

by Bob Rae

# THE NEW WORLD OF EDUCATION

*Les réformes de l'éducation des années 60 et 70 sont allées trop loin. Il faut maintenant revenir aux objectifs fondamentaux du système et, en particulier, attacher plus d'importance à l'éducation des jeunes enfants. Il faut que les parents participent davantage au processus et il faut aussi faire en sorte que la télévision et les ordinateurs jouent un rôle plus positif en éducation. L'ingrédient le plus important pour assurer la réussite des écoles consiste à leur donner des enseignants motivés, bien rémunérés et efficaces.*

Learning will be at the centre of the emerging new economy. Technological change is occurring at a staggering rate and with truly global reach. Canada is a trading country and we make our way in the world because of our ability to make goods and perform services at prices and with a quality that compares favourably with others. We cannot afford to lose sight of this central fact. The quality of our public services and the level and constancy of support we can provide for each other depends in good measure on two things, which are of equal importance: on our prosperity, which should never be despised; and on our sense of mutual obligation and justice, which in turn gives meaning and reward to our prosperity. These are not exclusive values; they reinforce each other.

Learning is at the centre of the new economy and of our society. How can we demonstrate its importance more effectively than we do?

The 1960s began a shift in educational philosophy

that needs to be re-thought. According to this view, focussing on the individual student and the quality and nature of his or her experience was more important than the substance of what was taught. Hierarchies of learning and courses were less important than the "relevance" of the material to the student. Fixed courses of study, curricula that reflected a body of knowledge certain in space and time were discarded in favour of looser ranges or groupings of study that could be chosen, cafeteria style, by the student. The *Plowden Report*, which expressed the 1960s philosophy in Britain, argued that schools should "allow children to be themselves and to develop in the way and at the pace appropriate to them."

The Canadian report that set the pace of change in the 1970s and beyond was the Ontario Royal Commission, the *Hall-Dennis Report*. It led to the abandonment of general matriculation examinations, and a revamped curriculum in the name of "child-centred learning."

There is now a growing recognition that this has produced a culture of learning with its own problems. Failure and success were harder to assess. Indeed, at one ideological extreme, the very word "failure" was not allowed to be heard. Yet it is a difficult truth that not all learning is fun. It requires discipline and steadiness of purpose, as well as imagination. There is a growing sense that we have not been challenging ourselves enough. This is what needs to change.

It is better that we start with the premise that the glass is half full. It is very hard to motivate people if we convince ourselves that everything is broken and all must be started anew. We need to be infused with a spirit of steady improvement, rather than with the need to turn the world upside down in the name of a revolution. There has already been too much catering to what is fashionable in education, and too little to the fundamentals of what we know.

In the nineteenth century, which was the first century of public education, children grew up in a world without television, movies or radio. The book was king. Most children left school before their teen-age years, and certainly not all could read, but we did achieve a great degree of basic literacy in the necessary skills for an economy rapidly shifting from its agricultural base to the factory and office tower.

The modern discussion and debate about education has to come to grips with television, computer games and the internet. Young children coming to school for the first time will already have spent thousands of hours in front of the TV, and can be expected to spend more time watching TV every week than they spend in school. We "blame schools" for poor results, yet do not really look at the entire context in which learning is taking place. As long as parents adopt a totally passive attitude to their kids' leisure time addiction to television and computer games, they can hardly blame schools entirely for what their children are learning.

There is no point in adopting a luddite attitude to technology, but we can continue to insist that television perform a critical, educational role. We have also to rec-

ognize the enormous, untapped potential that new forms of interactive learning now present for children. In a few years' time, we shall no longer be referring simply to "broadcast television." It will be more a matter of our choosing programming and courses of learning that we can follow at our own pace and in our own time.

The school will become a focus for sharing knowledge, learning and skills with the community around it. Ideally we would see the physical infrastructure of the school as a community resource, starting with preschool children and their parents, and involving senior citizens as mentors and valued guides. Early childhood education is even more important in the age of television than before. The addictive effect of TV has to be offset early on; working parents need to have their children cared for; the evidence is overwhelming that early childhood learning opportunities do an enormous amount for young children and their families. It is not "baby-sitting."

Parents confronted with poor test results should start demanding more from all of us, more from government, more from teachers, more from the leaders of schools. This is entirely to the good. The last thing we want is to encourage complacency or a sense that nothing can be done. Some parents will express their dissatisfaction by moving their kids out of the public system. But parents have to take the more fundamental step of demanding more of themselves and their children.

This will place the burden of leadership back on to parents, students and the teachers and principals of the individual public school. This is especially true in a time of confusion about the role and number of school boards. Yet this is entirely as it should be: the school will remain the central focus of parents' and students' lives and concerns. The principal of each school has to emerge as a stronger figure, more accountable and, in turn, more capable of expecting accountability from the individual teacher and student.

