Who are the people who constitute the community? In what ways are they equal? What freedom do they have to make both private and public choices according to their needs and wants? These basic questions about democratic society cannot be answered simply in the abstract; they must be judged as well by looking at public institutions and public policies that are actually put into practice.

When Canadian educational institutions and policies are considered in historical perspective, at least five distinct periods of development can be identified. At each stage public schools were being shaped by distinctive ideas of community, equality, and liberty that not only expressed, but also contributed to changing, the political tradition of Canadian democracy.

The Founding Ideas of Community
The colonies of British North America and, after 1867, the provinces and territories of the new Dominion of Canada, were variously divided by denomination, language, race, and ethnicity. The foundation of elementary schools as public institutions presented the huge problem of how to deal with the implacable oppositions and conflicting claims that resulted from these social divisions. The overriding political issue that ultimately determined the form of Canadian educational regimes during the 19th century was the relationship between church and state in education.

In general, there were two strategies that represented essentially different ideas of democratic community. One assumed the idea of a uniform public served by common (or “national”) schools that were non-denominational or secular, with the majority’s language as the language of instruction and ethnic or racial differences assimilated into the majority culture of the community. Schools for dissenters and minorities might be established as private schools, but they would have no public funding. The other envisaged a multiform public that comprised distinct social blocs. Public schools created by the majority social bloc to serve its children were complemented by the establishment of publicly-funded separate schools for dissenters and minorities, thus incorporating and isolating the main conflicts of denomination, language, or ethnicity and race inside the public educational regime.

Pre-democratic educational regimes in Canada generally began with state grants to church and voluntary schools, thus recognizing a multiform (denominational) public while minimizing the role of the state in elementary education. As institutions of representative and responsible government were tentatively introduced and gradually extended, the common or national school with a non-denominational curriculum was established as the basic institution in all educational jurisdictions except for Newfoundland, where the first non-denominational schools were quickly abolished, and in the cities of Montreal and Quebec in Canada East. Public provision for separate denominational (and minority language) schools was contested, often energetically and bitterly; but by the 1890s, except for British Columbia and Manitoba, dual educational regimes were established either in law (Quebec, Ontario, and the Prairies) or in practice (the Maritime provinces).

Whether based on an idea of uniform public or of multiform public, nineteenth-century regimes of public instruction did not give equal treatment to minority blocs of denomination and language. British Columbia’s non-denominational curriculum discriminated against Roman Catholics, whose idea of public education was inseparable from education under the authority of their church. In Manitoba, where constitutional provision for a dual confessional regime also gave de facto protection to minority education for francophones, the Public Schools Act (1890) was an especially blatant abrogation of minority educational rights by the Protestant, English-speaking majority.
The use of French as a language of instruction was harshly restricted in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, less favourable terms of state funding for separate schools meant that Roman Catholic schools were consistently underfunded compared to public schools, and funding for separate schools was limited in Ontario and Saskatchewan to elementary grades. In the Maritime provinces of Canada the practices of reserving schools for Roman Catholics and using French as the language of instruction in Acadian districts provided a measure of equity, but the tendency for francophone majorities to reside in poor school districts meant that Acadian education was systematically underfunded.

**The Pursuit of Industrial Efficiency**

Canadian ideas of democratic community and equality in public education were substantially revised in the early 20th century as educational policymakers became fixated on reforming public schools to serve industrial efficiency. Their central policy argument was framed in terms of multilateral secondary schools within which there would be separate tracks for academic, industrial, commercial, and domestic science courses versus separate vocational high schools that specialized in preparing their students for distinctive occupational class futures. In Ontario, led by the ideas of John Searth, as well as in the cities of western Canada, a policy of specialized secondary schools was adopted. Elsewhere, the academic course continued to dominate alongside limited provision for general or commercial courses.

