

Public Faith in Education: Canadian Trends

In the long run we know three things: we will all be dead; any specific predictions we make about the human condition will probably be wrong; and educational institutions will likely be widely blamed for many economic and social problems. Since the inception of industrial capitalism, most periods of economic restructuring have been associated with calls for educational reforms to produce smarter, more disciplined students and workers. The past generation has been no exception. Higher curricular standards and accountability tests have been promoted to provide the improved level of public education purported to be necessary to keep up with global competition and ensure social cohesion. Public opinion surveys in Canada and elsewhere have clearly documented widespread support for such measures, along with increasingly strong beliefs in the importance of education to get along in the information age and expectations that a post-secondary education will be needed to get a decent job.

As we have documented, Canadians actually have been extraordinarily successful over the past generation in increasing their formal educational attainments to world leading levels as well as engaging in massive amounts of informal learning.¹ Public faith in education as a means to secular salvation has probably never been higher. On the basis of our own regular readings of public attitudes in Ontario over the past generation and a variety of other occasional Canadian opinion surveys documented in our published reports, we will offer some trend profiles and very tentative predictions about public attitudes toward education.² We will focus on: confidence in educational institutions, support for government funding of education, preferred types of organizational reforms, and prospects for equitable access to advanced education.

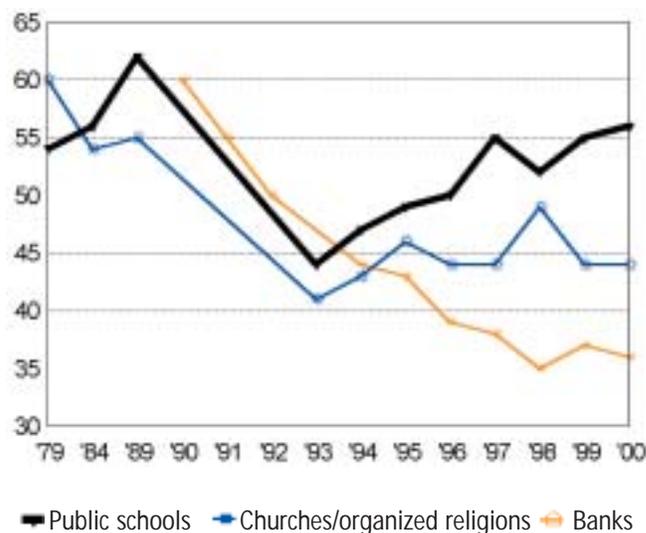
Public faith in education as a means to secular salvation has probably never been higher... Canadians now express greater faith in their educational institutions than either churches or their central economic enterprises.

Confidence, Quality and Funding

Canadians have expressed relatively high levels of confidence in educational institutions over the past twenty years. Figure 1 summarizes the level of confidence in a range of institutions, including public schools, churches and banks. The schools have retained the confidence of a small majority throughout most of this period in Canada, climbing to over 60 percent in 1989, declining to a low of 44 percent in 1993, then climbing back up to 56 percent in 2000. Confidence in churches has declined from over 60 percent in 1979 to 44 percent in 2000. Confidence in the banks also continued to slide downward through the 1990s to a current low of 36 percent. In spite of a steady drum beat of warnings about loss of faith in the public schools and relatively little media criticism of churches and the banks, Canadians now express greater faith in their educational institutions than either churches or their central economic enterprises. Will this faith persist? Comparisons of trends in perceptions of the quality of schooling and popular support for increased education funding suggest that it will.

