

What is the Business of Education?



By Norman Henchey

Scanning the Environment

But today the context of learning is more complex and so is the environment of education systems.

Our society is becoming more pluralistic and multicultural

There is a wider range of world views, ethnic identities, religious beliefs, and social attitudes. The pressure on schools from single-interest groups has been intensifying. It is not easy for schools to achieve a balance between a common cultural literacy and the social ecology of multi-layered diversity, between an inclusive community and differentiated programs for specific groups.

The social and economic importance of knowledge is increasing

Our store of knowledge is expanding rapidly, knowledge is a central element in our economic development, and the minimum knowledge requirements to live and work in society are rising. We need to learn more, learn better, learn the “right” things, learn faster, communicate knowledge, and apply our knowledge in our lives and careers. This poses a curriculum challenge of selecting and organizing knowledge and of identifying key intellectual skills.

The job market has been changing

Many jobs for which schools used to prepare students (for example, typing pools and assembly lines) have disappeared. The current job market is fragile in its prospects for lifetime security and it is both demanding and unstable in its educational and work-skill demands. This is leading to a blurring of traditional distinctions between vocational and academic education and it is putting pressure on schools and students to prepare for post-secondary study.

The demands of responsible citizenship are becoming more complex

Citizens are faced with decisions about globalization of the economy, environmental protection, the cost and viability of social services, the problems of poverty and violence, the preservation of human rights, the future of the country and many other issues with important consequences for our future well-being. Education for citizenship means more than an understanding how political institutions work or a pride in our past. Students need to learn the context and complexity of issues, understand different viewpoints, and appreciate the responsibilities as well as the rights of citizenship.

Information and communications technologies are transforming almost every aspect of our lives

Television, computers and the Internet have enormously expanded our access to knowledge and altered the organization and diffusion of information. They are changing what we think and how we think, offering the world in the curriculum but also requiring critical thinking and wise discernment.

What do we want from our education system? What do we expect? What should we expect? What functions do schools perform in our society?

WE ARE LIVING IN A TIME WHEN ALL KINDS OF INSTITUTIONS are being called upon to examine their mission and function, to consider changing expectations and demands, and to rethink their “business.” This is true of health care and banking, libraries and the military, railroads and social services, tourism and government. Education is part of this questioning because it is important, it constitutes a major public expenditure and it is the object of both high expectations and widespread criticism. Much of this criticism is rooted not just in views of how well education is doing but in different expectations of what it should be doing.

In the past it would have been strange to ask: What is the business of education? The answer was obvious: elementary schools should teach the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, give some general knowledge, and reinforce the values of family, church, and community; high schools should provide a second level of education for those who can profit from it; post-secondary institutions should train the higher professions and those wishing (and in a position) to pursue scholarship at an advanced level. There was a broad agreement about the goals and functions of education, about what schools should do. There was an alternative to school: it was called work.

Many of our key institutions have been under stress

The family, the church, community institutions and voluntary organizations are often not able to offer young people the support for development or the framework of meaning that they did in the past. Schools find themselves expanding their role in child rearing, dealing with issues of value and meaning, and providing community services, tasks once assumed by other agencies.

Change has become a permanent feature of our society

Many of the received truths of the past are challenged or rejected, many of the problems of the present are difficult to grasp and solve, and many of the prospects for the future are uncertain and disquieting. This calls into question the role of the education of the young, the importance of lifelong learning and the significance of “learning how to learn”.

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A Menu of Expectations

What functions do education systems perform at the present time? What are our expectations for them? Should we be content with expressions of hope and will or should we look for demonstrable results? This is a partial menu of expectations for education systems.

- 1 *Teach the mastery of fundamental skills:* communication skills of literacy, numeracy and second language; creative thinking and problem solving; social skills like leadership and co-operation; employability skills like entrepreneurship and teamwork; technical skills in using a computer and the Internet; life skills; and the skills of lifelong learning.
- 2 *Provide instruction in organized bodies of knowledge:* literature, mathematics, physical and biological sciences, history, social sciences, the arts, technology; interdisciplinary areas such as environmental and consumer education, current events, healthy living and sexuality.
- 3 *Socialize and instil a set of core values:* respect for authority, sense of responsibility, independence, co-operation, compassion, respect for others, aesthetic appreciation, pride in

work, tolerance for ambiguity, self-respect and self-confidence, concern for fitness and health, pride in religious and/or cultural and/or ethnic heritage, love of country and, for many, specific values rooted in a particular religious or cultural community.

