

# "Beyond School Reform: Re-Inventing the Public School for the Twenty-First Century"

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## Part 1

When the public school was born in the mid-nineteenth century, it represented one of the three great institutional inventions (corporation and the factory) of the Victorian Age.

Along with the development of the factory and the business corporation, the development of the public school in the 1850s marked a turning point in both organizational and educational history.

### **Why was the public school so willingly embraced by the public?**

1. Technical Reasons: The "public" or "common" school" offered enormous advantages over the other kinds of private and religious schools of the day

- a standardized curriculum for all children;
- teachers trained commonly in state-run normal schools,
- free textbooks for all children;
- a progressive system of grades
- entrance and exit examinations into high school.

Compared to the idiosyncratic character of many private schools, the public school seemed a model of organization and efficiency.

2. Political Reasons:

- Politicians, newspaper editors, professional people, businessmen, and parents commonly extolled its many apparent virtues.
- Public schooling, they argued, could become the chief instrument of nation building.
- could promote the survival of the nation state by securing common instruction in history, geography and language.
- Could also serve to socialize immigrants, educate the poor, bolster morality and citizenship, reduce crime and vagrancy, keep children from roaming the streets and, generally, instruct a new generation of youngsters in how to live better and fuller lives than their parents.

And, so, for more than 100 years, the public school operated with little public criticism or concern, directed largely by a small group of professional

**educators who administered national, state, and provincial bureaus of education.**

These individuals were usually scholarly in character, formally trained in the classics, literature, and history, conservative in their social demeanor, and mildly progressive in their views about schooling.

As senior members of the government's civil service, they represented an educational elite whose work was rarely examined through the lens of politics.

From the public school's beginnings in the 1850s to its maturity as an institution in the 1970s, politicians at national, provincial, or local levels rarely interfered with the work of the appointed officials who supervised public education.

As a matter of public policy, education, at least in Canada and the United States, was generally considered to be a branch of public life that should remain "beyond politics."

**This was the "golden age" of public education, 1870-1970**

## **Part II**

Since the 1970s, however, several important changes have taken place that have called into question the original purposes of public schooling and, indeed, the relevance of the public school itself.

- The growth of academic scholarship in education during the early 1970s prompted new questions about public education's sacrosanct status.

- Following the social turbulence of the 1960s, historians and sociologists in Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and other parts of the world, began to re-examine the public school's societal role, particularly how it functioned as an agency of **social control, selection and conformity.**

- Critics from the ideological left** charged that schools were far from democratic in their purposes, that they assigned greater cultural and employment opportunities to middle and upper-class children than to the poor, and that they served to perpetuate an already-fixed social system which suffocated the social identity of marginalized people. Public schools, they argued, were the institutional handmaidens of a rigid, class-divided, capitalistic system that shaped children to serve the economic needs of a corporate and industrial society.

- Critics on the right of the philosophical and political spectrum** were no less critical of the public school's development. They charged that public schools had been captured by advocates of a soft-minded educational progressivism that worshipped the doctrines of socialization and psychological adjustment at the

expense of intellectual rigor and the highest cultural values. Schools, they complained, had become institutions for the perpetuation of intellectual mediocrity, and that their intellectual core had been stripped away by professional educators in normal schools and universities.

- **Critics on the ideological right** also charged that public educators were spending increasing amounts of public resources on schooling but obtaining only declining levels of scholastic performance from kindergarten to the university.

- Even **those in the ideological center** had their own litany of complaints. Chief among them were that schools had become obsessed with social conformity, that they stifled individualism, and that they served to obstruct young people's personal thought and expression.

- **academic concerns** with the school's social functions were joined by those of the public-at-large who were beginning to lobby on behalf of groups of youngsters allegedly marginalized by public education's insistence on commonality and conformity.

- Advocates of children with special and sometimes profound learning disabilities petitioned educational governments at various levels for more inclusionary educational programs.

- So, too, did advocates for gifted children lobby for special services, as did proponents of assorted linguistic and cultural groups who claimed that schools ignored the distinct cultural identities of many immigrant children and their special learning requirements. Such voices were joined by many others who claimed minority or other special status and who demanded categorical treatment.

