

For the Love of Learning

Volume I: Mandate, Context, Issues

Chapter 1: The Royal Commission on Learning

Fulfilling the mandate of this Royal Commission required a whole host of activities. We examined the studies of Ontario schools that had preceded our own. We pulled together some of the research on education that has been done in recent years by scholars around the world. We met across the table with a large number of people with special expertise in the areas that we were finding most problematic.

And above all, we listened to our fellow Ontarians. Not only did we spend three months in public meetings, hearing submissions right across the province, each of us also spent time inside a series of schools. We reached out to young people, both those who had done well in our education system and those who had done less well, so that we could hear their views first-hand. We made a point of locating and spending time with some parents who we knew would not be comfortable making formal presentations to us. We received thousands of written submissions either by post or e-mail, and many others on our voice-mail.

It wasn't always easy to discern consensus in the midst of all these voices. But they left no doubt about one thing: the citizens of this province are passionately interested in their education system.

On May 4, 1993, in response to increasing concern among educators, members of the public, and the Government of Ontario, the Honourable Dave Cooke, Minister of Education and Training, announced the establishment of the Royal Commission on Learning.

According to the Order in Council that created the Commission, the government had identified the need "to set new directions in education to ensure that Ontario youth are well prepared for the challenges of the 21st century." Our mandate was "to present a vision and action plan to guide Ontario's reform of elementary and secondary education."

The government identified four issues for us to consider: a coherent "vision" of the system, the educational programs of Ontario schools, the accountability for results, and the governance of the system.

Public consultation

Our first priority was to seek the views of the people of Ontario. We consulted with as many individuals and groups as possible, both in and outside the school system; we visited schools and acted on several outreach strategies; and we used the opportunities provided by the media and computer-based town-hall meetings to involve, and hear from, interested people who addressed the four issues - and much more.

Talking to people

We began by developing an information brochure, "Learning," which explained the task we had been given and invited people and groups to participate, listing a schedule of formal public hearings throughout the province.

We placed ads in local newspapers inviting people to our hearings. We issued press releases and discussed our mission with journalists, and had special mailouts for women's groups, ethno-cultural associations, and groups for the disabled. We reached thousands of people.

In the fall of 1993, for 12 weeks, 1,396 groups and individuals in 27 cities across the province made oral submissions. Parents, teachers, students, trustees, and school administrators came, as did representatives of the business community, francophone groups, multicultural organizations, aboriginal groups, unions, colleges, and universities. We also heard from, among others, librarians, social workers, police officers, doctors, and members of religious groups, and many others - with views they wanted to share. Most presenters also submitted written briefs to support their positions. Many presenters were passionate and articulate, knowledgeable and persuasive.

To get a better view of Ontario education today, we first spent a week in a number of schools and regularly, over subsequent months, visited other schools where interesting and innovative projects are under way.

Media coverage

During the 12 weeks of public hearings, we spoke hundreds of times to newspaper, radio, and television reporters and received widespread coverage in the media, engaging thousands of Ontarians in a crucial debate about the future of Ontario's education system.

Several of the public hearings were taped by local cable TV stations and rebroadcast across the province during the winter of 1993-94, and we participated in a number of television broadcasts devoted exclusively to the Royal Commission and its work.

The Baton Broadcasting System, an Ontario television network with stations in North Bay, Ottawa, Toronto, and Sudbury, made an hour of air-time available to the Commission for a call-in show that was seen by more than 100,000 viewers in December 1993, a short time after we completed our public hearings.

TVOntario and La Chaine Francaise also helped us involve more Ontarians in the issue by airing an "Education Summit" in January 1994. Commissioners participated in a number of panel discussions and other programs in English and in French during the week-long summit, reaching thousands more viewers. The French-language broadcasts were particularly helpful in bringing fresh points of view to the Commission on issues surrounding French-language education.

One newspaper article in particular, by Michael Valpy in the Globe and Mail (October 2, 1993), provoked widespread reaction. After he spent a week visiting schools in eastern Ontario with one of the Commission co-chairs, he wrote about "the 40 percent factor" - his estimate of the number of children who come to school each day with some non-academic disadvantage that impedes learning: poverty, abusive or indifferent parents, hunger, emotional anxiety, or something else. Valpy's article was often quoted during the hearings, in conversations with teachers and principals, and we saw it pinned up on numerous bulletin boards in the schools we visited.

Outreach

Intense public interest in education produced a flood of submissions: more than 1,500 written briefs and audio/video cassettes were received at the Commission's offices, and more than 350 individuals used our special 1-800 number to make oral submissions. In addition, more than 1,500 messages were posted to a special Royal Commission on Learning computer conference on TVOnline/ChaiNET, TVOntario's/La Chaine's prototype bulletin board.

The Commission also published two bilingual editions of Spotlight on Learning, to keep interested people up to date on the Commission's activities, and to explore some of the most pressing issues in the education community. Fifty thousand copies of each Spotlight were distributed across the province to education stakeholders, parents, and others.

In addition to the hearings - at which people came to talk to the Commission - we went out, individually or in small groups, to talk to people. We held meetings with immigrant groups, and with parents, staff, and teachers at schools, in communities as diverse as downtown Toronto and Moosonee; tele-conferenced with people in Timmins; and video-conferenced with people from the francophone ethno-cultural communities in Toronto and Ottawa.

As well as learning from students and student groups across Ontario, we broadened the Commission's reach by setting up kiosks in malls across the province. We chose malls because young people, especially, tend to congregate in them, so that we could hear opinions and discuss education with those who might not otherwise have participated. As a result, 1,200 people in Ottawa, Windsor, Sault Ste. Marie, and Toronto took the opportunity to share their views on education.

Under the direction of a youth outreach co-ordinator and a commissioner, a volunteer team was trained to meet with youth in schools and in such non-school environments as community centres and video arcades. Across the province, some students took the initiative, surveying large numbers of their peers, thereby giving us input from literally thousands of others.

Commissioners, staff, and volunteers also visited detention centres, jails, homes for pregnant teens, multi-service agencies, and cultural organizations in 36 meetings and focus groups.

Experts and research

Following the public hearings, the Commission consulted a broad range of experts in education: professors of education, child psychiatrists, psychologists, policy analysts, and others.

Throughout the Commission's existence, our research staff conducted an extensive review of relevant literature and studies. In addition, the Commission itself heard expert opinions, and commissioned policy papers in areas where we needed further information.

The Commissioners and research staff also met with educators from Ontario and from other Canadian provinces, as well as from the United States and other jurisdictions.

Commissioners' meetings

After the public consultation, talking to people, media coverage, outreach activities, hearing the opinions of experts, and pondering a mountain of research, we then set out on our next and most daunting task: to articulate what we saw and heard, debate among ourselves the many contentious and complex issues before us, and begin to translate our understandings, opinions, and convictions into this Report.

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