What Canadians want from their public schools has changed dramatically over the course of Canadian history. The changing expectations reflect corresponding social, political, and economic changes as well as the influence of technology and ideas about schooling itself.

In 1826, the residents of Norfolk County, Ontario, agreed to engage the services of C.D. Shiemerhorn to teach in a schoolhouse they had built. They offered Shiemerhorn a six-month contract to teach “the different branches of reading, writing, Arithmetic and English grammar if all are required.”

By the mid 1800s, primary responsibility for public schooling in Canada had shifted from families and communities to the state. The shift reflected the growing social importance attached to schooling. Leaders suggested that public schooling would be a defence against radicalism, a means by which French Canadians would overcome their English rulers, a means of reconciliation between the French and English, and a mechanism for achieving moral and economic welfare.

The elementary education provided to the children of New Brunswick in the 1880s was typical of that provided across the country. The Chief Superintendent of Education for the province, Theodore Rand, said the public school was “the primary agency for the general education of all classes of youth – a school designed to impart a common education useful to all and open to all.” Despite its being “open to all,” the “practical aim of the public school” was “to prepare the child to discharge the duties and meet the obligations of coming manhood” [emphasis supplied].

By the early 1900s, many Canadian children attended one-room schools. Parents equated schooling with learning from books. They believed that a “good” teacher, and hence a “good” school, would provide instruction in reading, arithmetic and writing in the early years and grammar, history and geography as the children matured.

It seemed natural that each day would begin with the Lord’s Prayer. They expected that their children would do seatwork (written exercises) to practice what they had learned. While the older children worked at their desks, small groups of primary children would be called to the front of the room for instruction in reading, which consisted mainly of “phonics” and the opportunity to read a portion of a passage to the group that the teacher had assembled.

Public schooling between the first and second world wars was, for Vancouver parents – as with their peers across Canada – “learning out of a book.” According to historian Neil Sutherland, parents of all social classes held “most rigid formalistic expectations of what school should be.” By that they meant an elementary school that would prepare their children for “entrance” – a term that indicated eligibility to attend secondary school – and mastery of the “basics”: reading, writing and arithmetic.

Having endured the Depression and survived the Second World War, Canada emerged into the 1950s an increasingly prosperous and physically secure nation. Greater security and economic wellbeing changed what people wanted and expected from their public schools.

In 1950, only about three percent of the Canadian population had an education beyond high school. Those who continued their education did so in universities to prepare for the professions. During the late 1950s and 1960s, parents were told –
and came to believe – that schooling was an investment in the development of “human capital”. Like an investment in manufacturing plants and equipment, investing in the development of human capital through schooling paid off for the individual and for the economy.

My parents were typical of the majority of middle class parents in the post war period. They talked about getting a good education and going on to post secondary study. The connection between schooling and employment and earnings seemed clear – at least to my parents and their friends. Not everyone heard the message with the same clarity.

When I graduated high school in 1961, only 60% of the students who had been in my grade 8 class graduated with me. The others either had dropped out of school or had failed to accumulate sufficient credit to earn their diploma.

The close connection between schooling and employment was firmly cemented in my parents’ consciousness by the time I entered university in September 1961. My mother asked what I planned to study. I replied, “political science.” “That’s nice, dear, but why don’t you study something you can use?”

The rapid demographic, social, and economic changes occurring over the past 50 years have affected Canadians in different ways, influencing their expectations for the schooling of their children. Bryan and Karen are examples of people who married later – after living together for a number of years – and delayed having children until their careers were well established. Their daughter, Jennie, was born when Karen was thirty-five.

Kare and Bryan are lawyers. Because their combined incomes put them among Canada’s most advantaged families, they were able to hire a nanny, who, in addition to caring for Jennie, also taught her to speak French. Jennie is now seven years old and in Grade 2. She attends a public school, but not one in her neighbourhood. Believing that they should build on the capacity that their nanny cultivated, Bryan and Karen have had Jennie in early French immersion since kindergarten.

Two afternoons per week, Jennie attends an after-school arts program, where she learns ballet. Karen and Bryan spend the period between dinner and Jennie’s bedtime with their daughter, reading, talking about school, and planning the many excursions they take on weekends together. Since Jennie began school, Karen and Bryan have never missed a parent-teacher interview or a Christmas concert. The family has travelled every summer, and last year went to France. Jennie’s parents have the resources to provide her with opportunities unavailable to many other children.

