

For the Love of Learning

Volume II: Learning - Our Vision for Schools

Conclusion: What We Have Said about the Learning System

Our vision of curriculum is very broad: it begins with the traditional - and we think very proper - concern that children acquire essential foundation skills; these have always meant literacy and numeracy, have long included scientific thinking, and now, we strongly believe, also include computer literacy and the skills needed to work and learn with and from others.

From the beginning, however, we have talked about more than the traditional curriculum; in fact, we have talked about more than the program of schools. Our discussion and recommendations are directed at understanding and improving the learning system, as an integrated whole, one that stretches beyond school walls, not merely beyond classroom walls.

Traditionally, discussions of curriculum begin with the curriculum of Grade 1; sometimes they include kindergarten. But we look at the learning system as beginning at birth and with children's first teachers: their parents. We hope that throughout these pages, with their many issues and recommendations, people see clearly that we have not deviated from our conviction that parents are the first and most important teachers, and that the influence of parents and schools on learners is intertwined and inextricable.

Many of our recommendations stress the need to increase knowledge and communication in both directions, and to share more information and authority between the two. There are two reasons we want parents to know what children can and should be expected to learn at every age and stage in their development: first, so parents can be effective as educators in their own right; and second, so they can be effective as emissaries and advocates for their children at school.

It is in the child's interest as a learner that parents be very well informed and very powerful. That is why we speak of the need for parents to be told and be aware of what the curriculum is, what the expected learning outcomes are, and what standards of achievement are considered acceptable in foundation subjects.

Our recommendations on building assessment expertise in teachers are also designed to improve both teaching and learning, and to make more information available to parents and the public about what is being taught and learned. The same is true of our recommendations concerning system-wide curriculum reviews, and of our recommendation that a standardized and informative report card (the Ontario Student Achievement Report) be sent to all parents.

We have said that learning begins at birth, so our discussion of the school curriculum begins for children at age 3. We have recommended that full-time schooling be available across Ontario for children of that age. While this would be routine in some countries, it certainly is not in Canada: we are well aware that

some people may look on our recommendation for universal early childhood education as an unnecessary or unaffordable luxury too expensive to provide universally, if at all.

Having reviewed the evidence of the effectiveness of such programs, we are convinced, however, that Ontario cannot afford not to have them. Our children are in school longer than most others; we spend significant sums of money on remedial and special education programs. Yet, in spite of these programs and expenditures, the overall achievement level of our students is not outstanding. And while many, many children receive an excellent public education in Ontario, there are still some hard truths to be faced: only a minority achieve what can be called high-level literacy; a large minority don't make it through high school; and, within some disadvantaged groups, that minority comes perilously close to, or even reaches, majority status.

We want what we believe most people in Ontario want: more children to be better educated, and the irreplaceable asset of an excellent education to be owned equally by all our children. Excellent early childhood education is one big step toward achieving those goals. There are any number of reasons why that is so, but a central one is that, from infancy, children are acquiring ideas about cause and effect, about comparison and contrast, about quantity - in short, about the most fundamental building blocks of thinking and learning; by the time they are three years old, knowledgeable, skilled, and caring teachers can make a real difference for them.

Beginning school earlier gives children advantages. But those can be lost if the emphasis on teaching and monitoring the acquisition of foundation skills, especially language skills, is not maintained throughout elementary and secondary education and most especially during the first three years of compulsory schooling.

We have taken the position that almost all children should have mastered the basic literacy skills before the end of Grade 3, and we have recommended a universal literacy test (as well as a numeracy test) at that point, on the understanding that significant steps will have been taken one or two years earlier to help children who are having problems.

While we know that many children will continue to need support throughout the common curriculum years, and that some individual learning difficulties require on-going special attention, we have no doubt that early education and early help will prevent an enormous amount of frustration and suffering. It is the first essential step the system can take toward creating a better-educated populace.

We stress continuity. Children pass through teacher after teacher, class after class, and school after school, from their early years until they leave secondary school. Yes, interests and aptitudes grow and change, but the singularity and consistency of the person is always apparent.

It is very difficult for teachers or schools to have such a comprehensive view of a student, but we argue that unless schools can do better than they do now, students' education will remain too fragmented and too discontinuous, with consequences for the individual and the system - at the least, very wasteful of talent and fulfillment, and, at worst, truly destructive.

