

EDUCATING CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

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Summary

The educational systems in Canada and the United States have evolved out of similar yet distinct histories. Both provide free, locally controlled education that is rooted in developing an educated citizenry. Childhood education is mandatory. A variety of alternatives to public education are available and commonly used in both countries. The appropriateness of many of these alternatives is controversial, and the degree of autonomy allowed to these alternatives reflect in large part local sentiment.

Although primarily founded through the Church, public schools have been evolving away from a religious emphasis. In the United States, religion effectively can no longer be a part of a public school experience, while in Canada the number of public schools offering religious training is dwindling. Perhaps encouraging the movement away from incorporating religion into the public classroom is the growing diversity of the student body. Both countries were established following European traditions, and immigration patterns largely favored European settlers. However, current immigration patterns are quite different, with Asian and Hispanic immigration predominating. Integrating students who do not speak English or (in the case of Canada) French into the classroom presents important challenges to teachers and schools. Similarly, children of special

needs are bringing additional diversity and imposing new challenges to public schools.

Considerable emphasis is currently being given to measuring and ensuring that the quality of education is appropriate. Teacher preparation, school curriculum, and student outcomes are all undergoing scrutiny. Education is widely seen as key to the success of these nations over the next millennium, and there is broad consensus that failure cannot be tolerated. However, finding reasonable measures of success pose a challenge. Considerable controversy revolves around how best to prepare an educated citizenry; not controversial at all is the desirability of universal education. A safe prediction is that in both of these countries educational systems will continue to evolve as excellence is sought. The lack of consensus on how to provide an outstanding educational experience may be the best guarantee of long-term improvement of desirable educational outcomes.

1. Introduction

This article serves to describe briefly the systems used for educating children in the United States and Canada, and address some of the key educational issues facing these countries today. (Mexico is not included in this article because of the closer relationship in its educational systems to its Central and South American neighbors than to the traditions of the United States and Canada.) The United States and Canada share a similar heritage in their educational approaches. Education is seen as a right for all children and as a responsibility of the government. School systems are largely organized at the local level following requirements of the states and provinces. National governments play an active, but secondary, role in providing direction, evaluation, and assistance to the nations' educational systems. Education is predominantly paid for at the local, state, and province levels, with quality varying considerably among regions.

Although most children are educated in public school systems, many are educated in private schools and there is an upsurge in providing education at home (home schooling). Providing high quality educational opportunities is unquestionably seen as a national priority in both nations. How to provide valuable and equitable experiences are topics of intense debate with successful resolution seen as key to the future success of the nations.

2. Organization of Education

Sharing a history of European colonization, the United States and Canadian education systems have much in common. Distinguishing these backgrounds is the more pronounced Canadian use of a French educational tradition, particular in the province of Quebec. During the colonization period, educational opportunities varied widely in both countries and often were a function of social class. The wealthy might send their sons off to receive a classical education well versed in Greek and Latin, while the less well-to-do were fortunate to have a local teacher to help the children learn to read and write. Although apprenticeships were common, the poor typically had no formal education. The Church often played a prominent role in providing a community's educational opportunities and determining curriculum, although some schools also provided instruction in such secular and practical disciplines as navigation, surveying, and bookkeeping.

Following the revolutionary war in the United States, the federal government had few powers influencing childhood education. Similarly, Canadian schools continued to be locally controlled with little attempt to standardize curriculum across communities or regions. In both countries, the nineteenth century saw the development of coeducational common schools providing free education. These common schools began to modify curriculums to reflect state or provincial requirements. Public secondary schools also became more common. This trend continued to expand through the twentieth century.

Today, free education is available to virtually all children in both countries. Educating children is mandated by the individual states and provinces, with school attendance compulsory starting around age five or six and continuing through age fifteen or sixteen. Most students stay in school through at least age seventeen or eighteen (Table 1), with completion of secondary school common and an expectation for further study in higher education.

Country	%
Japan (senior secondary only)	88.8
Belgium	88.1
Sweden	85.3
Finland	85.2
Norway	84.7
France	83.3
Switzerland	82.0
Germany	81.6
Canada	79.3
United States	77.0
Denmark	73.4
Netherlands	72.0
Ireland	70.6
Spain	64.3
New Zealand	58.9
Hungary	49.3
Portugal	49.0
United Kingdom	44.3

Source: Based on 1993 OECD data reproduced in T.T. Schweitzer, R.K. Crocker, and G. Gilliss, *The State of Education in Canada* (Montreal: The Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1995)

Table 1. Full-time enrollment rates in upper secondary and tertiary education at age 17 in 1991

Primary responsibility for providing public education is held within the state and provincial governments and shared with local authorities. In Canada, responsibility for education is specifically given to the provinces as established in the *Constitution Act of 1867*. However, the Canadian Charter of Rights, adopted in 1982, identified

“fundamental freedoms” affecting Canadian educational systems in guaranteeing universal rights. These freedoms directly influence the school systems in such important areas as the study of language, with equality protected between French and English.