- In Canada, Aboriginal groups, whose education had been a matter of federal jurisdiction, demanded changes to the residential school system and sought to be included in provincial education systems. In some cases, they fought for and eventually secured complete autonomy over the governance and administration of schools for their own peoples.

- Feminists and other advocates of social and educational equity also made their presence felt by demanding that public school curricula be changed to reflect the changing role of women in society and that school leadership be opened up to include greater numbers of women in positions of authority.

### Part III

**So, after a century of quiet, public schools became political battlegrounds by the 1980s where competing social and educational agendas struggled for recognition and supremacy.**

- Central to the "new politics" was the question of who should control schools. For more than a century, educational control had remained in the hands of grey-

haired middle-age men in grey suits who occupied the senior positions in ministries of education. Beginning in the early 1980s, however, parents, various kinds of community activists, and women began to demand greater public participation in educational policy and decision making and, more importantly greater choice in determining where children went to school and greater control over what they learned.

- High levels of parental and public dissatisfaction with the control and quality of public schooling prompted a wave of school reform efforts at state and provincial levels around the world throughout the 1980s and 1990s.
- Some initiatives have involved structural reform, that is to say changing the governance and administrative structures of education (usually this took the form of reducing the number of governance units, transferring jurisdiction over education from one level of government to another, or transferring local control of schools into the hands of parents' councils).
- Some reform initiatives chose curriculum reform as their principal target (here the emphasis was on renovating and modernizing the curriculum to promote better decision making skills on the part of students, better communications skills, greater attention to mathematics, science, and information technology, and a focus on student employability).
- Still other reform efforts focused on system assessment and evaluation. Rather than emphasize levels of support, or input, governments at all levels around the world have tried for the past ten years to shift educational discussion **from "system inputs" to "system or student outputs."** The target here has been to enhance system or student productivity, usually relative to standardized measures from some other jurisdiction. Advocates of such reform generally believe that frequent and accurate measures of performance are essential to increasing educational productivity at all levels.
- Attempts at financial reform have also been popular, either in the form of spending restraints which force choices among goals and services to be provided or tying to tie increases in spending to increases in school or student performance.
- School reforms have also been directed along two other lines. One has emphasized reform through changes in teacher training and practices. Typically, such reform has called for teachers to take a more integrated view of subject matter, to be more clinically adept in diagnosing children's learning difficulties (and prescribing remedial activities), and to re-locate classroom emphasis on learning rather than teaching.
- Finally, in some jurisdictions legislative reforms have been introduced to change the character of the educational marketplace and to allow greater educational competition between public and non-public educational sectors. Advocates of this approach contend that market forces can make public education more responsive to the needs of children, parents, and the community.

## Part IV

Two decades of sustained attention to school reform in Canada and elsewhere have produced **no more than modest educational results**. On the positive side, provincial governments have been generally successful in establishing a new and common core of learning, with increased emphasis on basic literacy, mathematics, and basic employment competencies. Reforms have also changed teacher education programs and, in some cases, admission requirements necessary to enter teacher training.

- Reformers, however, **have been far less successful** in achieving most of the other goals they set out. For example, governments have not been particularly successful in reducing the scope of the school's social mandate and increasing the attention to the school's educational purposes. Reforms have had little impact on teacher practices or teacher performance inside schools. Various reforms have been likewise ineffective in improving children's understandings of their responsibilities as citizens, enhancing parental responsibilities for children's behavior and performance at school, or erasing the line that exists between school and work.

**Why have many of these lengthy and expensive reform initiatives generally failed?** There are many answers to this question. Sometimes the failure has been a result of overly ambitious expectations about what can be changed and the time required to bring about change. Sometimes the failure has been attributed to the

- confused and complex strategies reformers have used to change schools.
- Sometimes the failure has been one of implementation and the political negotiations that reduce the impact of particular reforms.

There is, however, a more fundamental reason why educational reform has often failed. And this has to do with the fact that **most school reformers begin their work by accepting the organizational character of public schooling as a factor beyond change**. That is to say, they accept the idea that the outlines of the public system are already fixed and in place.

- This critical assumption conditions all other thinking about reform
- it means that whatever reform strategies are chosen they must overcome the immense force of the school's organizational and historical traditions.

- Accepting the school's organizational status quo limits the system's capacity for reform. By accepting the educational

structures of the past as a starting point, the educational story of the future is conditioned to repeat the past.

