

# For the Love of Learning

## Volume I: Mandate, Context, Issues

### Chapter 3: People's Voices

*...Despite the cacophony of divergent interests, the public hearings are a useful tool to help the commissioners with their colossal challenge. The hearings put a human face on problems, provide a forum to float creative ideas, and give the commissioners a peek at the sort of complexities that elude academic study.*

*For citizens the hearings are a chance to sound off, while becoming part of the solution... But, ultimately, resolving the intractable problems of modern schooling will demand of them still more; blessed with the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon, they may also require divine intervention...*

The Ottawa Citizen, November 17, 1993

During the public hearings, many differing and distinct voices emerged, but we found that our various types of public consultation had one thing in common: each brought a truly astonishing range of opinions on educational issues. On almost any topic, we heard arguments full of conviction and logic. On very few issues, however, was there agreement even within a given group: there is neither a single, easily stated teachers' position on educational issues nor a consistent profile of parents' concerns and priorities.

What follows is not meant to be a complete record of every remark or suggestion made to the Commission, but rather a reflection of people's voices as they spoke with us during the hearings. The reader will find throughout the Report consistent references to the voices we heard.

#### **The purposes of education and curriculum issues**

The purpose and content of schooling, perhaps more than any other issue, demonstrates the breadth and passion of public opinion regarding education in Ontario. We were told repeatedly that our job was to clarify the purpose of education so that schools, teachers, and principals would have a clear mandate, and parents would know the system's expectations of them and their children.

One frequently heard opinion was that, at the moment, schools are taking on too much, or are being expected to take on too much.

There was a sense that in attempting to do everything, schools are not able to do anything excellently. This accounts for the common parental complaint that educational basics are being neglected. We frequently heard the call for schools to focus more on teaching reading, writing, and numeracy.

Many presenters saw a vital link between the quality of the education system and the health of the economy.

Many individuals and groups drew a clear distinction between the responsibilities of the family and those of the school. Others, however, particularly in the francophone and Roman Catholic communities, saw the school as acting in loco parentis and expect the values and traditions of the home to be supported by the school.

The second general view we heard concerning the purposes of education stressed the role of schools in moving society toward greater equity, and the need for the educational system to structure itself in ways that permit students from all backgrounds and with all levels of ability to have equivalent opportunities to succeed.

Many teachers, representatives of social agencies, and young people themselves told us that schools must do more to meet the social, physical, and emotional needs of students. Teenagers who had left school, developmentally handicapped students and their families, members of minority groups, and anti-violence advocates indicated that, at present, schools are not structured to respond to their concerns. They raised profound questions about the role of the school in responding to, and in some cases attempting to correct, problems in society at large.

Individuals and groups that underscored the role of the school in promoting social justice and equity were frequently critical of the perceived influence of the business community in shaping the agenda of public education.

Many presenters gave compelling reasons why certain subjects should be maintained or expanded within the curriculum; many stressed the value of liberal arts education in developing a well-rounded and informed individual. Groups from the Catholic school community identified an additional purpose of schooling for separate schools: instilling Catholic values throughout the curriculum.

Other religious groups asked for the same opportunity Roman Catholics enjoy to have publicly funded education imbued with their religious values.

Francophone presenters identified their vision of francophone education as a vital linguistic and cultural support for their community. Thus, francophone students spoke of the need for "animation culturelle" in their classes, in their school activities, and as a link to the community.

The degree of Ministry receptivity to their needs, as well as adequate representation and active participation within the Ministry, were issues in both the Catholic and French systems.

## **Teaching and teacher education**

While there was broad agreement that teachers are the key to both excellence and effective reform in education, there was considerable difference of opinion about how to ensure quality teaching.

Many parents favour teacher-directed procedures or more use of systematic phonics in teaching beginning reading.

Many briefs said there is a need to expand ethno-cultural and racial diversity within the teaching profession, specifically by broadening admissions to faculties of education, and to support teachers in better ways to work in today's diverse environment.

Students value teachers who are warm, caring, empathetic, genuinely involved, and powerful motivators.

Some teachers are criticized as being burned-out, uncaring, and/or incompetent.

Students suggest some reasons - and perhaps some solutions - to the drop-out problem. Boredom is number one: while they say they don't expect to be entertained, students believe a teacher's ability to relate to them is a key to learning.

