

Education Issues and Systemic Challenges in Canada

There are many issues that face Canadians with respect to education in Canada. As I have been asked to narrow my focus to three, I would like to outline three broad themes: the challenge of developing a shared vision, the challenge of learning access and delivery and the challenge of authentication.

The Challenge of Developing a Shared Vision: What should be learned? (What do we need to know?)

This issue refers to the constant debate that goes on in educational circles in Canada and beyond as to what is worth knowing. As everyone has had some experience with the educational system, it seems that everyone has an opinion about education and what it should be about.

Many educational pundits increasingly postulate that education should be focused upon developing critical thinkers. In our "information age" or "knowledge-based economy" where any point of view regarding almost any topic can be found on the Internet, how do learners learn to differentiate between information that is worth accessing and knowing, and that which is not.

Others say that we need to focus on "the basics" and stick to only programs which deal with literacy and innumeracy.

Others suggest that what schools should be about is developing citizenship in order to ensure that we have strong, healthy communities and a viable democracy.

While others argue that we need education to help our young people not only understand what it means to be Canadian, but that given the increasingly global and inter-connected nature of our relationships with the rest of the world, we also need to have young Canadians understand what it means to be a citizen of the world.

The systemic response to this challenge is made more complex in Canada where each province and territory constitutionally has its own jurisdictional purview. Taxes are raised in local jurisdictions, money is sent to provincial and territorial coffers and a debate constantly ensues over what areas should get what money and how this should be spent.

Despite this segmented political and systemic reality, there have been some moves towards creating a national dialogue about education issues in Canada. In 1967, the Canadian Council of Ministers of Education (<http://www.cmec.ca>) was established. CMEC is the national voice for education in Canada. It is the mechanism through which ministers consult and act on matters of mutual interest, and the instrument through which they consult and cooperate with national education organizations and the federal government.

Canada's SchoolNet was created as a Federally led initiative working in collaboration with all provinces and territories in much the same spirit as the CMEC. This is another example of a shared, national dialogue about education in Canada.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) also works hard with its provincial and territorial member-associations to establish a national dialogue on behalf of, and among educators across Canada regarding pan-Canadian educational issues. The CTF is often at political loggerheads with the goals and objectives of Provincial and Territorial Ministries of Education over the three major board issues outlined in this document.

Governments and the business community are often focused primarily on job-creation and skills developed in order to deal more effectively with unemployment and in helping to fill the increasing gap between employer needs and the lack of specific skills, especially in the areas of science, mathematics and technology-related, where many tens of thousands of jobs in Canada cannot be filled by Canadians as we do not have enough people educated to fill such jobs.

The Challenge of Learning Access and Delivery: How is learning best facilitated?

This topic covers everything from pedagogical debates over the uses of ICTs in education, to debates over strategies to secure and support basic literacy and innumeracy, e.g. Should a phonics or whole language approach be used for teaching reading, as just one example? What do we know about the effectiveness of using ICTs to support teaching and learning? With the emergence of the "knowledge-based" economy, all provincial and territorial governments are now placing the effective use of ICTs in support of teaching and learning as a high-priority. In Canada we have spent billions of dollars putting computers into schools and networking them, but the question that is increasingly asked is, "Our Schools Are Wired... Now What?" An answer to this increasingly asked question is mixed. This is one hugely important justification for the NIS program as NIS schools provide living, breathing illustrations and models as to what is possible with regard to innovation in teaching and learning when you place ICTs and supporting resources in the hands to visionary educators.

At a systemic level, there are increasing social, political and economic forces at play that would like to see Canadians have a greater choice as to how their children are educated with greater options for charter schools, private schools, religious and special interest schools such as those geared for the arts, sports, science and technology, virtual schooling etc. On the other hand, many other argue that when public resources are used in support of such options, the public school system becomes watered-down and is less able to fulfill its mandate of providing the best education for the vast majority of Canadians. In essence, this debate is about equity.

With a population that is very mobile, Canadians move on average every five years or less, this makes it very difficult for education administrators to plan for the costs related to infrastructure, human resources etc. Nationally, certain provinces are experiencing steady growth, where as other regions are seeing declining populations.

With an aging population of educators, another challenge arises articulated in the question, "Who will teach our children?" The substantial numbers of teachers who will be retiring across Canada in the coming years is going to place an incredible strain on Canada's ability to put competent, experienced teachers in the classroom.

The other systemic issue related to education system and how it will be delivered also relates to demographics. With an aging population that will be making fewer economic contributions to society and will be making increasing demands upon society and government resources, the obvious questions then arises as to, who will pay for our education system? And how will this be managed?

The Challenge of Authentication: How is learning best measured?

This is an area of fierce debate among those engaged with education in Canada today (and beyond). The CTF and its professional member associations have become very suspicious of the standardized testing and other over-arching assessments that are being done across Canada.

Governments describe this as an "accountability" issue, how can they ensure that students are learning what they are supposed to be learning effectively? Teachers' Associations argue that such assessment is more often about political leverage and mechanisms to shift funding resources to areas of political expedience, rather than what is in the best interests of teaching and learning.

Everyone who is involved in education these days is looking for "Best" or "Leading Practices". Canada is no different. In fact, SchoolNet's very own NIS program can be aptly described as being a part of this "Quest for best". The challenge for such initiatives such as the NIS will be to find ways to share these NIS member-schools stories and experiences with those involved with education outside of the NIS. The NIS will need to find many different creative ways of sharing these stories to have a broader social impact.

With the new federal American initiative called "No Child Left Behind", schools in the U.S. are scrambling to understand the implications of this legislation to ensure that this will also mean "No teachers or schools left behind" as their ability to respond to this national initiative will have direct funding implications. No doubt, this will have yet to be determined ramifications for education in Canada.