


For the Love of Learning

Volume I: Mandate, Context, Issues

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Introduction to the Report

The first task of any body brought together to study a matter of intense public interest and controversy is to recognize the climate in which it will operate, the history and dimensions of the issues it will have to define and address, and the concerns and needs of the people it has been created to serve.

This is particularly true when the subject is education. It is education, after all, that touches each of us at one time or another in our lives, and that, more than most things, can intimately and directly limit, or help create, our future. Few public institutions matter more to the destiny of the ten million people of this province. Therefore, we set about our work determined to explore, to the greatest degree possible, the way the education system operates, and to find out how it could operate better.

A climate of uncertainty

Like all organizations, our Commission operated within a particular time, and our deliberations were inevitably influenced by the context of unsettling truths around us.

- Our society is characterized by turbulence, creating widespread uncertainty and anxiety. Canadians fear a future of diminished opportunity, and expect public institutions to deal with this acute concern.
- Our economic system is changing, while technology is advancing at a geometrically accelerating pace.
- The fallout from those related phenomena includes the prospect of a large core of permanently unemployed and underemployed men and women, of younger people in particular, and of considerable confusion about the future of work.
- In the current political climate, and for the foreseeable future, projects requiring vast new public funding will be seen as impractical. The operative cliché is that it is possible to work smarter, doing even more with even less.
- The composition of Canada's population is changing dramatically, not least in Ontario and, above all, in southern Ontario. Each year, we become an increasingly diverse nation, but our institutions often fail to reflect that diversity.
- There is a sense that traditional social institutions have been breaking down, and that the family, as well as community and religious organizations, are no longer able to instil personal and ethical values in successive generations of Canadians.

- Despite uncertainty about common values, large segments of the population are not content to live in a society that has no identifiable values.
- At the same time, and for a variety of reasons, Canadians have been losing faith in their public institutions. As a result, they have been demanding that these operate more openly, involve more citizen participation, and become more explicitly accountable to the public at large.

Schools necessarily reflect - at least to some extent - the societies in which they operate. Therefore, it is not surprising that today's education system feels shaky, unsure, lacking in self-confidence, and struggling with a mandate that is increasingly uncertain and whose purposes are no longer self-evident. Not only is that the background against which the Commission operated, it was the reason the Commission was established.

Like so many other institutions, schools are finding it enormously difficult to cope with the never-ending change that swirls around and through them. Small wonder that educators are anxious - and sometimes discouraged - by responsibilities heaped on an already overburdened system that has neither the resources nor the capacity to cope. Small wonder that the public is dissatisfied with an education system it keeps turning to as society's best, last hope in meeting the challenges that lie ahead - whatever those challenges may be. It is inevitable that schools are then criticized for not being up to the task of rescuing a floundering society. As, indeed, they are not. As, indeed, they cannot be.

Members of the Commission became increasingly aware that it would be no easy task to meet the expectations of the many people who insisted that our job was to articulate a consensus on the purposes and practices of education in Ontario. As will repeatedly be made clear in the pages of this report, ours is an educational system of endless diversity: in the nature of the student body; in the prescriptions for remedying its various inadequacies; in the large numbers of troubled young men and women it must serve; in the formidable responsibilities it carries; as well as in people's lofty expectations of it.

Without doubt, the system exists in an era of extreme anxiety about what the future holds for Ontario's children, as well as of stress related to our apparent need to be "competitive" in a ruthless globalized economy. It must meet often-unacknowledged limitations that constrain the possibilities of real change - all this in the face of an extraordinary level of disagreement, even among the learned, about how either good teaching or good learning actually happens.

It would be flattering, to the Commission and to the entire province, if we had been able to devise a formula for a school system that would meet everyone's approval and banish all problems, actual and perceived. While we believe that we have come remarkably close to a new vision of an educational system that meets many of the central hopes and desires of most of Ontario's citizens, we have no illusions that we will satisfy everyone.

