

Reflections from the Inside

A REVIEW OF **GOVERNING EDUCATION** BY BENJAMIN LEVIN

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Books written by Canadians about Canadian education are rare. It must take a certain altruism to devote one's time to a book that is unlikely to turn much of a profit in a tiny market. Ben Levin's book, *Governing Education*, is one of those rare books that speaks specifically to the Canadian context, addressing virtually every contemporary policy issue in Canadian education with clarity, insight and a wisdom born of wide experience.

Ben Levin was a school trustee by the age of 19, became a professor and dean of education at the University of Manitoba, and was a deputy minister of both Education and Advanced Education in Manitoba before assuming his current post as Deputy Minister of Education in Ontario. There is surely no one more qualified to discuss educational governance in Canada, and despite regional differences this book is relevant and important to educators, academics, politicians and the public in all parts of Canada.

It is not intended to be an academic treatise but rather "a picture of government as experienced from the inside." Through candid stories of personal experience, Levin demonstrates that, "Government is experienced less as a set of structures and process than a kind of endless bombardment of issues and events that have to be coped with." The vagaries of politics, the influence of personalities (and egos), the practical constraints of economics, the complexity of public life in a diverse society, and the random forces of fate are all amply illustrated through Levin's political odyssey as a senior public servant in Manitoba. The stories also reveal the author's ability to balance clear-eyed realism and hard-headed practicality with idealism and optimism.

Levin fears that growing distrust of government might result in the public becoming "disenchanted enough with electoral democracy to render it illegitimate or unworkable," but also confidently asserts his belief that while government is far from perfect it is also important, "that mistakes and shortcomings are inevitable but that on balance a government can still con-

tribute to important improvements in our society." He appreciates that there is a widespread cynicism about politics, largely because of the gap between promise and delivery, but also notes that "governments have been the source of some wonderful human achievements" and claims that "compared with much of the world, public affairs and services in Canada operate with impressive quality and efficiency ... That none of these things is not done flawlessly should not blind us to their virtues."

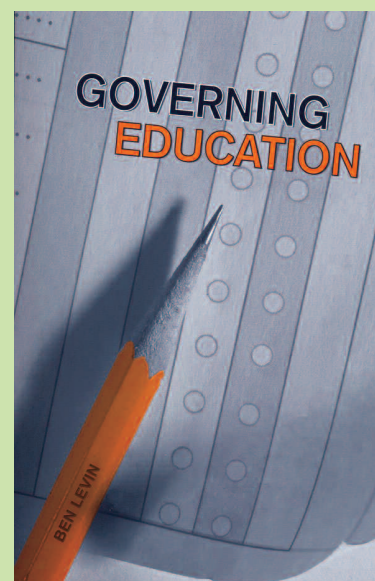
These perspectives and opinions are justified by an authoritative insider's view of how government operates and an accompanying analysis of governance that concludes with some personal suggestions for improving both education and government.

Levin's advice for improving public education is familiar: "Improving student outcomes means that we have to pay attention to factors outside the school, that we have to work closely with parents, families and communities, that we have to pay more attention to early childhood development and to adult education. Within schools, reforms need to focus more on the elements that actually influence student outcomes, such as teachers' skills and students' motivation. In post-secondary education we need to find ways of strengthening innovation as well as improving success rates and participation rates."

His advice for improving government is somewhat more novel and reflects the balance of vision, realism and optimism that his career exemplifies: modesty ("avoid grand promises in favour of real but feasible improvements"), awareness of complexity ("important issues are rarely amenable to simple solutions"), policy design that takes into account the mistakes that are likely to be made ("large scale action of any kind will produce unanticipated results ... Error correction capacity is critical"), increase opportunities for public dialogue about important policy issues ("The chances for agreement and common action generally

increase when people have a chance to debate their differences in a constructive way"), support more innovation ("If innovation is treated as an opportunity to learn, without excessive expectations and with the likelihood of errors that will have to be corrected, it can contribute in important ways to revitalizing operations"), and think about political action in terms of creating lasting change as well as short-term interest ("A focus on capacity building and sustainability requires more attention to the longer term as well as the immediate [despite the fact that] it is hard for governments to resist the temptation to get the applause right now").

Governing Education is an important book for Canadians not only because the author is an award winning scholar who provides wise counsel on important issues, but also because that wisdom is derived from lived experience in the unique context of Canadian education and politics and based on values that have defined and should continue to guide our country. |



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