

The Challenges Facing Canada's Public Schools: A Diagnosis

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There is no such thing as an objective diagnosis of educational challenges; the challenge depends on what one wants to do and the most obvious feature of education in Canada is dissent, about both means and ends. So, everything depends on perspective.

I shall make a series of statements I believe to be accurate that suggest there is little wrong with the schools: Canada has very few really bad schools, like those that could easily be found in any American big city or in the slums of most English industrial centres - we don't have those countries' divisions by social class or by money; the academic achievement of our schools is reasonable in terms of international comparison, we do as well as or better than the countries most like us - the United States and Britain; a relatively high proportion of young people continues to postsecondary education. Canada is seen by many multinational firms as a good place to situate themselves because of the educational level of the work force - for example Canadian-made vehicles have generally had the reputation of fewer defects than American or Mexican cars made by the same manufacturer; Northern Telecom first builds its most complex parts in Canada, outsourcing the simpler parts, and later the more complicated parts as well after Canadian factories have got rid of the bugs. By the age of 25, 85 per cent of young Canadians have reached the level of high school graduation.

Unfortunately, I can also make an equally accurate set of statements that paints a less rosy picture. Canada has very few excellent schools and very few really excellent students, at a time when industrial countries depend increasingly on their very brightest young people. Canada gets less bang for the buck in terms of achievement than almost any other developed country, and we are not among the most academically successful countries: Switzerland, Japan, Singapore and France; even in England and the USA the very best students outperform ours. Too many of our schools are mediocre - not very good at

anything, whether it be academics, regular attendance and strong discipline, a friendly civil atmosphere, music and the arts or physical fitness. The Germanic countries and the US have totally opposed approaches to preparation of young people for work. The German countries plan the movement very carefully. In the U.S., movement to work is typically left to the free market. Both have lesser youth unemployment problems than we. The Germanic countries tend to have relatively low youth unemployment compared with the overall average; the American free market leads to lower unemployment for all than does our more controlled labour market. Our record of moving students from school to work is abysmal.

So, is the educational glass half full or half empty? Take your choice. I have been asked to look at the things preventing us from filling that remaining half glass; I am looking at the educational challenges. In a single speech, all I can do is touch on some of the issues I consider important.

There are two things I am not going to do. I am not going to talk about solutions; it's not a secret that this conference is about choice and that I happen to believe more choice is by far the single most important reform we need, but that's for tomorrow. I am also not going to try to attribute blame for the various problems I see. There will be times when it may seem obvious who is to blame, but that is not my point and you may be over-interpreting me. Very few problems are uni-causal.

Let me begin with students. Perhaps I seem to be blaming the victim here. After all, I do think students should take more responsibility for their learning and their future than many do. I do get tired of hearing complaints that there is no point in trying because there aren't any jobs anyway; even in the Maritimes most young people do get jobs, and some of those that don't would be very difficult to employ profitably. They are over-influenced by negative peer-group characteristics. But I also admit that students are also victims. They did not choose their parents, their society or their school.

Their problems spill over into their homes and into their schools. Consider the conversation overheard in a local hairdressing salon. The mother is a secondary school teacher, her daughter Julie is 14 in grade nine.

Hair stylist: "How are things going with Julie?"

Mum: "Oh, better. She occasionally even smiles now. She's quite bearable at home sometimes."

Stylist: "What about her hair and her clothes?"

Mum: "Oh, I've given up on them. My priorities are behavior and courtesy around the house and attending school."

Now neither you nor I know any of the background to all this, but we can see how parents, student and school are all involved. Now you may think that the hair and the dress don't matter at all; I disagree: they are important symbols. Consider the opposite extreme in dress and decorum from ours - Singapore. I have done a little work in Bermuda and am always impressed by the cleanliness,

courtesy and smart uniforms of all the students, no matter the social class or racial character of their school. And just think how much easier it would be for Mum in my anecdote if her own school insisted on strong standards of dress, behaviour, attendance and work for everyone. I do know the school and by all accounts it is an at least average small-town high school.