Georgia confronts challenges that Bryan and Karen will never have to face, given their affluence. Georgia and her ex-husband were first-year university students when her son Jeremy – now seven years old – was born. When Jeremy was less than a year old, Georgia and her husband divorced with Georgia having custody for Jeremy. Jeremy’s father

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EN BREF En tant qu’institution de la société canadienne, nos école publiques obtiennent un succès remarquable. Elles inculquent aux jeunes l’histoire, les symboles et les valeurs qui distinguent leur pays des autres. En outre, elles suscitent en eux un profond attachement au Canada et leur donnent les connaissances grâce auxquelles ils pourront survivre et prospérer. Nos écoles publiques possèdent une grande souplesse et peuvent s’adapter au fil du temps aux nouveaux désirs des Canadiennes et Canadiens, aux changements économiques, sociaux et politiques, et aux nouvelles technologies et idées qui influencent l’enseignement.
moved to the United States and provides no child support. Georgia left school to find work and establish a home for her and Jeremy. She now makes about $23,000 per year including benefits.

The neighbourhood in which Georgia found an apartment is not the best, but living there keeps the rent affordable. Georgia is lucky that, despite the problems in the neighbourhood, there is an elementary school nearby with a childcare facility in the basement. Each weekday morning, Georgia takes Jeremy to the childcare centre. After school, Jeremy returns to the centre, where he plays until Georgia picks him up. Nevertheless, Georgia worries that she may not be able to afford the centre’s fees next year. Strapped for cash, the school board has threatened to raise the rent it charges the childcare centre.

Jeremy enjoys school and is well liked by his teacher and peers. He is an average student but has problems with math concepts. When Georgia raised the matter with Jeremy’s teacher, the teacher noted that Jeremy is one of the younger children in the class. She remarked that his difficulty with arithmetic is probably developmental – something he would “grow out of.” Georgia asked Jeremy’s teacher if Jeremy should be tested for a learning disability, but the teacher said there were many children with more serious problems. She suggested that Georgia work with Jeremy at home, and she provided some ideas about the sort of things they could do together.

Georgia is more fortunate than many single parents. Her income is above Statistics Canada’s low-income cut-off, and Jeremy has before- and after-school care, which lets her work a normal schedule. Unlike many of the neighbourhood children, Jeremy participates in an organized activity outside of school, a Saturday-morning class in karate.

The demands on Georgia are significant. She has to do all the parenting plus working, preparing meals, and worrying about finances. In the evening, she helps Jeremy with his homework. Georgia is concerned about Jeremy’s problems with mathematics, about the influence of the social environment, and about rumours of bullying in the neighbourhood.

The situations confronting Georgia and Bryan and Karen illustrate how family circumstances often affect what Canadians want from their public schools. Today’s parents cling firmly to competing ideas about what public schools should provide: the basics: reading, writing, and mathematics … fine arts and modern languages … preparation for work … more history and politics so that students will become good citizens.

The diversity of what Canadians want from an education for their children is reflected in the responses to a poll conducted in 2001 by COMPAS Research for the National Post. A sample of Canadians was asked: “Which of the following purposes of education is most important or valuable in your judgment?” A third (32%) indicated that “training youth for the work world” was most important or valuable to them. “Creating good citizens” was chosen as the most important by about a quarter (23%). Seventeen percent chose “creating inquiring minds.” Substantially less than ten percent chose “creating happy people” (7%), “teaching ethics” (7%), “teaching religious values” (4%), “producing good parents” (3%), and “encouraging people to question authority” (2%).

The range of responses illustrates the stress upon public schools to respond to the different desires that Canadians hold. Some parents seriously question whether public schools can deliver on the multiple visions for the education of children. Economic competition, social diversity, and changes in other institutions have prompted some Canadians to question the broadly based general education traditionally offered by Canadian public schools.

Parents worry about the welfare of their children. Like my parents, today’s parents want their children to grow up well educated and able to find meaningful work. They know that their own wellbeing, and that of their children, is connected to the quality of the schooling their children receive. Increasing economic uncertainty is one reason parents wish to choose the schools their children attend and the programs they pursue.

