

Loto's ludicrous program

I am writing to comment on an article on youth gambling that appeared last week in a Montreal community newspaper. In response to the research findings of McGill and Laval Universities that adolescents are developing gambling problems as much as four times the rate of adults, Loto-Quebec is funding a project called "Count Me Out." One would assume that the intention was to teach children the harmful effects of gambling. Having seen the workbooks that are being distributed to the schools, it is my opinion that this program is as likely to promote gambling as to prevent it. As an educator and a consumer advocate, I find it ludicrous and bordering on obscene that the "Count Me Out" program being distributed through our schools, in the words of its own project manager Pauline Jourdan, does not teach that gambling is bad or to "say no" to gambling. Says Jourdan, "We just teach them to gamble wisely." How soon do we begin to teach students in grades three to five to drink and to smoke wisely? To paraphrase Mr J.P. Roy, spokesperson for Loto-Quebec, children are growing up in an ambience where gambling is all around them, so we need to teach them to gamble wisely. He further stated that the program was approved by the Minister of Education. This is just another example of one arm of the government validating the other. If the Minister of Education feels that this is a good program, then why is it not part of the curriculum? It is up to the discretion of the individual school councils whether or not to use the workbooks. In some of the schools I visited the books were kept in a closet or in the office of the nurse or volleyball coach. Still other schools have monitors handing them out to the students as they leave the school. Many of these workbooks remain in the schoolbags, unread. The cost of the program for this fiscal year is \$850,000.00. In Saskatchewan, where I played an instrumental role in making changes to the curriculum in the Regina School Board, the subject of gambling did not even surface. We merely introduced coping skills and stress management into the Wellness course, and odds and probabilities in the Math course. The premise being that if a child learns odds and probabilities he or she will figure out for themselves that gambling is very high-risk. Gambling is a stupid activity, but it is practiced by people who are not stupid. One of the main triggers that cause people to search for an escape mechanism, (alcohol, drugs, gambling) is stress. By teaching young people coping skills at an early age we may prevent addictive behaviour in the future.

This is just another example of what happens when you have Loto Quebec providing the source of the problem and the cure. To complete the trilogy, add in La Regie des Alcools des courses et des jeux. Their mandate is to govern and supervise amusement machines, video lotteries and government casinos. They are responsible for issuing, suspending and revoking the permits of alcoholic beverage retailers and casinos. Why then, are they not visiting the countless bars and bowling alleys where under-age patrons play VLTs? Why is the Montreal Casino immune to prosecution and exercises a half-hearted effort to keep minors off the premises? In the United States the casinos "card" everybody under twenty-seven. Perhaps because the American casinos are hit with fines in the millions of dollars by a regulatory commission. Perhaps it is time that the casinos of Quebec start being heavily fined every time a minor is found on the premises. The money could be given to non-government non profit agencies that deal with child abuse, child hunger, food banks etc. The personnel at Montreal Casino, whose responsibility is to monitor the entrance and assure that minors do not enter, are clearly not doing their job. A study done by McGill University researchers revealed that of 817 high school students, 61 reported having gambled in casinos. There are four times as many young people affected by gambling dependencies as adults. (4.7 vs 1.2) Unless we begin to see the prevention and treatment of problem gambling taken out of the mandate of the gaming industry (who derive eighty percent of their profit from compulsive gamblers) and allow the experts to deal with the issues, we may as well rename the program "Count Me In."

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