As the consensus formed that secondary schools should be expanded and diversified to give both academic education and vocational training, whether organized in specialized schools or separate tracks, the prevailing idea of equality in public education changed accordingly. The original scope of public instruction had been restricted to elementary school. The curriculum was differentiated between grades, but for students in the same grade, learning experiences were largely interchangeable. As secondary education was expanded and became differentiated into separate academic, commercial, industrial, and domestic science programs, equality of experiences in elementary public instruction was converted into a form of segmental equality in which the educational experiences of students were generally interchangeable or equal in the same program but unequal between different programs. Thus, on top of the vertical mosaic of social blocs based on religion, language, and race there was added a differentiation of educational programs that corresponded to the hierarchy of occupational classes.

**The Educational Agenda of the Welfare State**

After the Second World War, as public education was reconstructed in the context of the emerging welfare state, the principle of universality was extended from elementary school to secondary school. “Secondary education for all” did not mean that educational experiences in secondary schools were becoming more alike and interchangeable, nor even that they would be equal in value on the basis of different individual needs. Secondary education for all did signify, however, that a new idea of democratic community was invading Canadian educational regimes comparable to the revolution in public philosophy that led to the introduction of public instruction over a century earlier. No longer merely a condition for economic productivity and international competitiveness, secondary education had been joined with elementary education as a requisite for democratic citizenship.

From the turn of the century to the Second World War, the official policy consensus had favoured, wherever they were feasible, separate specialized high schools for secondary vocational education. In the context of the postwar development of the welfare state, the consensus shifted progressively in favour of multilateral (or “composite”) secondary schools. This form of secondary education was seen to incorporate an idea of democratic community that gave students a common identity as members of the same educational community, joined together in a range of social activities and sharing basic learning experiences, while at the same time pursuing their separate occupational futures. Thus multilateral schools sought to reconcile and legitimize class hierarchy and democratic citizenship.

By the 1960s, even as multilateral schools were being generally implemented, the policy consensus had shifted again in favour of comprehensive high schools as the means to realize both equality and individual liberty in public education. According to progressive educational philosophy, programs should be designed to meet the individual needs of each person in school. Rather than being forced into three or four tracks, students should have individual timetables, with subjects offered at two, three, or even four levels of difficulty, and proceed to more advanced courses within each subject on the basis of their achievement in that subject rather than having their promotion depend on passing a group of subjects. Because students were each choosing their preferred courses, their educational programs would not be generally interchangeable; but, because each individual program was designed to meet a particular student’s educational interests, needs, and talents, all students would be getting equal individual value from their different educational careers.

As a plan for organizing secondary schools, comprehensive high schools were recommended by the Quebec royal commission on education, chaired by Right Reverend Alphonse Marie Parent, whose report was issued in five volumes from 1963 to 1966, the 1968 report of the Provincial Committee on the Aims and Objectives of Education in Ontario chaired by Justice Emmett Hall and Lloyd Dennis, and the report in 1972 of Walter H. Worth’s commission on educational planning in Alberta. An official commitment to student-centred education was made in each of the provinces in the late 1960s and early 1970s. All provinces except for Quebec and Newfoundland abolished provincial department examinations at the end of senior high school. In the Atlantic provinces official recognition of distinctive
academic and vocational programs remained part of the provincial curriculum, but in other provinces these were replaced by credit systems that gave students more freedom to construct their individual programs.

**Public Education for a Pluralist Society**

Public commitment to the principles and policies of student-centred education reopened debates about the language of instruction and the place of religion in public schools. In order to meet the educational needs of students living in an officially bilingual and multicultural political community, public education somehow had to incorporate the diverse cultural communities that constitute the foundation of individual educational development.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, three different ideas of democratic community in a pluralist society were incorporated in the policies of Canadian educational regimes. One was the classic liberal formula that, as much as possible, the state in a democratic community ought to be neutral among competing visions of the good life. A second approach held that the policies and practices of educational regimes should be adapted as much as possible to encompass the social diversity of the democratic community. This approach envisaged the conversion of the traditional common school from cultural uniformity into a multicultural public institution. The third, a communitarian approach, advocated policies of separate schools and communal self-governance, thus creating educational regimes that would be consociations of denominational, linguistic, or racial and ethnic communities.