Jonathan Black-Branch, from Campbellton, New Brunswick, did his doctoral dissertation at OISE on the effects on education of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. One thing he looked at was the effect on behaviour in the secondary school as seen by secondary school principals. He telephone interviewed a national sample. First of all, I should say that principals did not separate the Charter from the Young Offenders' Act. But most of them claimed that the law made them try to avoid discipline problems wherever they could. They would look the other way. Now the legal experts say this is nonsense; the record of the courts is that they have generally supported reasonable discipline exercised by principals. But that misses the point. Administrators are not mainly worried about being convicted in court, but about the publicity, for themselves and for the school. Suppose local school board members read in the newspaper or hear on the radio that the principal is being accused of racism or arbitrary, authoritarian behaviour in conflict with the student's individual rights. The case may be lost or may never even come to court, but is the school board going to promote that principal while there is an uproar in the media? Will the principal ever live it down?

I was an expert witness in a case where a student beat up another student in school, who provided little resistance and who suffered allegedly permanent brain damage. The aggressor, annoyed by events in a high-contact basketball game, had lightly struck and threatened the victim in the presence of the vice-principal a few minutes earlier and had received a light reprimand. This was a highly complicated case with plenty of background. My judgment was that the vice-principal had not behaved unethically (although he may have been morally culpable), because he was experienced and was behaving in the non-confrontational manner that the school board and the principal would expect. I concluded that the major guilty party was the school board, which had set up a weak and indecisive discipline policy that inevitably led, first to the aggressive basketball game and second to the consequential violence. But even then, one could argue that the school board was no different from most other school boards. Was it not the provincial government that was partly at fault? And would not government turn around and say it is limited by the possible legal actions of parental minorities?

I did some research, in the area of educational policy, on attitudes and opinions of educators and non-educators in Ontario. One question asked how difficult it is to expel students from school. Non-school people and educators, including principals, all agreed strongly that it is too difficult, i.e. that too much misbehavior is ignored, with one important exception. Directors of education did

not agree. Obviously, there is a difficulty here, at the very least one of communication.

If we look at the most extreme situations, we find that while the Canadian murder rate of young people (particularly of young males by other young males) is well below the horrific level of the United States it is more than double that of most other developed countries. Our suicide rate too is relatively high among young males, and getting higher, higher than in Japan, by the way, where the rate is declining.

If you turn to other statistics concerning the young, one can find many other troubling factors. Commitment to traditional values, such as honesty, is in decline. Commitment to popular music (often of a violent and sexual nature) is high, as is involvement with television. Commitment to school and church is much lower. Sexual experience is moving to lower age groups and is no longer unusual among twelve-year olds.

Perhaps the single most important factor outside the school inhibiting more effective schooling is the decline of the family. The front-page headline in *The Globe and Mail* on April 18 was that affluent children do better in school than those living in poverty; the article was followed by a series of others equally naive. That headline and those stories are on a par with the discovery that most Iraqis are Muslim, and most CBC reporters left wing. Increasingly, the educated are marrying the educated (I would guess that most of the married people in this audience have educated spouses) and of course most young unmarried mothers (an increasing proportion of mothers giving birth) are uneducated and live in relative poverty. There is growing evidence of the long-term damage to some young people caused by divorce, with the result that even some of the children living with a household headed by a man and a woman are at increased educational risk by reason of family structure.

The following are believed to be family factors that support learning: Parents provide help, encouragement, and support; they stimulate ideas and involve the family in and out-of-school activities; they use language carefully for genuine caring communication; they have high expectations of their children in all areas of life and encourage high but realistic expectations for the future; they and their children practice good work habits; they provide their children with help in the basic skills. Now, just think of the number of families that are unequipped to do most of those things, and those that cannot because of work and time conflicts, and those who have other priorities.