Some recent history of educational change and reform

For decades, substantial numbers of Ontarians, along with people in much of the rest of the world, have complained that their schools are failing to produce properly educated young people. Our esteemed predecessors of the past half-century - the much-neglected Hope Commission of 1950 and the much-distorted Hall-Dennis committee of 1968 - were eloquent in reporting the disenchantment of so many people.

It is useful to recall that the Hope commission did its work during an era when Ontario had standardized

departmental exams for Grades 11, 12, and 13, as well as a carefully prescribed Grade 13 curriculum, used uniformly across the province. It is also worth remembering that those "good old days" were a time when, of all students beginning school life, only two-thirds would enter high school and, of those, only 13 percent would graduate; of that meagre number, only four in a hundred would enter university. Yet the Hope commission said it was

disquieted by the common complaint that the graduates of our schools have often failed to attain an acceptable standard of English... University and secondary school teachers complain that their students are unable to express ideas, either orally or in writing, in lucid, accurate, and fluent English. The criticism is echoed by employers who complain bitterly that young persons make errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar, and cannot express themselves logically and clearly in speaking.

Royal Commission on Education in Ontario, 1950

Plus ça change ..., as echoed in Living and Learning, the Hall-Dennis report of 1968:

Today, on every side, there is heard a growing demand for a fresh look at education in Ontario. The Committee was told of inflexible programs, outdated curricular [sic], unrealistic regulations, regimented organization, and mistaken aims of education. We heard from alienated students, frustrated teachers, irate parents and concerned educators. Many public organizations and private individuals have told us of their growing discontent and lack of confidence in a system which, in their opinion, has become outmoded and is failing those it exists to serve.

At the time it was released, Living and Learning was greeted with a great deal of enthusiasm and, as one of our presenters noted, was even "perceived as an instrument of emancipation from the confining, restrictive, suffocating practices of the past."

Four years after Hall-Dennis, Douglas Myers, then a professor of education history at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, pointed out that in the 1960s, "education seemed to permeate all other social and political issues. It was a major growth industry, [becoming] the largest single budget item in the public sector." But by 1972, as Myers makes clear, the atmosphere was already one of "disenchantment and scepticism."

... plus c'est pareil. The Hope report was buried without comment or action, while only two-thirds of Hall and Dennis's recommendations were dealt with at all by the government that had appointed them. Some were implemented only in part, and fully a third were never addressed - despite which, many people have scapegoated the report for all the alleged failures of Ontario schooling in the past quarter century.

We have tried to learn from the experiences of our distinguished predecessors, and have included a final chapter on how our recommendations can be implemented, in order to save this report from the unkind fate that befell theirs.

But the search for excellence is by no means restricted to Ontario: it has been a universal pursuit. Even those systems we love to envy, such as those in Germany and Japan, are anxiously being re-examined. In fact, there are few jurisdictions in the industrialized world that have not agonizingly appraised and re-appraised their school systems over the past five decades - as is evident in the scores and scores of reports we examined.

Virtually all jurisdictions have tinkered and toyed with various aspects of their education systems, and

just about every one is back at the drawing board at this very moment. In the United States, permanent education reform has become big business, not least because yesterday's panaceas have become today's problems at least until tomorrow, when those old panaceas will be resurrected.

Given these and other complex realities, we began our work cautiously, aware of the pitfalls on all sides. But we finish the task with great excitement, believing that we have fashioned a compelling, practical vision of an effective learning culture. We are persuaded that if the recommendations we make are approached in a spirit of good will by the many stakeholders in Ontario who care about improving learning, that goal will be achieved.

Improving Ontario's schools

Having examined how Ontario's education system evolved to its present state, we were ready to learn how it could be improved. As part of this lesson, we looked at the nature of the process of change itself, and at how basic rules of change and innovation were frequently ignored or breached in the past.