A classic instance of state neutrality can be seen, following the proclamation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, in the decisions of appeal courts in Ontario (1988), British Columbia (1989) and Manitoba (1992) that provincial regulation of religious exercises in public schools had the effect of imposing Christian observances on non-Christians and religious observances on non-believers. Hence, it was unconstitutional. An approach to making public schools a more multicultural public institution was the introduction of heritage and aboriginal language programs, beginning with Alberta in 1971 and subsequently extending to other provinces. Communitarian ideas, with their underlying assumption of a multiformal public, have been embedded in section 23 of the Charter, which establishes collective rights to minority-language education for both francophones and anglophones. As a result, all provinces outside Quebec now provide for schools that have French as their language of instruction and are governed by francophone district or provincial school boards.

As language replaced religion as the crucial determinant of duality in Canadian educational regimes, de facto reserved Roman Catholic schools gradually disappeared in the Maritime provinces, and in a much more controversial development, the constitutional protection of denominational public education in Newfoundland was ended in favour of non-denominational common schools (with provision for religious education and observances). In the province of Quebec, also by constitutional amendment after three decades of debate, the dual confessional regime established for purposes of public instruction in the 1840s was converted into a linguistic consociation of francophone and anglophone school commissions.

**The Era of Global Capitalism**

Although dominant as an ideal of Canadian educational policy-makers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, child-centred primary schools and comprehensive secondary education were never uncontested. From the 1970s through the 1990s, the principles and practices of progressive education were vigorously attacked and eventually displaced by advocates of a revisionist version of uniform education. This focused on ensuring that all students acquired a common body of basic knowledge and skills that are necessary for both individual advancement and collective prosperity under conditions of rapid technological change and economic globalization.

Curricula from kindergarten to year nine or ten were rewritten to establish standards and outcomes with regard to what each person in school would be expected to know and be able to do. Provincial curricular frameworks defined the work to be covered at each level of schooling. Subject profiles gave direction to teachers about how standard learning experiences should be constructed and what methods of internal and external assessment should be employed. For the post-compulsory years, reforms focused on making clear transitions for students from the common curriculum to their post-secondary careers in university.

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*The idea of individual equality that was embedded in the child-centred primary schools and the comprehensive high schools of the welfare state was generally supplanted during the 1990s by a program equality based on the prescription of common curricula, core courses, provincial standards, and extensive testing.*
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college, or the work force. Vocational pathways through senior secondary school were now defined by the occupational class structure of global capitalism rather than the specific educational ends or needs of individual students.

Thus, the idea of equality as equalizing individual value that was embedded in the child-centred primary schools and the comprehensive high schools of the welfare state was generally supplanted during the 1990s by an idea of equality as equalizing educational results with regard to basic knowledge and skills. At the same time, the freedom of students (and their parents) to choose learning experiences oriented to their individual needs and talents has been substantially restricted by a combination of curricular reform and budget cutbacks.

**Historical Legacies and Contemporary Conflicts**

The advent of public instruction, however deeply flawed in its theory and practice, both reflected and constituted a major advance in Canadian democracy. The reconciliation of Canadian democracy with industrial capitalism in the public schools of the early 20th century was a perceptible retreat.

The pursuit of more inclusive and egalitarian educational policies during three decades following the Second World War marked another major advance in the idea of Canadian democracy as dependent on a well educated citizenry whose members enjoy individual equality and exercise more effective freedom of participation in public life. Growing consensus on the representation and expression of social diversity in public schools further resulted in educational communities that recognize and value difference, striving to transform an historically vertical mosaic into equal treatment of minority social groups.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Canadians continue to be deeply engaged with difficult questions about the fit between democratic ideas and public schools. In response to the imperatives of global capitalism, contemporary educational regimes have been reformed to give priority to the economic role of students as future producers (and consumers). The resulting common and core curricula embody a concept of equality under which the educational experiences of individual students are more generally interchangeable and their freedom to choose their education is more restricted. Such curricula also challenge the inclusiveness with regard to cultural diversity that is vital to the public education of a pluralist society.

Thus, just as they have been in the past, public schools are expressions of conflict over the meaning and application of democratic ideas. In their functioning as a key public institution where people teach and learn together, they also constitute a prime hope for progress towards a more effectively democratic public life.

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