

# A Case for Innovation

Canada's education system is sophisticated, robust, and quite remarkably successful by almost any standards. Its teachers are among the best qualified in the world; its postsecondary participation rate is 55 percent compared to the OECD average of 33 percent<sup>1</sup>; its 15-year-olds score among the top six countries in Programme for International Student Assessment literacy, mathematics, and science assessments; and all provinces are focused on raising achievement levels in the K-12 system. Yet the calls for innovation are incessant. Improving on our current practices is an inadequate response to the changed context in which young people are growing up.

The stories in this issue of *Education Canada* attest to the fertile ground for innovation in education. They build on a long history of trying new classroom approaches, developing new programs, and creating new models of school. Mostly these innovations focus on educational problems in local contexts. Such innovations are sometimes hard to find and difficult to sustain. The new Ken Spencer Award for Innovation in Teaching and Learning seeks out innovations among the schools participating in a major research and development initiative of the Canadian Education Association (CEA), *What did you do in school today?* The three 2009 winners provide examples of new program design through partnerships, inquiry-focused practice, and active student involvement in school change. (See Innovation Resources.) As significant as local innovations may be to individual schools and communities, they do not add up to the scale of system transformation that would be required to develop the intellectual capabilities of all students called for by a number of international bodies as well as by the Conference Board of Canada.<sup>2</sup> Intellectual skills are not acquired as new courses to be offered. They must be integrated into the work that students do every day in all subject areas.

The calls for innovation in education reflect distinct ways of describing the context outside of and inside the education sector. From the outside, the need to deepen social cohesion and expand civic participation, the emergence of a knowledge economy with a decline in the proportion of low and semi-skilled occupations, more recent ideas about creative communities, environmental degradation and climate change, and the transformation of virtually all forms of work by technologies contribute to questioning schools' capacity to develop in young people the aptitudes, attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to solve these problems and find success in an uncertain future.

At policy levels the challenges are more often framed as preparing young children for success in school, raising high school graduation rates, closing the gap in achievement among defined groups of students, particularly in literacy and numeracy, and successful navigation of the transitions from school to work and post-secondary education. Policy is informed by empirical research that examines the way things are now and the systematic measurement of student achievement (in addition to political and public values). Innovation arises from seeing the problems differently, imagining another way of doing things and so is inherently local. Policy is not likely to be informed by small-scale experiments or the qualitative research often associated with local innovations. Yet most innovation is local and so does not find its way into provincial policy until its relevance or acceptance has become fairly widespread.

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Innovation in education is not a new idea. In fact the landscape could be said to be littered with apparently promising ideas that quickly became fads. Yet there are other innovations that have been sustained over many years. Alternative schools (and in some places, charter schools) developed models of organization often radically different in philosophy or practice from mainstream schools. Many have been very successful and have endured for many years. Proponents of alternative schools have argued that experiments with new models would inform directions in "regular" schools. Little evidence supports this view. A more cynical argument is that the creation of alternative programs or schools simply creams off highly motivated parents, students, and teachers or at the other extreme, provides a safety valve for disaffected students and teachers. Either way, it seems possible that assuming the solution to educational problems is in alternative schools or programs limits the likelihood of more radical change in the learning experiences of the majority of students.

CEA's initiative, *What did you do in school today?* clearly suggests that the way we understand learning among adolescent students needs to change. The finding that only about 37 percent of middle and secondary school students are intellectually engaged in their language arts and mathematics classrooms is surely cause to think again.<sup>3</sup> Some of our most academically successful students have told us that their marks matter more than what they've learned.

We need what the Innovation Unit in the United Kingdom calls "disciplined" innovation that goes "beyond the evidence of 'what works.'"<sup>4</sup> The basis for believing an innovation is likely to be useful must be clear at the beginning; the reasons for undertaking the innovation must be explained; the anticipated outcomes need to be described; and the evaluation must document the processes of implementation and its outcomes. Only then will others be able to learn from and adapt innovations across contexts.

Since innovations intended to change the learning experience and outcomes for students must necessarily begin where teachers and students meet, it seems wise to give attention to policies that might enable innovations to be designed, implemented, evaluated and scaled up. Could policy approaches include suspending current regulations that limit promising innovations? Could innovating schools be allowed alternative uses of resources? Could teacher unions allow their members in specific schools to experiment with alternative work rules to facilitate an innovation that that teachers had designed?

And perhaps most promising of all, are we ready to co-design our future with the students on whose behalf we purport to act? |

**PENNY MILTON is the CEO of the Canadian Education Association.**

## Notes

- 1 Post-secondary education in Canada: Who's missing out? Lessons in Learning. April 2009. Canadian Council on Learning. [www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/LessonsInLearning/LinL200900401PSEUnderrepresented.htm](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/LessonsInLearning/LinL200900401PSEUnderrepresented.htm)
- 2 Employability Skills 2000+. Conference Board of Canada. [www.conferenceboard.ca/Libraries/EDUC\\_PUBLIC/esp2000.sflb](http://www.conferenceboard.ca/Libraries/EDUC_PUBLIC/esp2000.sflb)
- 3 Willms, J. D., Friesen, S. & Milton, P. (2009). *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement.* (First National Report) Toronto: Canadian Education Association.
- 4 Valerie Hannon. The Search for Next Practice. *Education Canada* Fall 2009. [www.cea-ace.ca/media/en/Next\\_Practice\\_Fall09.pdf](http://www.cea-ace.ca/media/en/Next_Practice_Fall09.pdf)

## Innovation Resources

- The Search for Next Practice. Valerie Hannon, *Education Canada* Fall 2009. [www.cea-ace.ca/media/en/Next\\_Practice\\_Fall09.pdf](http://www.cea-ace.ca/media/en/Next_Practice_Fall09.pdf)
- *What did you do in school today?* [www.cea-ace.ca/whatdidyoudoinschooltoday](http://www.cea-ace.ca/whatdidyoudoinschooltoday)
- The Galileo Educational Network [www.galileo.org](http://www.galileo.org)
- FutureLab [www.futurelab.org.uk](http://www.futurelab.org.uk)
- Overcoming the Barriers to Innovation: A Literature Review [www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/lit\\_reviews/Barriers\\_to\\_Innovation\\_review.pdf](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/lit_reviews/Barriers_to_Innovation_review.pdf)
- The Innovation Unit [www.innovation-unit.co.uk](http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk)
- *Innovating to Learn, Learning to Innovate.* OECD. [www.oecd.org/document/7/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_35845581\\_41656455\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_37455,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/7/0,3343,en_2649_35845581_41656455_1_1_1_37455,00.html)