In the first place, it would be prudent to remember that not all change is progress. It should also be said plainly, right at the outset, that the education system is notoriously difficult to change: a vast bureaucratic institution, almost by definition, it shifts only slowly and under very intense pressure. After all, in a province of ten million people, a system that requires more than 100,000 teachers and innumerable other grown-ups to maintain working-day control of some two million Ontario children cannot be turned around easily.

It is slowed further by the conflicting pressures placed on decision makers by countless stakeholders seeking to change some part of the system in their own interest, but coveting maintenance of the status quo for anyone else. This is true of parents, trustees, administrators, business groups, universities, teachers and teachers' unions, faculties of education, and political parties. Missing from the list, of course, are students - though they, too, want and are entitled to a say in the future of Ontario education.

In considering how change happens in the education system, we found recent Ontario experience highly illuminating. In the early 1980s, the Conservative government of the day initiated major reviews of several key aspects of education, and began implementing substantial changes. No sooner had it been ejected from power, its recent reforms barely begun, than the new Liberal government started its own re-appraisals and changes. These, too, were only in the initial stages of the lengthy process of implementation when the new NDP government began putting its own stamp on schools in Ontario. Such changes simply reflect each government's confidence that it could and can improve on the work, not to say repair the damage, of its predecessors.

Alas, the process of serious change does not happen that way, and democratically elected governments have an obligation to understand the consequences of their actions. Changes that serve to bewilder families, demoralize teachers, confuse students, and alienate the community seem a rather excessive price to pay in the hot pursuit of education reform.

Whether better schools are really the key to Ontario's competitiveness in a harsh, new world seems to us debatable, at best. But surely a destabilized education system can be guaranteed not to help. If major efforts at reform are to be undertaken seriously, they must be planned meticulously, and must respond realistically to the dynamics of institutional and bureaucratic change.

News, both good and bad

We had the distinct advantage, as Commissioners, of hearing from thousands of our fellow citizens both within and outside the education establishment. We had long sessions with specialists on all aspects of learning, and examined much of the voluminous mountains of research that are ceaselessly being generated around the world. We visited a goodly number of schools, and saw, across Ontario, many classrooms and many schools where learning of the most exciting, creative kind is already under way, where an attempt to cope with our astonishing times is being achieved. We have been delighted by schools in which youngsters were not only learning to know and to think, they were loving every moment of it. This report contains some of those stories, in the hope that they will inspire others to do even better.

We believe that, as a result, we emerged with a quite balanced overview of the present system and its future. It may be that ours is the era of the educational crises that so many generations before us feared they were facing: it is impossible to envision a time when huge new resources will be available to deal with the maladies the system faces, but there is a very real sense that social problems will not decline, putting even greater strains on schools. This Commission celebrates the rainbow that Canada has become, but we acknowledge that this increasing diversity adds new dimensions to the work of the school system.

Fears of permanent unemployment or, at best, underemployment, will continue to create anxiety for parents and students alike. Many people will continue to look to schools for vocational salvation, while the incessant pressure to be "competitive" will add to the tensions that afflict every part of the learning process. Technological change comes hurtling at us with such speed that it seems impossible to guess what tomorrow will demand and - more specifically for the Commission's purposes - how to prepare young people, and many not-so-young people, to cope with whatever it is that lies ahead.

Characterized by bureaucratic structures right out of the automobile assembly lines - with the same kinds of mass production techniques, work specialization, fragmented programs, standardized procedures, hierarchical authority, and compliant workers - our schools, miraculously and with remarkable effectiveness, have taken us through this century. But it seems unrealistic to believe that, without change, they can handle the challenges of the next. What has been acceptable, if not always outstanding, is now in real danger of failing unless it is dramatically re-shaped.

It is clear to us that neither now nor in the past have schools been the disasters some critics claim, or the triumphs some defenders insist they are. And we acknowledge that even if every one of our recommendations were scrupulously implemented, the same might well be true 25 years from now.