Fig. 1: Confidence in Institutions in Canada

% saying great deal or quite a lot of respect and confidence

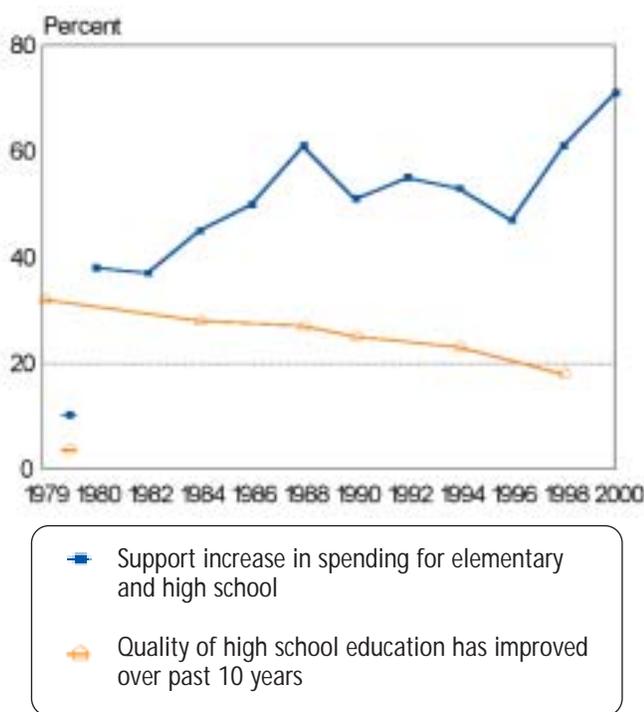


Sources: Gallup Organization

and Predictions

D.W. Livingstone and Doug Hart

Fig. 1: Spending Preferences and Views on the Changing Quality of High School Education: Ontario



Sources: OISE/UT Survey of Educational Issues

Canadians are now generally aware that government budget restraints have resulted in reduced school services. There are many evident indicators, including closure of small schools, elimination of specialized teachers and librarians, playground and transportation cuts, and intensified efforts at volunteer fund raising.³ While Canadians have retained confidence in public education as a vitally important institution, they are less and less likely to perceive improvement in the quality of education provided. As Figure 2 indicates, in Ontario there has been a steady decline in the minority who think the general quality of high school education has improved.

Conversely, there has been a very substantial increase in the numbers who want to see increased government spending on public schools. As Figure 2 shows, support for increased funding in Ontario has grown from under 40 percent in the early 1980s to around three-quarters in 2000, with major gains occurring during declared government restraint campaigns in the mid 1980s and the mid 1990s to 2000. Various other polls confirm that there is now strong majority support for increased education funding across the country.

So, Canadians are now expressing more confidence in public schools than in most other institutions, and they want more government dollars spent on education to address reduced services. But what kinds of future specific educational changes do they want these added dollars to support?

Canadians are much more inclined to want student-centered educational services restored to previous levels than to want any major structural changes.

Restoration versus Reform

In light of the general level of confidence in the public schools, no popular support for a major reorganization appears imminent. Some would argue that schools are like banks; the real measure of public confidence is whether there is a “run” when people “vote” with their feet. But, while private school enrolments have increased a bit from 4.3 % of all students in 1981 to 5.3% in 1998 according to Statistics Canada, the overwhelming majority have remained in the public system. In Ontario, in spite of persistent lobbying efforts over the past generation, public support to extend public funding to private schools has remained fixed at about 30 percent. There is strong majority opposition to allowing private profit-making businesses to operate public schools. Similarly, while home schooling may have increased a bit in recent years, it remains a minuscule tendency and the majority oppose its development. While advocates have heralded microcomputers as harbingers of an educational revolution, the majority of Canadians now think students are spending too much class time on computers. Extension of public schooling to include more early childhood education opportunities does enjoy majority support and will likely continue, especially given the compelling research evidence of long-term benefits and Canada’s poor record compared to other OECD countries. But no other major educational reorganization proposal currently has widespread popular support.

EN BREF

Les Canadiens ont plus de confiance dans les écoles publiques que dans la plupart des autres institutions. Pratiquement tous les groupes sociaux et économiques sont partisans d'un financement accru de l'éducation publique, y compris les aînés qui précédemment estimaient plus urgent d'accroître les crédits en santé, une question qui les touche de plus près. Cependant, hormis la nécessité de rétablir des services centrés sur l'élève et d'améliorer l'imputabilité, il n'y a pas vraiment de consensus sur la façon de réformer les écoles publiques. Dans ce contexte, la tendance la plus lourde est celle d'un droit de regard accru du public sur la gestion des écoles.

The most recent of our series of OISE/UT surveys offers further insights about preferred changes. In both 1998 and 2000, we asked which of a large array of possible changes would improve student achievement. The only changes that drew strong majority support were restorative measures: more special education teachers, smaller class sizes in the early grades, more class time on basic skills, and more parental involvement. Reorganizational initiatives such as lengthening the school year or teacher education programs, adding more classroom computers, and even making junior kindergarten compulsory, all now attract only minority support. Now that they have experienced the impact of sustained spending restraints and budget surpluses have reappeared, Canadians are much more inclined to want student-centered educational services restored to previous levels than to want any major structural changes. This apparent lack of popular consensus on any specific structural initiatives presents a major challenge for future educational policy making and program innovation.