There were three major criticisms of the existing pre-service teacher-preparation programs: first, there was a pervasive sense that the current programs are not long enough to cover the necessary range of topics and to ensure the development of the practical skills that starting teachers require; second, the content of several existing programs was judged to lack relevance; and third, the classroom time that student teachers spend in schools was criticized as too short.

The francophone and Catholic communities had concerns about ensuring an adequate supply of appropriately qualified teachers for their schools. Catholic presenters frequently commented on the inadequate response from faculties of education to their requests for programs that would meet their system and curriculum needs.

Linked to academic achievement and adequate support for teaching and learning was the issue of additional training for French-language teachers. (Many have moved from areas, principally from Quebec, where French is the majority language, to Ontario, where, in the main, it is a minority language.)

There was considerable confusion about what could and should be expected of teachers in terms of meeting academic, social, and emotional needs. Teachers themselves reported feeling overwhelmed by conflicting expectations, and expressed concern about a lack of professional support.

## **Assessment and accountability**

There was near consensus from those outside the system that more assessment of student learning, and more testing, are needed, and that greater attention should be paid to ensuring accountability.

We understood accountability to include fiscal responsibility on the part of trustees, and an assurance of program effectiveness from administrators. On the other hand, many educators seemed to be concerned that inappropriate assessment would be imposed on schools, and that this would interfere with learning.

Some students believe that standardized testing would curb inflation of marks, and some applying for university worry about how standards and marks compare across schools. At the same time, there are parents who are unsure how well their children are doing, and believe that standardized tests would give them better information.

Universities want some form of standardized assessment to deal with grade inflation and differing standards across schools.

Many submissions stressed the need to avoid gender, culture, race, and language biases in testing and assessment, whatever methodologies are developed and used. At the same time, some ethnic and racial minority groups expressed concern about the achievement levels of their children, and did support the need for better assessment.

## **Organization of education (governance)**

The two main concerns expressed about the way education governance is organized centred on participation and effectiveness.

Parents, high school students, and a variety of advocacy groups wanted some role in making decisions about various aspects of schooling, including the focus of curriculum. When we discussed this issue further with certain people, however, it became clear that the essential problem was that they are frustrated with a system that does not recognize their concerns and that does not make them feel valued and welcome.

Many submissions raised questions and concerns about possible duplication of services, the existence of too many levels of bureaucracy, and ineffective use of resources. Such briefs came from education reform groups, business, and some parents, as well as from educators. Many called for reductions in the number of school boards and trustees.

Representatives from the Catholic and francophone communities asked for equal per-pupil funding, to give better support to school programs.

These groups were also concerned about any potential threat to the distinctive nature of their schools. To ensure that this would not happen, many francophones asked that the recommendations of an earlier document, the Report of the French Language Education Governance Advisory Group, (the "Cousineau report") be implemented.

Aboriginal groups were concerned about assuming self-governance of schooling on reserves, and having more voice in the education of their students in schools under the jurisdiction of school boards. They asked for learning materials that are more culturally appropriate, better ways of taking advantage of distance education in their remote communities, and anti-racist education to promote a more accurate understanding of their people throughout the publicly funded system.

A number of briefs indicated that communications between the Ministry and school boards are poor on several initiatives, and that some clarification of roles and responsibilities is needed.

## **Public concerns and the Commission's mandate**

Underlying the concerns of all those who made submissions to the Commission is a distinct sense of unease and uncertainty about the educational system. People spoke about unclear purposes and overload; they questioned whether the material students were learning was necessary and important, whether they were learning it at an appropriate level, whether the system was equitable, and whether it was cost-effective. Many people made suggestions on these and other issues.

Although we listened to critics and supporters, inside and outside the system, and were moved by their concern and passion, what they suggested did not add up to a coherent plan for reform. Assuming otherwise would only lead to more fragmented solutions to isolated problems, or give the illusion that some perfect, imagined past can be replicated in an educational system at the end of the 20th century.

Instead, the need is to define learning systems for the future. Everything has changed: students, teachers, families, technology - society itself. How could the basic design of schools stay the same? Who would be

satisfied if they did?

In the other volumes of this report we set out the conclusions we reached about the way Ontario's education system should be shaped; we suggest, in broad terms, how that might be achieved; and how our recommendations could be implemented.

The next chapter of this report articulates the purposes of the school system, and how they relate to the mandates and practices of other social institutions. In Chapters 5 and 6 we consider what is known about how children and adolescents learn, and about good and effective teaching.

ISBN 0-7778-3577-0

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