There are, in fact, many good reasons why schools will always disappoint to some degree or other. The fact is that there are no scientific solutions to the education crisis as, we confess frankly, some of us innocently believed when we began this assignment.

First and foremost, schools are human enterprises attempting to develop and shape human minds and spirits, with all the imperfections and imprecisions that implies. While we agree that this is an era of scientific miracles and that the growth in knowledge is exponential, to this very moment, the world's leading experts - using all their passionate, erudite convictions - disagree on the way the human personality develops and how the mind learns. Nor should we disregard the diverse personal and collective value systems within which this process takes place.

Any school child who watched last night's television news can attest that, too often, there is little relationship between knowledge and wisdom. Given the fallibility of all human-made institutions, it is hard to fathom why schools, of all the precarious and fragile enterprises possible, are expected to be flawless, superior to all our other frail undertakings.

As society transfers ever-greater burdens and responsibilities to the education system, should we be particularly disappointed or surprised when it doesn't succeed where families, or communities, or social agencies, or religious organizations have failed?

Yet, in the name of realism, even as the Commission urges modest expectations, we find ourselves, at the end of our task, filled with a surprising but gratifying optimism about the enormous possibilities the future can offer - not will, but can - because success is by no means inevitable.

Our way into the future

We turn now to the key conclusions we have reached, the recommendations we believe are necessary, and suggest how they can be implemented most effectively and efficiently.

In seeking the best learning system possible for Ontario, we are not singling out or recommending any one of the countless reform thrusts and movements that are the rage in educational systems across the developed world - whether outcome-based education, site-based management, reading recovery, phonemic awareness, effective schools, amalgamation of boards of education, authentic assessment, or the like. In fact, we have avoided certain terms because their meaning has been so clouded by disagreement or misunderstanding that we consider them to have been rendered useless; child-based learning, restructuring, and constructivism are good examples. It is obvious to us that if these, or a legion of others, were the panaceas many people believe are just waiting to be found, the world would already have discovered them.

It has been said that there is a simple solution to every complex problem - and that solution is invariably wrong. Magic buttons don't exist; magic buttons aren't real.

Almost every kind of reform has been ringingly endorsed and soundly condemned, in about equal measure and on the basis of equally serious research. While we single out and praise aspects of certain of these movements (not all, but some) - all change, it is worth repeating, is not progress - none seems to us to have the kind of paramount importance on which reform can be achieved.

Nonetheless, this Commission is confident that a high-quality, effective, lifelong learning system is a realistic possibility for this province. It can be done!

But - and it is a very substantial but - four key partners in the learning system must be willing to transform their roles and the relationships among them, if the system is to function as we are convinced it can. Those partners are the students, the teachers, the students' families, and the community. To use an increasingly familiar phrase, their roles must be re-invented.

Rather than simply basing our hopes on the more conventional tools of school reform, such as testing, remedial programs, or acceleration, we have concluded that there is a different approach to change, one that has a greater chance of success.

Because the traditional prescriptions never seem to result in significant change, we believe a value-added

approach is called for. We see four driving forces as essential to major transformation of the system, to support key partners in playing the new roles we have suggested for them, and to drive the other reforms we recommend. Whether we call them "pillars" forming the foundation of a revamped system, "engines" that drive it, or "levers" that open it to greater forces, we are clear about their part in transforming the system.

The four engines are as follows: early childhood education, teacher development, information technology, and community education. That does not mean, of course, that we have nothing to say on the usual subjects: as readers will see, we offer recommendations on just about everything that impinges on the community's ability to make schools excellent learning institutions.

However, none of those recommendations is new: each of the changes we propose has been tried in one jurisdiction or another, yet major positive change has not resulted. But we have concluded that a new, value-added force is necessary to make these recommendations achievable - one that, by its own momentum, can drive or move the process of change and that has an impact on the role of the education system's key partners. The four engines constitute that driving force.