To improve continuity for students, we have recommended that beginning at the start of their compulsory schooling in Grade 1, there be one person at the child's school who is responsible for knowing the child and the child's record, so that as year succeeds year, and teacher succeeds teacher, there is someone who is aware of whether that child is progressing at a normal rate, who makes certain that the new teacher has a good idea of what the child's strengths and needs are, and who can speak to the parents as an informed

and concerned representative of the school. And, at the point where schools become more specialized and children have several different subject teachers, and teachers have far more students than they can know well individually, we have recommended that this case-management function become much more personal and hands-on, and that all students have a teacher-advisor or the like, someone who not only remains aware of their overall progress, but who actually meets with them often, and with their parents at least twice annually, and who assists them with educational and career planning in an informed but informal way.

The tool that we recommend as both a facilitator and a record of this process is the Cumulative Educational Plan (CEP), which is a comprehensive planning tool for the student. We say comprehensive because, as we stated earlier, we do not believe that it is helpful for schools to ignore what students are learning and developing an interest in outside of school. We have made much of the importance of what we call community-based career awareness, by which we mean that the whole community is a child's school, and that schools must act accordingly. The curriculum must take students out of the classroom, by foot and by computer; and the school must insist that the resources of the community become the resources of the learning system for students. Thus we build in a community career co-ordinator for the younger grades, and a career education specialist for the older ones, and put considerable emphasis on the continuity of career education from beginning to end.

And we expect the CEP to include information on what the student is learning in the community that has implications for her school program and for her future. A concrete example is international languages, where community resources often exceed school resources: many children develop fluency and literacy in international languages outside of school. We strongly suggest that such knowledge become part of their record, and that they be encouraged to put their knowledge to a test, when they reach Grade 10, and receive both advanced placement and credits toward their diploma for that knowledge. We see this kind of encouragement of learning, wherever it happens, as enriching the community as well as the individual.

As soon as one considers the curriculum to be more than what is taught in classrooms, one begins to appreciate the advantages, as well as the necessity, of greater flexibility in the learning system. At the school level, we suggest that 10 percent of the curriculum be available for local definition; that the common curriculum occupy at least 90 percent of the learning agenda from Grades 1 through 9. Depending on the physical environment and geography of the school and community, and/or on its social environment and human geography, a school (its teachers, its parents, its community helpers) may decide to put a special focus on an environmental study project, on a social history project, or on some other worthwhile endeavour that can enhance students' knowledge and skills, and perhaps also benefit the larger community.

At the individual level, flexibility in what is learned, and at what pace, has always been necessary, just as individual variation has always been inevitable. But it has been difficult for schools to provide the necessary flexibility, for many reasons. It will continue to be so: any system that tries to provide for everyone will have difficulty in providing for those who are farthest from the average. However, we firmly believe it is possible to do better, and extremely important to try. Hence we draw attention to a few schools that have made real efforts to diminish the lock-step nature of learning by allowing students to use the whole 12-month calendar or more, or much less, rather than insisting that learning comes in packages of 10 months only. And we have recommended more use of all the techniques that make it easier for students to learn at the pace right for them: acceleration for students who can move faster, individual learning assessment (challenge exams and prior learning assessment), and intensive,

accelerated, and immediate catch-up courses for students from the elementary years through adulthood. We know this is an area that requires greater skill and will from educators, and we have urged the Minister of Education and Training to provide leadership and support for those who are willing to work at developing models and strategies to increase flexibility for learners.

There is another kind of flexibility we are committed to as well, and we hope our readers are aware of it, though it is perhaps written between our lines as much as within them. That is the flexibility we believe is the best way to encourage responsibility and creativity. Our recommendations stress clarity about ends, not means. Thus, we think teachers and parents must have clarity about intended learning outcomes and standards; and about the essential components of a course, whether it is Grade 7 math or Grade 11 geography.

As well, we think the principles we have emphasized - continuity, stewardship, flexibility for learners, learning without walls are tremendously important everywhere. But we also believe there are as many ways of teaching an excellent Grade 7 math or Grade 11 art course as there are excellent math and art teachers; and as many ways of building strong relationships between students, teachers, parents, and the community on behalf of learning as there are caring and committed professionals and parents. We do believe that much good can be achieved by offering people teachers, parents, volunteers - training, and the opportunity to work together to come up with their own strategies for supporting those principles, in ways that will work in their schools and their communities.