**Some illustrations are in order.**

- For example, the pedagogical structure of 12 grades and the idea that schooling should take 12 years of a young person's life is a tradition born in another time. Where is it carved in stone that a school program requires this length of time? Where is the research that says the primary and secondary school curriculum requires 12 years to complete?

- Could this curriculum be completed by some children in, say, 10 years? Or, possibly, nine years? Insistence upon a 12 or 13-year cycle for schooling (including kindergarten) has a profound financial impact on school systems and greatly circumscribes how educational spending is directed.

- Without this limitation, **vast amounts of educational funding could be redirected** to other and, perhaps, better purposes.

- For many secondary students **disenamoured with their educational programs, schools represent little more than educational parking lots** where they are forced to spend time undertaking activities they deem irrelevant to their lives and to the world of work. In Canada today, some 20-30% of young people who enter Grade 8 fail to complete Grade 12: for children from marginalized groups, the non-completion rate can run as high as 55%.

- Likewise, **where is it carved in stone that the conventional period of instruction is 50 minutes or, in some cases, one hour?** Where is the research evidence that supports this? Instructional practice suggests that children's capacity for attention is about 20 minutes. Why, then, do we insist on instructional periods that bear little resemblance to what we know from practice about the length of children's span of attention?

- As matters stand, **children conventionally receive five 50-minute periods of instruction daily, irrespective of how they actually learn.** We appear to accept this as a condition of instruction that is allowed to stand without challenge. This, again, has enormous financial implications, particularly as it applies to the efficient use of school facilities and the costs of capital construction. In developed countries, school reformers of the past half-century have rarely investigated strategies to use schools more efficiently or to extract greater value from educational spending by sharing physical resources with other schools or other community institutions. Could schools not be operated for longer or shorter periods daily? Could children not be cycled through schools in ways that are socially and educationally more efficient?

•Similarly, **the structure of the school year bears closer examination.** As presently constituted in most Western countries, the length of the school year is some 180 days or so in most jurisdictions. In its construction, the school year was originally designed to reflect the realities of an agricultural age when teachers who were mostly male farmers or clergymen who taught part time to teach while continuing their agricultural or religious activities. This construction, which may be traced as far back as the medieval universities, also allowed male students to study without interfering with their own agricultural activities or that of their families. Does a school year so defined continue to make sense in a world where many parents and students work in service industries or other occupations that operate seven days a week, 24 hours a day?

•**Could the school year not be re-organized to accommodate a "better fit" between school and work, or to allow secondary students to gain work experience while attending school?** Or, for example, could the school year not be lengthened to give young people with learning difficulties in particular subjects longer time to master the curriculum. Assessment results in mathematics and science in countries such as Japan, for example, clearly suggests that longer school years and school days (in the case of Japan, a school year consisting of 240-days) are correlated with high educational performance.

•**The way instruction is organized similarly warrants investigation.** PERSISTENCE OF THE RECITATION Studies of public school teaching practices in Canada and the United States reveal a common pattern and one that has endured for more than 100 years. Studies of instructional organization from the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries report similar findings: namely that teachers speak for more than 80% of the time in classrooms, and that the remainder of the time for discourse is occupied by teachers asking questions of students and, then, commenting on answers students provide.

•**Research also shows that teachers' instructional behavior does not change measurably with changes in class size.** Whether teachers instruct large or small classes, the pattern of instruction remains relatively constant. In other words, the century-long movement toward smaller and smaller class sizes in many systems has produced few positive results in terms of student performance. Scholastic performance, as indicated by language and mathematics assessments, seem entirely independent of class size according to a large constellation of studies. Again, the organization of instruction and class size have enormous bearing on educational costs and how resources are allocated. Yet, they are usually accepted as a "given" in school reform initiatives and rarely factored into any equation designed to produce school change.

• **Old ways of organizing instruction have even proved impervious to educational technology.** So far technology has failed to reshape or modernize instructional organization, despite a large amount of resources directed toward computers and connecting schools to the world wide web. Rather than embrace new technologies, teachers have been slow to master new technologies and, more importantly, have resisted their introduction, preferring instead ways of instruction they hold to be "tried and true." Unlike other modern organizations where technology has been successfully applied to increase efficiency, productivity, and to change basic work and learning processes, the results in schools have been different. The introduction of technology has failed to renovate the work structures of schools, or to change the rate at which children learn.