Before educators begin to feel smug that even Mark Holmes agrees that the educational challenge lies in the family rather than in the school, let me just quickly list some of the things that many or most schools do or fail to do that aggravate the social problems. For a start, most schools do not teach the value of the traditional family -educators tell me that to do so would be unfair to children from non-traditional families, but note that that concern doesn't stop them from teaching non-smoking to children of parents who smoke or preaching extreme

conservation measures to children of parents who are employed in logging, fishing, construction or automobile sales. Very few school sex education programs teach postponement of sex until adulthood or marriage. The Ontario Ministry of Education put out a comic book for high school students suggesting that any sex is acceptable that meets two conditions, the two partners consent and condoms are used - no mention of age, incest, moral or religious prohibitions or even the high level of unreliability of condoms in preventing either pregnancy or AIDS.

Most schools do not emphasize direct instruction in the basic grades in the primary grades, even for the disadvantaged who are most at risk from child centred and individualized instruction which is premised on the child's own experience. Most schools do not provide objective test results before grade three (by which time \$15 000 of public money has been spent per student) and many schools do not give reputable standardized tests at all. Many children have been in school for years and years before their parents realize there is a serious problem. Let's face it; most parents have enough problems of their own without trying to read the tealeaves in those always positive-sounding anecdotal reports. Most schools do not teach directly or indirectly the values of honesty, cleanliness, perseverance, courage, industriousness; but they do teach the values of a high self-concept and the importance of self-fulfillment, both of which are problematic to me and to some parents.

Having established, I hope, the enormous challenge inherent in a mass education project within a pluralist democracy based on almost unlimited individual freedom and access to a multitude of media, many of which pander to the basest human instincts, I shall turn to challenges within the school system itself.

First, consider the organization of public schools in most of Canada. The assumptions are that provinces can direct the essentials of education from the centre, with the use of local school boards as buffers representing local community interests. The assumptions made sense in 1867 but not in 1997. Local towns and villages have lost their common interests; in any case, with centralization, they have also lost their local school boards.

In New Brunswick, school boards have gone altogether. In most of Canada, there are strong movements to centralization of control in the Department or Ministry of Education. Look at recent events particularly in virtually every province. So, the more different the values and wishes of parents have become, the more determined are our leaders to enforce a single regimen on everyone. The provinces don't entirely agree on what that regimen should be, but they all agree that the minister of education should determine just about everything and parents almost nothing; yet Canada is a signatory to the UN Charter of Human Rights that states that parents should have a prior right to determine the education of their children.

You may say that I am talking about dissent in places like Toronto and Vancouver, but that in the Atlantic Provinces there are fewer immigrants and therefore less dissent. There is a grain of truth in that but only a grain. It is a mistake to think that Asians or blacks all have the same values, just as it is to think that all New Brunswickers do. There are big differences between Hong Kong and Korea and between Jamaica and Nigeria, and differences also among Nigerians and among Jamaicans just as there are among all countries' citizens. There is more difference in educational values within the cities of Fredericton and Halifax, than there is between the Fredericton average and that of Prince George, British Columbia. In most Canadian cities, there are many parents who want a religious education for their children (but not the same religious education), many who want an academically intensive but secular education, and many who are happy with the secular, progressive, child centred education their young children typically receive.

So, one of the greatest challenges is the one-size-fits-all mentality, at a time when the people are becoming more and more diverse. Don't confuse the one-size-fits-all mentality with the idea of the common school. The common school is a romantic illusion that no province actually tries to impose across the board. Hardly anywhere in Canada is there a common school. The Atlantic Provinces are probably the least culturally differentiated, but Newfoundland has not a single common school, but rather Catholic, Integrated and Pentecostal schools. The Maritime provinces all have at least a few Catholic schools; local, bilingual schools are virtually extinct, and New Brunswick now has two fully-fledged school systems, one French one English; don't be misled - these are not geographical districts which happen to be mainly French or mainly English. They are language-based administrative districts. Consider also the growth of French immersion schools and programs in every province, which, by the way, unlike religious schools, do tend to be socially divisive. Why? Because Canada is divided by language and not by religion. Everyone in Canada except the editors of the *Globe and Mail* knows that. And I hope no one in this audience truly believes that the education in grade three in a school in the disadvantaged south end of Saint John is the same as one in upper middle class Kennebecasis Park, just twenty-five kilometers upstream. The one-size-fits-all mentality has little to do with a common school, everything to do with the miasmatic imperialism of centralizers.