Canadian national education interests are represented by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). The CMEC is not an arm of the Canadian government but a voluntary organization composed of representatives from the individual province ministries of education. Ministers from the provinces work through CMEC to consult and act on matters of mutual interest and to represent Canadian education internationally. In a 1993 joint directive, the CMEC announced a national agenda for education action plan, giving priorities to the following activities:

- Establishment of a national work group to examine curriculum comparability and possible joint initiatives in curriculum development
- Continuation and expansion of the current School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP), adding science to reading, writing, and mathematics
- A new joint CMEC/Statistics Canada project to develop pan-Canadian indicators of education performance, including such measurements as completion rates for all levels of education, successful transition to work, and student, educator, and public satisfaction
- A new Canada-wide focus on open learning and distance education, particularly in postsecondary education, beginning with an inventory of policies and practices throughout the country in this area
- Development of new linkages and partnerships with students, parents, educators, trustees, education organizations, federations and institutions, business and labor, as well as appropriate federal departments and agencies
- Leadership for a pan-Canadian conference on education priorities and joint initiatives, with all partners, building on successful education practice and innovation.

In the United States, the individual states have primary responsibility for governing education. The federal constitution identifies specific powers of the national government and education is not recognized as a federal obligation or option. Thus, strict constitutional interpretation prevented federal-level involvement in education as the state programs were developed. The states each implemented educational systems using their own state constitutions and laws as authority. However, broadening interpretation of the federal constitution has provided a linkage between education and national government responsibilities. For example, the Preamble of the Constitution identifies the power to “promote the general welfare” by the national government. Modern interpretations of this clause allow the federal government actively to support education. Similarly, constitutionally guaranteed rights such as freedom of speech are seen as applicable to all educational systems, with possible violation of these rights subject to scrutiny and remedy by the national courts.

The active involvement of the United States federal government in education is further demonstrated by the existence and activities of the federal Department of Education. The Department identified itself in 1988 as having six primary responsibilities affecting education:

- (i) Providing national leadership and partnerships to address critical issues in American education
- (ii) Serving as a national clearinghouse of good ideas
- (iii) Helping families pay for college
- (iv) Helping local communities and schools meet the most pressing needs of their students
- (v) Preparing students for employment in a changing economy
- (vi) Ensuring nondiscrimination by recipients of federal education funds.

The federal government can be extremely influential in affecting state and local government programs for schools through its funding programs. For example, the government's direction encouraging assessment of student outcomes (as discussed below) provides substantial state and local funding. States and local school systems are virtually forced to comply with the federal directives because of their needs for these funds. Although there is substantial political sentiment encouraging a reduction of federal government involvement in education and other issues traditionally centered at the state and local levels, there also is a growing trend toward increasing the federal role to ensure that high-quality education is provided throughout the nation.

U.S. President Clinton made education one of the major themes throughout his administration. Perhaps outlining future directions then anticipated at the national levels are the issues identified in his 1997 State of the Union Address:

- Set rigorous national standards, with national tests in fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math to make sure our children master the basics.
- Make sure there's a talented and dedicated teacher in every classroom.
- Help every student to read independently and well by the end of the third grade.
- Expand Head Start and challenge parents to get involved early in their children's learning.
- Expand school choice and accountability in public education.
- Make sure our schools are safe, disciplined, and drug free, and instill basic American values.
- Modernize school buildings and help support school construction.
- Open the doors of college to all who work hard and make the grade, and make the 13th and 14th years of education as universal as high school.
- Help adults improve their education and skills by transforming the tangle of federal training programs into a simple skill grant.
- Connect every classroom and library to the Internet by the year 2000 and help all students become technologically literate.

More recently, President George W. Bush signed into law the "*No Child Left Behind*" Act of 2001. This law was promoted as providing "stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work." How this Act will be operationalized is not clear at this time. However, it is clear that both major political parties will continue to promote a strong national interest in improving education throughout the United States.