The majority of Canadians celebrate the more inclusive nature of Canada’s public schools, but some Canadian parents express concern about the increasing diversity in the student population with the inclusion of students with special educational needs, a growing aboriginal population, and significant numbers of students of colour among the student population. A few parents seek refuge from the debate about whose culture and heritage public schools transmit. They want to educate their children in “traditional” public schools with a focus on values identical to the ones to which their children are exposed at home.

A small number of Canadians no longer believe that society in general and schools in particular will assure opportunities for all. In the face of what appear to be limited opportunities, these parents are increasingly inclined toward a competitive model of society and schooling. They want to be able to choose schools and programs as they might an automobile, a restaurant, or a fitness centre. There is increasing pressure to redefine schooling from a public responsibility to a private one – from a public good to a private privilege. Regardless of their location, when I visit Canadian public schools, I see an experience for enriching and developing Canadian society being changed into a commodity to be consumed.

In a number of jurisdictions – most notably Alberta and British Columbia – governments are retrograding from the core Canadian value of trying to achieve equality. They are saying that inequality fuels the competition leading to economic progress. Provincial governments in those jurisdictions have generally been reducing the role of government. They believe that governments should no longer provide all the education services Canadians received in the postwar period.

Some Canadian politicians reinforce the idea that public schooling is primarily a commodity when they talk about offering more choice of schools and programs. Choice in itself is not a bad thing, but when politicians talk of choice without talking about the social benefits of schooling, it reinforces a consumer mentality that feeds our “selfish” gene.

Fortunately, the majority of Canadians remain supportive of public schooling. They want their public schools to provide an education that is meaningful, enabling students to connect what they learn in class with their lives outside of school. They want their children to be challenged to reach
beyond previous boundaries in knowledge and experience. They want their public schools to stimulate students’ curiosity, prompting students to want to know more. Moreover, they want their public schools to require students to think deeply, to invest mental effort in their learning.

It is doubtful that, on the eve of the twentieth century, anyone could have predicted the events and developments that would unfold in just its first twenty years. Given her age, one might have anticipated the death of Queen Victoria, but who would have predicted the articulation of quantum theory, or the Russian Revolution? The development of the one-dollar Kodak Brownie camera might have been predicted as a natural step in the evolution of photography, but who knew that Picasso would introduce cubism or Einstein would develop his theory of relativity?

Most Canadians do not think their public schools should try to prepare the next generation for a specific set of circumstances. They know that it is impossible to predict the future with any accuracy. They believe firmly that both the next generation and the larger society will be well-served if public schools ensure that students possess a strong foundation in reading, writing, and numeracy; are disposed to treat others with respect; have the ability to work co-operatively with others; appreciate and act upon the values and principles that make us human; understand Canada and can appraise its strengths and limitations; and can exercise a critical intelligence that is adaptable to circumstances unforeseen.

Canadian public schools have excelled in these areas. In the past two decades, student performance in reading, mathematics, and science has improved dramatically. Twenty years ago, Canadian students performed near the middle of the pack internationally. Today they perform near the top. When I graduated from high school, nearly forty percent of my peers did not. Today, dramatically more students are completing secondary school. In 1950, less than three percent of Canadians went on to post secondary study. Today, the numbers of qualified public school graduates seeking admission to post secondary institutions exceeds the seats available.

According to John Ralston Saul, the founders of Canada’s universal, publicly funded school system understood that such a system was essential for democracy to flourish. Public schools help to transcend our differences to see what we have in common. They cultivate our individual strengths and dispose us to treat others as we would like to be treated.

Our institutions reflect our aspirations. In this regard, we are most fortunate. Canada’s public schools are remarkable among institutions for their success. They communicate the history, symbols, and values that distinguish Canada from other nations, inspire in the next generation a sense of belonging to Canada, and develop the knowledge base that Canada needs to survive and thrive. Canadian public schools have shown themselves to be resilient and elastic, adapting well to the changing desires of Canadians. Their continued success will depend upon a number of factors: a reasonable balance between education for personal and social development; resources equal to our expectations; and public confidence.

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