New Zealand's educational reforms appear to the outsider almost the same as New Brunswick's. There are two differences. In New Zealand, the school council (with a parent majority) has authority over almost everything in the day-to-day management of the school, in New Brunswick over nothing; in New Zealand, parents can choose any school in the country, in New Brunswick they usually are given Hobson's (or perhaps I should say McKenna's) Choice. I am not implying by the way that parents should be forced to run the schools (as in New Zealand); I am suggesting that parents want very different things; most in

my experience are only too happy to delegate as long as they can get what they want for their children.

Let's turn now to the product of the school system, the school leaver. In Canada, about 30 per cent of the age cohort goes to college or university, for which it is adequately prepared. People fret about the drop out rate, but to me it is a non-problem. Most young people do reach graduation level, whatever that is, by age 25. The problem is: What is there for young people to stay in school for if they do not go on to postsecondary education? Canada and the US have a poor record of programs for moving young people from school to work. What we in Canada are very good at is moving young adults from school to unemployment. I cannot imagine a worse preparation for work than a few years of unemployment. Just as the school often does little to mitigate family problems, the state often only exacerbates school problems. We are making early retirement more difficult; in some places, mandatory retirement has been abolished; we allow affluent people to keep their retirement savings in a very costly tax free plan until they are 69, instead of 65, or even younger; and minimum wage laws make hiring of young people more difficult. Exporting low wage jobs to Mexico and Malaysia is inevitable and desirable, but exporting them to our more affluent neighbor is odd indeed. Our élites, politicians, academics unions and the chattering classes secure in their own jobs and pensions, apparently think it is better for young people to have no job than to have a low wage job; the alternative of élite members leaving their jobs earlier than they want or losing some of their retirement perks is unthinkable. And of course they are very willing to hand on their debts to the younger generation.

But what are the schools doing to make young people employable, other than telling them all to eat cake and go to university? Only one province, Quebec, has clear tested, external academic standards required for high school graduation. You may say, "Ah, but Quebec has the highest dropout rate in Canada." That is true, and New Brunswick has the lowest, but if you make a comparison at age 25 there is little difference; and in Quebec a graduation certificate stands for something other than endurance.

Betty Donaldson, another OISE graduate, examined how non-college-bound students actually move to work. Very few had help from the school in terms of programs or the guidance office. The two most common ways were: links through family or friends and through their part-time work. There are few formal programs in Canada whereby students are helped to combine part time, paid work with school programs designed to meet graduation requirements (I mean standards not hours) efficiently. Indeed, most provinces specify the number of hours required to graduate, rather than the necessary skills, which of course encourages the attitude that the idea is to come to school for the minimum number of days and do the minimum amount of work, not a good preparation for work. In the Germanic countries, the mass of young people move to work by means of combined work and study programs, with tight demands, and, as I

mentioned earlier, they have youth unemployment rates below their average rates.

Vocational education has been in decline for almost thirty years now and few efforts have been made to reorganize it to meet the real market needs of the 90s, notably in the service sector, a market sector that has either maintained or even increased its employment record over the last ten years. The official wisdom is that job training is provided after high school. If everyone actually applied for some form of formal, postsecondary education or training, the provinces could not possibly afford it. In fact, large numbers of young people are not attracted to the idea of twelve, thirteen or fourteen years of education; and neither are they necessary.