- 4 *Sort students into different categories:* use of guidance, grouping, streaming, selective programs and options, high-stakes tests, and information to classify students on the basis of aspiration, ability, or promise, to provide information to admissions directors and employers.
- 5 *Assess student learning:* evaluation of learning based on valid, defensible, fair and transparent criteria and procedures, and reporting of results in an intelligible and timely manner.
- 6 *Qualify and certify students for the future:* skills and knowledge, qualification and certification to provide access to post-secondary programs, careers, and adult life.
- 7 *Serve the needs of students in the present:* drop-out and failure prevention; range of counselling, psychological, health and student services; recreational, sports and cultural activities, clubs and organizations; special services and resources for those with talents or special needs; programs and services for at-risk students ranging from conflict resolution and free meals to effective parenting and job-search skills; transportation of students to and from schools.
- 8 *Co-operate with other agencies:* business partnerships; co-operation with social services, health services, child protection, police, cultural associations, religious congregations, voluntary organizations.
- 9 *Provide custodial care:* daycare for young children, extended after-school programs for children with working parents, extra-curricular activities for adolescents, programs to keep adolescents and young adults off the labour market; safe, secure and supportive school environment free from threat.
- 10 *Be inclusive:* openness to everyone who wishes to attend an institution, regardless of background, ability, or special needs.
- 11 *Offer alternative programs:* innovative and targeted programs and services for specific groups; technology for girls, Aboriginal studies, French immersion, International Baccalaureate, fine arts options, at-risk students, virtual programs and schools, home study, charter schools, distance education.
- 12 *Offer adult education:* services and programs to teach literacy, English or French as second language, job skills, basic adult education, arts and crafts.
- 13 *Provide learning resources:* libraries, sports facilities, laboratories, workshops, textbooks, teaching materials, computers, software.



Expectations and Realities

De nos jours plusieurs institutions doivent examiner leurs rôles fondamentaux. Le réseau d'éducation, qui utilise une grande proportion du budget de chaque province, n'est pas une exception. Auparavant le but de l'éducation semblait évident. L'auteur analyse tous les changements sociaux qui influencent le réseau. À quoi peut-on s'attendre aujourd'hui ? On a besoin d'une nouvelle mission qui reflète les méthodes et les chemins alternatifs. L'éducation devrait être plus vaste qu'un réseau d'écoles, c'est un processus qui dure toute une vie.

- 14 *Offer extra-curricular activities:* sports, clubs, recreational activities, artistic productions, student council.
- 15 *Provide good teachers and other educators:* range of education specialists (teachers, counsellors, administrators, specialists) who are qualified, motivated, appropriately assigned, good models for young people, suitably supervised and evaluated.
- 16 *Encourage school-based management:* authority and responsibility of school personnel to apply education policies and regulations and to be innovative, together with policies to ensure equality among schools in allocation of resources, quality of service, and range of programs and activities.
- 17 *Respond to needs and expectations:* sensitivity and responsiveness to community expectations and priorities; mechanisms to ensure parent consultation and contribution to school life and policy; links with other community agencies; clear procedures for appeal of decisions.
- 18 *Make effective use of resources:* recognition of the limits of public funding, initiatives to raise funds from other sources, marketing of school activities, organizational efficiency, cost-effectiveness of programs and services.
- 19 *Organize and provide information:* information on student attainment and progress, follow-up of graduates, clear, open and useful information for students and parents about expectations, regulations, services and possibilities.

These expectations are not all equal, nor are they all shared by everyone; different schools and communities have different priorities. Do students work hard? How well have they done in advanced math? Do they know their country's history? Do they care about victims of flood and famine? Are they proud of their heritage? Are they good competitors? How good are their higher-order thinking skills? How good is their spelling? Can they use a spread sheet? Do we judge the grandeur of the expectations, their relevance and realism, the degree to which they are fulfilled, or all of these?

As we try to reconcile • the menu of educational expectations, • the demands of the current context of education, • the cost of seriously attempting to meet these expectations, and • the limited resources likely to be available to education in the foreseeable future, we need to ask if we have a crisis of expectations and realities.

We have few options: 1 invest the money necessary to meet our expectations in a responsible way; 2 scale down the number and level of expectations to match resources; 3 muddle through with an uneasy mix of vague expectations ambiguously engaged; 4 change the way we think of education and do things differently.

We may need to make a clearer distinction between public education as the structure of learning services in the society and public schools as the institutions and instruments providing these services. Are our expectations for public education too much to expect from public schools alone?

We may be relying too much on schools and too little on the learning potential of technologies, media, the home, community centres, and other institutions and services. We may have gone too far in institutionalizing learning in schools, co-opting the learning taking place outside, trying to incorporate too much into the mission of the school. We are offering young people a single route to adulthood, a particular setting of classes, timetables, assignments, testing, regulations, attendance, learning styles and rituals that may not be congenial learning environments for some boys and young men, for some kinds of learners, for some cultural communities, and for some able but idiosyncratic learners.

Some people advocate reducing our dependence on hospitals, courts, advertisement and mass entertainment. We may not be ready to follow Ivan Illich and deschool society. But the time may have come to unschool learning a little. We already have models in adult education and distance education that could be applied as alternative learning paths to schools, colleges and universities, not just for those who are unable to do it "properly" by attending, but as a respectable option for everyone.

The business of public education is the education of the public, providing the stimulus, services and resources needed to promote learning and development in everyone, not just children and adolescents. We may need a new vision and mandate for departments of education, school boards and schools. We may need a new definition of the work of a teacher and a new meaning of school "attendance."

It might mean that learners of all ages would be asked to be more self-directed, take more initiative in their learning, become learners all their lives. Many people seem able to be self-directed in nursery school, others in graduate school, and others in their car with their laptop and cell phone. Perhaps we could do with some adjustments for what comes between early childhood and adult life.

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