Each school would be freer to set its course within the public system, with the central and regional authorities concerned with regular assessment of results according to the re-designed common curriculum. How each school gets there, and what else is done on the journey, is less important. The point is for schools that are less successful to learn from those that are more so.

The key to more successful schools is effective, fairly compensated, well-motivated teachers. In 20 years of political life I was increasingly struck with the fact that the professional representatives of teachers have been remarkably under-represented in the debate around the quality and performance of the public school system. On issues of compensation, governance as it relates to job tenure, on broad political issues with the government of the day: this has been the focus of teacher union activity. On dealing with poor results, curriculum

reform, young kids and science and math, on the central questions of how to improve education, the debate has been filled by parents, by academics, by some politicians, but not so much by the organizations whose job is to advance the point of view of teachers. This is a missed opportunity, to say the least. With the predominance of the political agenda today, there is little sign that this will change, unless teachers themselves demand that it do so. I personally hope they will because teachers should be among the leaders of this debate, and should be the leaders of educational improvement and reform. The adversarial nature of bargaining has tended to move the focus away from education itself, and this is much to be regretted. There is nothing inevitable about this — the trend can be reversed, but it will require a change of head and heart.

At the same time, governments have to stop teacher bashing. Angry teachers can defeat governments, but ultimately this is less important than their ability to short-circuit change in the classroom and in the school if they are persuaded that this is only way their voice can be heard. A successful improvement in our schools can only happen with the full support of the teaching profession — teachers are the key, and shifting the debate within the profession is crucial for this to happen.

The teachers face the challenge of a public that wants value for money and has heard much resistance to change but not enough positive vision. The teachers and their federations need to tell us how things could be improved without spending vast new sums of money. They need to understand why most governments around the world are focussing more energy and attention on education. Globalization and unprecedented technological change make education and training more critical to the success of our society than ever before. Public opinion — to which governments must respond — demands quality and results.

The radical right has an agenda on public education as it does on everything else. Its central premise is to hate the status quo, and make it look and sound much worse than it is. If successful, they hope that this will lead the way to a demand for vouchers, for charter schools, for the obliteration of teachers' federations. Arguments that were on the fringe in the 60s and 70s are now part of the central ideological agenda of the government. Mike Harris, for example, does not simply despise the last 10 years. Ironically, this radicalism will set back the cause of more modest improvement and reform. A generation of embittered and resentful teachers is no prescription for improving the quality of education.

Yet in many ways social democrats share the dilemma facing the teachers. Too much of what one hears as a solution to the challenge is a simple "more

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money." Canada already spends a lot of money on education in primary and secondary schools by any international comparison. Why aren't the results better?

As in health care, while radical cuts in spending make matters worse, there is no evidence to suggest that huge increases in spending on their own on the status quo would make things better. The cliché is that "learning is for life." Like many clichés, it is true. It points to the fact that we need to focus more attention on the earliest years. A number of United Ways across North America are funding programs with the simple title "Success by six." This points to an important truth: our life chances, and our learning opportunities, are often set before any of us even gets to school. Poverty, bad housing, lousy nutrition, broken families, child physical and mental abuse: these all make their nasty contribution to a meaner and more marginal life.

These issues can be addressed, but they will require a spirit of innovation and a willingness to make a social investment. This means money as well as focus and commitment to assessing outcomes. Which in turn means that not as much can be spent elsewhere. The history of public spending everywhere is that, unless checked by deliberate policy, the lion's share of spending will go to the interests of the *status quo*. A government committed to reform cannot simply acquiesce to the wishes of those with a vested interest want.



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by Lorna M. Earl

# DEVELOPING INDICATORS: THE CALL FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

*Il y a deux bonnes raisons de mettre au point des indicateurs de responsabilisation : la reddition de comptes et l'amélioration du système d'éducation. L'auteure dit toutefois qu'il faut éviter de se fier à des indicateurs unidimensionnels et simplistes. Pour que les indicateurs de résultats servent à améliorer les décisions plutôt qu'à les infléchir dans la mauvaise direction, il faut qu'ils soient détaillés, bien conçus et bien exécutés. En outre, les éducateurs, les responsables politiques et le public doivent faire un usage plus nuancé de ces indices.*

Accountability has become the watchword of the 1990s. In Canada (and the rest of the world), the realities of economic and political uncertainty have contributed to a climate of concern about the quality of education. School systems are under pressure to provide information to the public about what they are doing in schools and how well those efforts are working. But, public pressure is not the most important reason for describing schools and their work. Educators and policy makers are discovering that they need better information to make good decisions. It is very inefficient to continue a cycle of trial and error, without the benefit of data that can describe the quality of education, monitor efforts at reform and identify areas for