The primacy of the provinces and local governments to govern education appears stronger in Canada than in the United States. Illustrative of this difference is the approach taken toward national level activities. In Canada, cooperation among the provinces is done voluntarily through collaboration, with leadership provided through the Council of Ministries of Education. In contrast, the United States has a Department of Education, which has strong coercive powers (frequently through control of federal funding of educational initiatives) driving state activity. A commonality in both countries is the guarantee of universal civil rights overriding provincial and state authorities.

3. Current Issues

Several issues face both countries as they look to improve the quality of education and best prepare their populations for the challenges of the twenty-first century. Although the countries share many concerns and approaches, important differences also distinguish current and projected activities.

3.1. Religion in the Public Schools

When the United States was formed, schools largely had a religious base and were limited to an elite few. As the country matured, opportunities increased for education involving all children and diversity increased in the classroom. Religion grew to be a less important part of education, resulting in the system today where public schools legally cannot require prayer or make prayer part of any official function. The current restriction of religion in the schools is based upon the First Amendment of the Constitution's guarantee of the separation of church and state. Public schools, as a creation of the state, legally cannot make prayer part of any official function. Schools cannot require or forbid students to participate in religious activities or hold religious beliefs. Religion is not barred from study and can be part of a curriculum in such fields as literature, history, and social studies. Certainly permissible is the study of the relationship between religion and culture. The legal system has made a fairly clear distinction between the acceptability of studying about religion and the unacceptability of supporting any particular religious belief system.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court has interpreted religious instruction as being unconstitutional, many Americans favor religious activities in the public schools. For example, a 1996 Gallup Poll revealed that 73% of respondents approved of a constitutional amendment permitting prayer in the public schools. Local or state efforts to include religion in public schools has met rejection by the courts due to the federal Constitution taking precedence over state and local law. Thus, the federal government stance in forbidding religion from the public classroom has regularly been in opposition to local sentiment.

Public interest in allowing religion in public schools is a priority agenda item of many politically conservative groups. These groups have been driving efforts to amend the federal constitution to allow religious training and expression in the public classroom. These efforts have been unsuccessful, but demonstrate that there exists a substantial constituency committed to changing the relationship between religion and public

education.

Canada does not have as strongly defined a guarantee of separation of church and state as in the United States, so there is not a national-level restriction on the provinces' ability to determine the appropriateness of religion in public schools. However, the Canadian Charter does recognize the freedom of conscience and religion as a fundamental right, so the history of the Canadian educational system is not devoid of controversy regarding the constitutionality of incorporating religious training into the public schools. Many of the Canadian policy makers in the early nineteenth century held strong beliefs about incorporating religious training as an integral part of childhood education. Consequently, many public schools were religiously based. Subsequent movement has been toward more secular public schools, but religion can remain an important component of state school systems. Today, all provinces provide for secular public schools but also have the right to fund schools that include religious training. Public support of religious training varies considerably among the provinces. At one extreme is Newfoundland, with a tradition of a public school system entirely composed of Christian denominations. With the passage of Bill 8 in its House of Assembly on July 26, 1996, there was clear direction toward restructuring of the Newfoundland administration and organization of its school system allowing reduction of the role of the Church. In Ontario, Alberta, and Saskatchewan a secular public school system coexists with a publicly funded Roman Catholic system. However, in Ontario, funding is not provided for any religious school other than those in the Catholic system, while partial funding may be provided in Alberta and Saskatchewan. In Quebec, the tradition of separate Protestant and Roman Catholic public school systems has recently been changed to a dual system based on language (French and English). At perhaps another extreme, the British Columbia system provides partial public funding for all religious based schools that follow provincial guidelines.

Clearly there exists an important distinction between the treatment of religion in schools in Canada and in the United States. Secular, public schools provide the most common type of education in both countries while private schools may incorporate religious training into their educational programs. However, Canadian schools also allow for religious training as part of public school systems as determined at the provincial level. A shared concern in both countries is that secular instruction, avoiding promotion of any religious belief system, may be resulting in lack of education about religion. Religion is an important part of these societies, and educated individuals obviously need to understand religion as a feature of modern life. Yet, in order to avoid even a perception of surreptitiously incorporating religious training into secular schools, religion as a scholarly topic is also being—perhaps unfortunately—avoided.

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Biographical Sketches

Dr. Gary S. Silverman is professor and director of the environmental health program at Bowling Green State University. His doctorate is in environmental science and engineering from the University of California, Los Angeles. He has published in the area of water quality, environmental management, environmental law, and educational standard setting. A current research interest focuses on curricular assessment. Dr. Silverman previously taught environmental management as a Fulbright Fellow in

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