

### **JEREMY:**

A welcome and hello to Dr. Curtis Clark, who is a former Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education of Alberta and Advanced Education, and is now a consultant at Propero.

Dr. Clark has extensive experience in education leadership, particularly in navigating policy changes and fostering collaboration between the public and private sectors to improve education outcomes. Dr. Clark, welcome. How are you doing?

**CURTIS:**

I'm great. And thank you for having me here, Jeremy.

**JEREMY:**

Great.

What have been the key takeaways so far of the events that M&L has been putting on in terms of your perspectives?

And what do you think has been the most kind of, I guess, eye-opening things that you've heard?

**CURTIS:**

So I think probably maybe not eye-opening, but what's been resonating is the commonality of some of the issues that we've been facing.

And certainly from my perspective of being engaged in policy development and in the education portfolios for a number of years, these are particular things that we were starting to see.

But now to see that it's coalescing around some actions and individuals and corporations and entities that are starting to focus on this specifically, that's been really heartening to see.

But also the recognition that it's not traditional models that we're looking at. It's about change.

It's about shifting that and how important it is for us to recognize that, you know, we've actually been admiring this problem for long enough.

Now it's time to actually start doing things and also to see those who have been doing it as well.

**JEREMY:**

Yeah, absolutely.

I've been noticing that too. One of the things that really sort of like was a moment where I tuned into was a comment yesterday about this 12-21 paradigm.

I don't know if you caught that.

**CURTIS:**

Yes, indeed.

**JEREMY:**

So I'm going to ask you a couple of questions. What you think about the role between technology and education in terms of reshaping that sector and what steps should education institutions be taking to be preparing students for the future of work?

**CURTIS:**

I think it's interesting that you referenced the 12-21, because what we're looking at is structural changes in organizations and certainly from a policy perspective, from our post-secondary institutions and those who are on the peripheral of that learning space as well.

I think the concept of future skills equals change.

We can't think about future skills without recognizing that we expect and will be framing large foundational changes to our institutions, to our policy directions, to our learning outcomes as well.

And if we don't start paying attention to that, then I think we get lost back into the 12-21, the 12th century models of doing things and the 12th century structures of the organizations that we have.

But in order to move us forward, we need to think differently about what our institutions do, the role that they play.

Recognizing that it's not a traditional learner that we're looking at, that 17 to 24-year-olds who are going through our post-secondary institutions.

This is about lifelong learning.

Future skills is about that ongoing adaptive and agile aspect of what learning is.

And recognizing that the 25 to 55-year-olds in that upskilling and reskilling sort of framing, that is who we need to start paying attention to.

And we need to change our structures and our organizations to adapt and meet them where they are as a learner, but also be able to provide an agile and responsive learning space and outcome for them to be successful and thrive in this world that we're looking at right now, that economic shift that we're looking at.

**JEREMY:**

Yeah, if I can follow up just on the word responsive, I think so often we think of traditional learning spaces as a student goes in and they receive a body of information and a body of knowledge that is kind of more or less static and set in stone.

I'm just wondering if you can sort of, I'd love to just hear a little bit more about like that responsiveness in how those curricula, those bodies of knowledge can really adapt to a learner. I don't know, does that resonate with you?

**CURTIS:**

Totally. I think we need to get away from the old learn and pray.

And the learn and pray is we're going to teach you, you're going to learn something and pray that this is applicable to the world that you're moving into.

And what we need to do in terms of looking at that engagement of the individual is there's a couple of things.

First of all, we need to start sort of meeting the students where they are.

So there is the old traditional model of you come in as a blank slate.

We will fill you up and we don't really understand where you're coming from or the competencies or the skills that you bring to the table.

We don't really care about that.

We are here to inform and frame you that way.

We need to shift away from that. And we need to sort of look at, first of all, doing an assessment of where students are coming from, where are their competencies?

A colleague spoke about this yesterday in terms of what Bow Valley College is doing in terms of looking at the competencies that an individual brings to the table.

