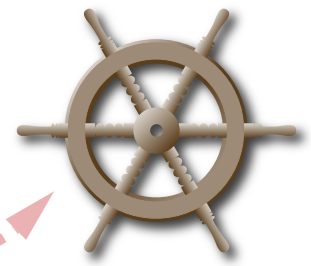


Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Eight big ideas to strengthen public education

By *Bernie Froese-Germain*

The genesis of public education in Canada and the birth of the Canadian federation have some important commonalities. They are both approximately the same age – public education has its origins in the latter half of the 19th century. More importantly, they are both works in progress, continually evolving to meet new needs and demands, one supporting and strengthening the other.

On the role that public education plays in a democratic society, philosopher and essayist John Ralston Saul eloquently stated that:

Any weakening of universal public education can only be a weakening of the long-standing essential role universal public education plays in making us a civilized democracy.
www.publiceducationnetworksociety.com/the-charter.html

In a similar vein, American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey observed a century ago that:

It is no accident that all democracies have put a high estimate upon education; that schooling has been their first care and enduring charge. Only through education can equality of opportunity be anything more than a phrase. Accidental inequalities of birth, wealth, and learning are always tending to restrict the opportunities of some as compared with those of others. Only free and continued education can counteract those forces which are always at work to restore, in however changed a form, feudal oligarchy. Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.

https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_Dewey

The historic milestone of Canada marking 150 years of confederation is an appropriate time to reflect on the future of public education: what kind of public education system do we need to support the vision of an inclusive, equitable, sustainable, prosperous Canada?

No one could argue that public education doesn't play a central role in creating our future society – unfortunately, the typical discourse around educational innovation and change too often equates with standardized, market-driven reforms which undermine equity. Teachers' organizations attempt to provide an important counter-narrative to this flawed mindset.

So, with that in mind, here are some “big” ideas (in no particular order) to strengthen public education in Canada.

1. **Education for reconciliation** – In the wake of the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report and its Calls to Action, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) firmly believes education is vitally important to the healing and reconciliation process and is committed to working together with Indigenous organizations and our other educational partners toward this end.
2. **The teacher voice** – Classroom teachers, the experts on teaching and learning, are best positioned to know what students require to be successful in the broadest sense of the term. As such, it is vitally important to involve and incorporate the teaching profession's views on educational change. Indeed, Jelmer Evers and René Kneyber, editors of *Flip the System: Changing Education From the Ground Up*, published last year by Education International (EI), argue that teachers can and should take the lead on education reform. <https://www.teachers.ab.ca/Publications/ATA%20Magazine/Volume-96-2015-16/Number-1/Pages/Book-review.aspx>
3. **Support for collaborative professionalism** – The importance of fostering a system culture of collaborative professionalism to improve teaching and

learning is one of the main recommendations of a recent study on the state of professional learning in Canada. According to Andy Hargreaves, “professional learning and development (PLD) is most effective when it takes place within a culture of collaborative professionalism where teachers work and plan together, take shared responsibility for all students' learning in each other's classes and schools, and undertake inquiry in teams to solve problems in their schools”.

<https://learningforward.org/who-we-are/announcements/press-releases/2016/12/05/findings-from-a-study-of-educators-professional-learning-in-canada-released-today>

4. **Social and economic conditions matter** – Socio-economic factors (such as child poverty and mental illness) can have an impact on student learning and educational outcomes. Improving the broader social and economic conditions of children and their families will ultimately benefit learning and the overall quality of public education.
5. **Global Education Reform Movement (GERM)** – We need to deepen our awareness and understanding of global education reform and how these changes are impacting our schools and education systems. Features of GERM include school choice (charter schools, voucher programs, etc.), increased competition between schools, test-based accountability, and the narrowing of curriculum. To take one example, the growth of international benchmark testing such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) PISA is influencing educational policy and practice in ways that can be detrimental to the goals of public education.
6. **Achieving excellence through equity** – The Alberta Teachers' Association's (ATA's) blueprint for educational development in Alberta, *A Great School for All*, takes a systematic holistic approach to educational change with equity as its foundation. The blueprint contains 12 dimensions of change which “are interconnected and recognize that schools are complex

living communities that exist within an ecology bounded by culture, community, socio-economic realities, political environments and global trends and pressures.”

7. **Increase support for diversity** – Given the incredible diversity of classrooms and schools – and the richness and strength that lies therein – providing the necessary supports and services for students with special needs including students with mental health problems is absolutely critical.
8. **Stem the growing tide of privatization in/of public education** – Over the past two years, CTF has been actively involved in the Global Response campaign, an international effort – coordinated by EI and endorsed at the EI World Congress in Ottawa in 2015 – opposed to the privatization and commercialization of public education. The campaign has two complementary pillars:
 - Advocate for governments to do what they're supposed to do – act in the interest of the public good with adequate funding, resources and policy to ensure quality inclusive public education.
 - Endeavour to interrupt and stop “edu-businesses” such as Pearson and Bridge International Academies from profiting at the expense of access for all to free quality publicly funded public education.As part of the Global Response campaign, the recently launched *We The Educators* initiative, a series of animated short videos supported by a detailed literature review, is intended to catalyze new conversations about the relationship between educational technology and the privatization, standardization, datafication, and (de)personalization of education.

While not exhaustive by any means, this list does touch on some core issues for the teaching profession in its efforts to ensure the provision of quality public education for all – for the next 150 years and beyond.

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