Accessibility and the "Jobs Gap"

What disturbs Canadians more than anything else about schooling today is threats to the accessibility of advanced education. University tuition fees have more than doubled over the past decade, as have student debt loads. The vast majority of people now think tuition fees are too high. Support for the principle of equal educational opportunity has been virtually universal in this country. But, while in the 1980s there was a widespread perception that students from poorer economic backgrounds had an equal chance of getting a higher education, now the majority believe that students from lower income families have a worse chance and that increasing tuition fees are preventing their participation. There is massive public support for increased government financial assistance to poorer students as well as for income-contingent loan repayment programs, sentiments that Canadian governments are beginning to address with new award programs. Given the general perception of access problems, there is also now

growing public support for giving private universities official status in Canada. Access to many foreign institutions is now available through distance education at cheaper rates, so their effective presence is likely to grow whether or not it is regularized by Canadian governments.

Similarly, widespread support for the principle of lifelong learning has not been met by a corresponding provision of adult education courses in Canada. After rapid growth from the 1960s through the 1980s, funding for adult programs declined and participation rates stagnated during the 1990s, while popular demand for courses continued to grow and involvement in informal learning may have also increased in response. There is now strong majority support for both increased funding of adult education and procedures for prior informal learning assessment and recognition (PLAR).

Canada is now clearly a "learning society". The question is whether our governments, employers and established educational institutions will increase adult education provisions to the higher levels of some other OECD countries and formally recognize much of this informal learning.

In spite of increasing access barriers, Canadians are continuing to seek more advanced education any way they can. Educational demand continues regardless of common perceptions that many people are overqualified for their current jobs and that schools are already preparing most people well enough for their jobs. In fact, the *underemployment* of young Canadians is an increasingly serious and multi-dimensional problem.⁴ But even the most highly overqualified continue to seek further education and the "jobs gap" grows apace. Most people recognize that the main cause of unemployment among young people is not poor education but the failure of the economy to generate enough jobs. But as long as the strong public faith in education abides and policy makers continue to suggest educational reforms to address economic problems rather than addressing the need for workplace reforms such as creation of better quality, sustainable jobs and the redistribution of paid employment, the serious underemployment of Canadians' continuing educational investments is likely to persist.

Beyond agreement on restoring student-centered services and improving accountability, there is no obvious consensus on how public educational institutions should be reformed.

Concluding Remarks

With the notable exception of corporate executives, virtually all social and economic groups have become strong supporters of increased funding for public education. This includes the elderly who have previously discounted education spending in relation to their more pressing health concerns. But beyond agreement on restoring student-centered services and improving accountability, there is no obvious consensus on how public educational institutions should be reformed. In this context, perhaps the most important trend in public opinion is a growing interest in more public say in how the schools are run. In Ontario, for example, the proportion who think the public has too little say in how the schools are run increased gradually from under half in 1979 to about three-quarters in 2000.

Given the lack of consensus on new policy directions for the early 21st century, the most important immediate initiative Canadian educational leaders should take is to conduct and disseminate coordinated national and provincial opinion surveys on public attitudes toward major educational policy options. There is currently no such regular reading available. Coupling such surveys with representative discussion groups among citizens has been found to be an effective democratic way to move toward greater policy consensus in other jurisdictions.⁵

Keeping in mind our initial caveat about long-term unpredictability, the best we can hope for is more sustained efforts by opinion leaders to use the increasingly interactive

information technologies available to engage in more democratic dialogues with the increasingly interested Canadian public over educational policy choices. We cannot reasonably predict that our opinion leaders will cease tending to blame the education system for Canada's economic and social problems in the near future. It is more likely that this tendency will persist. But at least the Canadian public following policy debates is likely to be even more highly educated and increasingly able and motivated to contribute to these debates. 

1. D.W. Livingstone. *Working and Learning in the Information Age* (Ottawa: CPRN, 2001).
2. see www.oise.utoronto.ca/OISE-Survey
3. see www.peopleforeducation.com
4. D.W. Livingstone. *The Education-Jobs Gap* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1999).
5. James S. Fishkin. *The Voice of the People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995)

D.W. Livingstone is Head of the Centre for the Study of Education and Work and **Doug Hart** is Institutional Research Officer at OISE/UT. They have collaborated on the OISE/UT Survey of Educational Issues for over 20 years, including Public Attitudes toward Education in Ontario 2000: Thirteenth OISE/UT Survey which appears as a special issue of Orbit.

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