I have referred to the challenge of elementary education, where education is typically based on a series of philosophical and pedagogical whims and fantasies. They include: that all children are naturally eager to learn and will learn once they are given the opportunity and see the need; that the most important thing to teach the child is high self-concept; that learning to read is natural like learning to walk and talk and does not require instruction; that children who do not learn the basic skills when they are six like everyone else will learn them later when they see the need and will soon catch up; that early instruction is best individualized and later collaborative, i.e., that they learn best on their own or from one another, but not from the teacher; that children learn best through games; that accuracy in spelling and reading is unimportant because good readers are guided by prediction and guesswork. You may well think those are nice ideas; that is your prerogative. But please don't state they are supported by large-scale, empirical research; and please don't inflict them on everybody else in one-size-fits-all topdown manner. The most researchable aspects of those fantasies have been directly refuted by research. Good readers don't predict and guess; phonics is the best introduction to reading; large group instruction is more effective than individualized, and so on.

The child-centred enthusiasm has the strongest hold in Ontario and Nova Scotia, least in francophone schools, notably Quebec. I drew a regression line predicting provincial achievement in mathematics on the basis of provincial wealth. Most provinces involved in the testing were close to the line, meaning that the richer the province the better the achievement, as one would expect. There were two exceptions, Ontario which was far below the line, and Quebec francophones who were substantially above the line. Some recent tests have shown Quebec and New Brunswick francophones out-performing their anglophone counterparts - a striking commentary on the educational changes over the last thirty years, and showing that educational achievement is not only a product of social background (although it is undeniably the single greatest influence).

At the heart of the pedagogical challenge, is the failure to accept two axiomatic principles of teaching in the public school: i) teachers should have the

right to teach, using the methods of their choice; and ii) they should be accountable for the results related to a publicly supported set of curricular objectives. In most of Canada, neither of those principles is adequately met. Only two provinces explicitly state that teachers have the right to teach, none in the Atlantic Provinces. The result is that in many Canadian elementary schools, teachers are strongly discouraged or even prohibited from using the instructional methods that are demonstrably the most effective, e.g., direct instruction of large groups in the basic skills and the use of flexible ability grouping in the middle grades. So what we increasingly have is the reverse of those two axioms: teachers are closely supervised to ensure they teach according to current fashion, and there is (understandably) no accountability for the results of the teaching.

Reasonable programs of accountability for results are found in three provinces -Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia (incidentally the three most academically successful provinces). The Maritime provinces have a dismal record of setting accountability. Nova Scotia, for example, has the Nova Scotia Achievement Tests at two grade levels, but they are, in the jargon, low stakes tests - nothing hangs on individual, class or school performance and the last I heard, school scores were still not even made public.

Many individual provinces and the Council of Ministers of Education are going through the motions of introducing tests in the face of public demand, but some lack validity and reliability (the Ontario tests are notorious here), most are low stakes and some do not even provide results at the individual or even the school level.

Another barrier to effective instruction is the widespread practice of mainstreaming, whereby even the most severely disabled children are placed in the regular classroom. This practice is strongly imposed in New Brunswick. The Supreme Court has recently established that school systems have the legal right to place the most severely disabled in separate classrooms or schools, but only when it is in the individual's best interests. What is lost here is the best interest of the remainder of the class. Disruptive individuals impede the learning of countless others; a common administrative way of handling this is to encourage individual or collaborative learning, look the other way, and imply that the student would not pose a problem to a good teacher. As I have indicated, school systems have shown little will to deal with disruptive individuals. I am not implying a return to the metastatic spread of special ed classes of the 708. I am saying that students with severe disabilities that prevent their learning in the regular class or whose behaviour, intentional or not, significantly hinders the learning of others should not be left in the regular classroom. Ordinary children have rights too.