Look at their learning map or the process that they're going to engage in in that learning journey for them.

And then sort of work from that space. If we're looking at 25 to 55-year-olds, we can't assume that they're coming in with nothing.

We have to really meet them as a learner where they're at and be able to provide the service and the expectations that they have for that learning space.

As opposed to start from scratch and you're going to go through the traditional trajectory of what our old models have framed.

So we need to think differently about how we engage, but then it's also what we're engaging them with.

And it's about real-time, real-life experiences.

We need to, in some way, engage industry differently to co-develop and be a part of that process so that when learners are coming out, they're actually engaging with the industries and that sector that is actually part of the workforce that they're moving into.

And the skills that they're going to utilize will be applied in that space as well.

So it's thinking differently about a curriculum. It's thinking differently about the learner and how we as institutions and policy framers enable that and nudge that in a way.

**JEREMY:**

So that sort of next thing that comes to my mind when I hear the engagement piece is about leadership.

And so what do you think are the most important leadership qualities that we need to basically guide our education system through, you know, these periods of rapid change and profound uncertainty that we're seeing today?

CURTIS: There's probably three different ways to look at this. We need to get out of the risk adversity that we traditionally have with fairly conservative organizations and institutions.

Again, a 12th century approach is it's a very sort of lockstep approach, understanding of the role and expectations and the prestige of that organization.

So we need to move away from that and sort of look at that risk aversion that we have to be a little bit more thoughtful and creative about how we think about curriculum.

How we think the role of an institution is in terms of its function in developing the educational foundations, the programming.

So we need to think differently about that. And programming is one of those areas that we tend to be very risk adverse at.

It's pretty lockstep in how we think about the building of curriculum and its outcomes.

So we need to think about that differently. And we need a different leadership sort of orientation towards that. The other part of it is we have to think about it from... we need to stop competing with each other.

It's much more about collaboration. Where do we find those moments of cooperation and alignment?

And that takes a certain leadership orientation. It takes a different step away from what we've traditionally thought about.

I'm competing in a market, and I'm competing in a market for students and the learning outcomes and objectives that my institution can provide.

So there needs to be a different sense of what that partnership orientation is.

And some of that partnership orientation is also with industry.

How do we bring industry into this process of... Linda Hill, a professor in the Business School of Harvard, talks about creative ingenuity, creative genius.

It's about that collaborative space and bringing diverse individuals together.

But that's a leadership quality as well, is being able to say, we need this and I'm going to facilitate this as a leader, as an institutional leader, or as even just an industry leader as well.

**JEREMY:**

Yeah, that's so interesting. Antipathy or antagonism between the collaboration and the competition frameworks of mind.

I'm just wondering, why do you think that education systems have been traditionally or historically more in the kind of competition end of this spectrum of relationships?

**CURTIS:**

I think one element of that is that our policy structures have not enabled a change.

It sort of sets it up that in order to sort of look at even our funding models, it's very much about here is my niche, here is my mandate, here is the market that I need to address.

And the expectation of growth comes from a solid student body and the funding is created by body students coming in and the student count and address that way.

So we tend to say, I need to capture this.

This is where my funding envelope articulates. And as such, I cannot sort of cooperate or partner or think about this differently because the funding model doesn't allow me to think about how do I collaborate?

How do I think about sharing or enhancing the experience of the learner?

It's a capture kind of mode. It's again, going back to that 12th-century model of this is mine. And what we've seen also in that problem is a lack of collaboration and wanting to cooperate is you also get built into the structure of my courses do not transfer to your courses.

The fluidity of that learning experience for the learner becomes very captured in that space. We need to blow that up. We need to enable that kind of collaboration and way of thinking that our job is to educate and to develop the upskilling and reskilling framing for the learner, not to capture a particular market orientation.

**JEREMY:**

Right. Dr. Curtis Clark, thank you very much.

**CURTIS:**

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.