Early childhood education

The first engine is early schooling, beginning at the age of 3. Children who come through a carefully planned process of early education gain enormously in competence, coping skills, and positive attitudes to learning. Excellent early childhood education enhances their understanding of the value and centrality of formal learning; it expands teachers' expectations of children's capacities and parents' expectations of teachers' one-on-one involvement with their children. Recent research shows that children, both those who are privileged and those who are disadvantaged, benefit from high-quality early schooling of this kind.

Teacher development

The second engine is the education and training of teachers. Their competence and self-confidence as learners, as professionals, as instructors, and as guides for their students would increase dramatically if they were part of a greatly improved process of initial preparation and on-going development.

It is axiomatic that you can't teach what you don't know, and if there are to be significant changes in curriculum and organization, there will have to be teacher support for the initiatives and for professional in-service. In the desire to change organizational structures and curriculum programs, we must not forget that education still involves individual teachers working with students, and getting them excited about learning. This human relationship is the essence of our schools, and the best place to focus our energies.

Information technology

Third, we have come to believe that both students and teachers would be more receptive to the entire learning process if information technology is integrated into, and seen as an essential part of, teaching and learning strategies. The new technology is not a substitute for teachers; used intelligently and guided by thoroughly prepared teachers, however, it is capable of re-shaping the traditional nature of both learning and teaching.

A study entitled *Prisoners of Time*, published in 1994 by the American National Education Commission on Time and Learning, underscores the potentially liberating aspect of technology-enhanced learning:

The true promise of technology lies in the classroom. Technology makes it possible for today's schools to escape the assembly-line mentality of the factory model school. With emerging hardware and software, educators can personalize learning. Instead of the lock-step of lecture and laboratory, computers and other new telecommunications technologies make it possible for students to move at their own pace. Effective learning technologies have already demonstrated their ability to pique student interest and increase motivation, encouraging students not only to spend more of their own time in learning but also to be more deeply involved in what they are doing.

Community education

Finally, the entire learning process would be enormously strengthened if schools became genuinely community-based institutions. The school is part of the community, and the community includes the school. That is why it is imperative that social agencies, community and religious organizations, local businesses and trade unions, and community colleges and universities share the load, particularly the non-academic load, that has been thrust on our schools.

Such alliances would allow teachers to focus on their central tasks, namely teaching and learning, and to address the issues of curriculum overload and system over-extension. Community alliances would give the school access to resources, expertise, and services that would help in educating the greatest number of students, and would give the community a vital role in the life of its school.

In fact, we can go even further and assert that unless the concept of partnerships stops being mere conference-hall rhetoric and becomes part of the new reality of the education system, it is unreasonable to expect schools to meet their present, let alone their future, responsibilities.

We are convinced that these four engines or levers are the sine qua non of the system of the future. Together, they constitute a set of dynamic and interlocking forces with the synergy to propel reconstruction of the present system.

These engines or levers are intended to drive the crucial series of curricular changes that are at the heart of our proposed reforms. They are described in Volume II of this report, Learning: Our Vision for Schools. In it, we recommend what we have termed a curriculum for "literacies."

The curriculum

Having immediately posited the fundamental necessity of developing reading and writing literacy, and having described it as the first task of schooling, we have deliberately broadened the meaning of "literacy." We have insisted that in addition to skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, there must be literacy in the areas of science, group and interpersonal skills and values, and computer technology. The reader will quickly recognize our conviction that effective schools will surely develop in most young people a high level of dexterity and a deep level of comprehension across a variety of subject areas.

The school program we envisage begins at age 3 as an option, and becomes compulsory at age 6. It is a long-range learning plan, lasting through various academic and personal transitions, that provides each child with ever-increasing personal involvement, guidance, and career counselling from an interested educator. It goes into operation the day the child enters school and continues until the day that child graduates.