A particular curriculum challenge at the high school level lies in the arts and humanities, notably history and literature. The central problem here lies in the university where these subjects have been deconstructed by postmodernists, meaning there is no clear agreed discipline of knowledge left. History is re-

written according to the latest ideologies and literature is chosen to represent selected voices rather than an enduring standard of excellence. So Jane Austen and Joseph Conrad (except for *Heart of Darkness* which can be, inaccurately, interpreted in a politically correct manner) are thrown out of the curriculum. Among contemporary writers, Joyce Carol Oates's feminist tale of girls' gangs and lesbians is brought in, along with J. D. Salinger, Samuel Beckett, Margaret Lawrence and Margaret Atwood (all politically correct), while equally good but less socially subversive contemporary writers are ignored. I think of Alice Munro's brilliant early stories, Ernest Buckler, Carol Shields, John Fowles and Guy Vanderhaeghe. When parents question the selection of texts opposing their values, they are dismissed, as would be "censors" or "Christian fundamentalists", both terms used as dismissive abuse.

Non-educators may wonder at this point: "Some of these challenges are obviously major social problems but others are problems that could be solved at little or no cost. Why are they so widespread?"¹¹ There is no simple answer to that question. Many of the reasons are implicit in the challenges already described, notably the topdown mentality that all schools can be fixed from central office. It would be a mistake, however, to under-estimate the influence of the rigid union bureaucracies that make flexible change difficult or impossible.

I shall finish by summarizing what I see as the major challenges facing Canadian elementary and secondary schools as we near the end of the century. I do not claim to have touched on them all equally or adequately in this short address.

1. Money. There is no national financial problem, but there is a problem in the distribution of funding and on the way money is spent.
2. Purpose. There is enormous dissent about the goals and the practices of education, among parents, the public, and to a lesser but still significant extent, among educators. There is also often important dissent between educators and parents.
3. Centralization. Provincial governments seem not to have heard of tight-loose management, instead having unwavering faith in the ability of themselves to manage all problems centrally. The answer to problems is more regulation, at a time when regulation of human behavior is demonstrably increasingly ineffective.
4. Union monopolies. Teachers are forced to join a closed shop which effectively imposes a single salary scale based only on experience and often-irrelevant credentials. Unions oppose any educational reform that threatens their legislated power and authority, and most meaningful reforms do.
5. Religious discrimination. All provinces practise religious discrimination in the funding and operation of schools with the exception of British Columbia and Manitoba. Ontario's discrimination, with its numerous

- educationally disenfranchised, including Protestants, whose beliefs, now banned, used to be *prescribed*, is extreme.
6. Academic achievement of Canada's most able youth is below good international standards, and achievement is variable among provinces. The overall level is a matter for reasonable debate, but it does not match that of the most educationally successful countries.
 7. Values and order. Many students are raised in increasingly permissive families. Order, standards of behaviour and industriousness within the school are increasingly threatened. Traditional values are seen as matters of personal choice and reasonable contest within the school.
 8. The family. The extended family is largely extinct and the nuclear family is under attack from social activists and excessive individualism. The proportion of children from young, never married mothers increases. Parents, individually and collectively, are excluded from educational decision making.
 9. Child-centred pedagogy, lacking support for its effectiveness from large-scale empirical research, is deeply rooted in the elementary school and in faculties of education. The cult of self-fulfillment tends to exclude rigour, in the disciplines, in music and the arts, and in physical fitness as well as realistic preparation for the future.
 10. Work. The two-thirds of young people not continuing to postsecondary education suffer severe rates of unemployment. Government policy, fiscal and social, favors the interests of mature adults over young adults and educational policy ignores the school-to-work issue.
 11. Individual rights. Schools are increasingly operated on a pseudo-judicial assumption of individual rights, contrasting with increasing evidence that the most successful schools (in terms of order and achievement) are based on organic community. They are, as Chester Finn notes from recent research, small in size, they have clear consensual purposes, and students, teachers and parents all want to be involved.
 12. The disciplines of knowledge. The disciplines of knowledge are under attack in the secondary school; literature, history and geography are in the front line but math and the sciences are also fingered.

While I would be the first to admit there is no total solution to those challenges, there is particular cause for concern when many of them are denied, explained away or justified as virtues. As I stated at the beginning, everything depends on perspective; which is why this conference is about choice.