## Part V

**The argument is this—for schools to be truly reformed, they must first be re-imagined and re-invented without the organizational baggage of the past.** They must be reconstructed from the ground up with as little reference to the past as possible. In other words, if we were given the task of re-inventing the public school today, what characteristics would we look for, what elements would we wish to see in a school designed especially for the twenty-first century. **New Currency of Competition.**

• A few suggestions are in order.

1. **Many parents and other members of the community would like to see more flexible structures for learning, in terms of time and place.** The school year and school day as presently constituted serve to restrict the entry and participation of many young people, who for economic and other reasons cannot manage to attend school or to upgrade their education or training. Related to this is the question of convenience.

• Although schools may be convenient institutions for middle-class families in suburbs, they are not always as accessible to members of other classes or for those whose family lives are broken or dis-organized. Educational programs could be just as easily provided in other settings as they are in the buildings we call schools today. **Classes could be held in community centers or in learning centres close to workplaces to allow a much greater spectrum of people greater access to education.**

• 2. **There is the matter of curriculum control,** something that has long belonged to teachers or to government education planners. Surely the focus of schooling should be fundamentally changed from **an emphasis on teachers and teaching**

**to an emphasis on learners and learning.** Educators have discussed this for nearly a century but for one reason or another have hesitated to actually alter the locus of learning. One way to do this is to develop courses and learning materials that support a "mastery" approach to learning.

**•It is a simple task to develop curricula that can be placed in the hands of individuals who can proceed at their own rate and according to their own time.** (ABORIGINAL LEARNERS IN CANADA) Such courses can be provided in written or electronic forms and can be made widely accessible to all. Obviously, such courses are less applicable to primary school children but beyond the primary grades this form of instruction has proven to be extraordinarily powerful, especially for minority group and students from marginalized social and economic groups. In this respect, **technology holds out enormous potential for the design and delivery of new curricula that can be controlled by learners. For many youngsters today, learning is an existential experience in that they never know what is next or how things are connected together. This must change!**

3. In light of the long-standing gap between the worlds of work and school, **our conception of what constitutes a curriculum seemingly requires change.** Clearly there is an obvious need to involve community businesses in the work of education and to create new school-work partnerships where young people can learn from a much greater array of human and technical resources that can be found inside even the best of schools. So, too, must curricula be developed which are more relevant to the world outside the schools and that can relate school learning to the social and economic realities of people's lives. In short, we must broaden our conception of curriculum to include many of the communications, attitudinal, and other life-skills that help make individuals good citizens and productive people. Apart from teaching a basic national or provincial curriculum, the curriculum should also emphasize the languages necessary to survive and prosper in an increasingly international world.

4. **The re-invention of schooling must allow for the emergence of new and different organizational structures in which children can learn.** Some may be traditional in character. Others may be radical. Some may be large structures. Some may be small. Some may have no apparent structure at all beyond an electronic address. The important thing is that the forms produce variation, competition, and experimentation in how learning takes place. True experimentation within existing systems is rare.

**•Legislation, regulation, and contractual agreements with teachers' unions have extinguished most opportunities for experimentation in how children are grouped, how they are taught, and how learning is sequenced throughout a large and complex organizational system. A more diverse and competitive**

**educational marketplace will no doubt stimulate new ways of doing things and will ultimately produce greater learning opportunities for everyone.** As we speak, school systems across North America are responding to parental demands for greater educational choice and access by allowing families much greater control over where their children attend school.

5. Finally, we need to envision a system of schooling where the goals and curricula are clearly specified, that is to say tightly focused and inspected. At the same time, the system must be "loose" enough to allow for new approaches to the development, design, and delivery of educational programs, new approaches to making learning more accessible for greater numbers of young people and adults who require training or re-training, and new conceptions of what it means to be a teacher who can actually intervene and make a difference in the ways that people learn. Without liberating teachers from the mechanical and routine delivery of instructional materials which now occupies most of their time, it is impossible for teachers to ever develop into fully professional people whose clinical skills in diagnosing learning difficulties will earn for them the social and professional status they deserve.