The plan is based on the human dimension of the learning system above all, on students and teachers working productively together; families reinforcing the significance of what goes on in schools; teachers acting on the assumption that the family is an integral part of a student's school life; and the local and professional community sharing some of the increasingly onerous burdens that schools are being called on to carry.

It is a plan which insists that all teachers, parents, and students share clearly articulated definitions of what students are expected to achieve at various stages of their schooling. And, because the community is an essential partner in the learning system, we envisage that it, too, must be informed about the degree of effectiveness with which schools are educating our young people.

Making change happen

How will these changes come to pass? The essence of the Commission's understanding of complex change is that it can happen only with direction and support from both the bottom up and the top down. Government to household, household to government, and with the many elements in between - all must work together if the system is to be transformed.

We are neither naifs nor bleeding hearts. We understand perfectly well that what we are prescribing will not happen easily. None of our four "engines," nor the vision they are meant to drive and support, is the simple solution the world has longed for these many decades. On the contrary, ours is a complex, long-term project, and would have to overcome obstacles - some quite intractable. None of this can be implemented tomorrow, though aspects could be introduced the day after tomorrow and begin the change process almost immediately.

In fact, significant initiatives can be taken without orders from the Ministry of Education and Training: parents, teachers, principals, trustees, administrators, universities, faculties of education, business people, and community agencies - all could begin the change process with little delay.

Implementation itself must be done sensitively, recognizing that, if carried out heedlessly, it would further destabilize an already fragile and precarious system. Parents will be sceptical of major change unless they can see at least some immediate benefits. And, unless they are treated from the start as collaborators, teachers will resent yet another series of intrusions into their already harried lives.

While the entire reconstruction of the system would and must take many years, there have to be rapid, positive reforms, not just for their own sake but to convince the community that the effort is worth making. Entire new, credible public processes for monitoring and evaluating components of the changing system will have to be developed, to ensure that public accountability becomes a reality.

We do not minimize or disguise the challenge we are issuing. We stress that while each of the engines or levers is a driving force on its own, our vision will best be realized if all of them work in support one of the other. Children who don't have deeply motivated, caring, trained, experienced teachers are limited in what they can learn. Teachers whose students are not predisposed to learn, to embrace school as a welcome part of their lives, are limited in what they can teach. Schools with strategies that ignore the new information technologies are limited in their ability to make knowledge accessible and themselves relevant and interesting to future generations of children. And schools that are not organically connected to the communities, families, businesses, and health and social agencies around them are limited in their ability to cope with the needs of children.

In our view, the four engines or levers form a convincing strategy to assure the implementation of our vision of a better learning system. They hold the promise of overcoming great obstacles of alienated, distracted, passive youngsters; isolated, overburdened, unappreciated teachers; massive buildings that vividly reflect the way schools are cut off from both the real world outside their doors and the human communities around them.

Without these engines, our curriculum for literacies, and most of our other recommendations, will fail to shake up the system as it needs to be shaken. With them, and with their power to enhance and reinforce each other, significant changes can be made to education in Ontario - as this report shows. With them, we also believe, excellence and equity are possible.

As a human enterprise, no school system will ever be other than a work in progress. Like learning itself, school is both an end and a process. Nothing is neat and clean in human endeavours, and learning is among the most complex of those. Even with the best will in the world - and it would be unrealistic to believe that good will always prevails - humans build their institutions like themselves: imperfectly. School, the seminal American educator John Dewey taught us long ago, is not only a preparation for life, it is life.

For the Love of Learning promises no rose gardens, no panaceas, no utopias. But, on the basis of what we learned by listening to the people of Ontario in their thousands, absorbing the research literature and the lessons and experiences of others, we are convinced we can offer the possibility of significant progress. The people of Ontario, blessed in so many ways, have a good school system. On that solid base, if they have the will, they can now forge as successful a learning culture as the world has yet known. If they have the will.

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