The same principles that we have developed and discussed in talking about younger learners apply to older ones as well. Older students also need well-informed parents who are on comfortable terms with their teachers; students continue to need a teacher who knows them and acts on their behalf; and they continue to need flexibility in learning time. But, in addition, as our children pass beyond the age of the common curriculum, when all of them are meant to be acquiring that bank of knowledge and essential thinking and learning skills that every one of them needs, they must be given opportunities for making choices based on what they have learned about themselves and the world. By the time a young person reaches Grade 10 in the learning system we have envisioned, she is ready to make some decisions - not irreversible, by any means, but very important nonetheless about what direction she wants to take, not only in secondary school, but afterward. This has traditionally been the case; secondary education has always meant the point at which options increase and alternative paths open up.

But an abiding concern, in the last 50 years at least, has been how to increase options and open up paths in a way that is inclusive, and doesn't leave out those students who come to school with fewer advantages, less "social capital" in the form of parents with higher education, more money, and the like. In our opinion, differences in interest and aptitude, which is what program options should accommodate, have become confused with differences in social class and social rewards. Hence, we have a secondary system organized by "levels," which come to be thought of as reflecting the inherent and unalterable ability levels of individual students, but which in fact reflect best such other factors as parents' occupations, education, and income levels, and sometimes also race or home language or national origin.

Our concern in making recommendations to reform and improve education beyond the years of the common curriculum is to continue to strengthen core knowledge and skill areas for all students, while at the same time making alternative paths as clear and as open to everyone as is possible. So, for example, we redefine the courses that are offered as falling into three kinds, which do not in our mind speak of greater or lesser ability, but of different degrees of emphasis along a continuum between applied and

academic. We make the point that it is courses, not students, that fall into one or another of these three categories. Thus, in Grade 10, a student might choose a science course that emphasizes practical applications (an Ontario Applied Course, or OApC); a history course that puts more emphasis on a traditional academic approach (an Ontario Academic Course, or OAcC); and a music course that attempts to maintain an even balance between applied and academic emphasis (a common course). Such a student may be one who thinks of going on to a technical course at a college but who has a strong avocational interest in history, or one who wants to study social sciences at a university and also wants to have an intelligent layperson's understanding of basic science.

While we are aware that no plan, however flexible, can overcome social preferences, prejudices, and rewards that favour academic over applied skills, and university over college education, we do believe that it is plausible that a system such as we suggest could increase students' options, and result in a better match between interest and talent on the one hand and useful post-secondary education on the other.

For this to happen, colleges and universities must co-operate with secondary educators to redefine entrance requirements. The object would be to define these in both a clearer and a more differentiated way than at present. Now, universities, for the most part, look at students' marks in their last year only, and insist on prerequisite courses defined as pre-university in all those six final OACs. While this is clear enough, it is very undifferentiated; a student who wants to study history must take the same science course as a peer who wants to be a chemist, or else take no science course at all. Colleges, for their part, have no such blanket rule; but while they show greater flexibility, the paths to college are very confused and unclear for students, except in cases where individual colleges and secondary schools have worked out specific articulation programs.

We have recommended that schools, colleges, and universities define "packages" of courses that lead to particular college and university programs, and that these packages include the appropriate OApCs, OAcCs, and common courses for each post-secondary program.

We have also recommended that schools organize themselves into relatively small units, and that these units (which will most often be small schools within large buildings, sharing administrators and some facilities and courses) might have a subject or career focus, such as is now available in a few cities in schools that have an arts academy or a science academy. In such "academies," students who are interested in a career in art history or arts administration, in engineering or in electronics, can find a curriculum that has a clear relationship to their interests and - if course packages have been defined collaboratively as we suggest - to their future.

As much as we want adolescents and young adults to feel the connection between their formal education and their future - and we strongly endorse such out-of-school learning experiences as co-operative education and community service, both as emphases within courses and as experiences in themselves - we are also concerned that there are commonalities in education and learning that must not be lost sight of. All students want to understand the practical applications of what they are learning; similarly, all students need a high level of literacy no matter what career interest they may pursue.

Our recommendations concerning the common needs of secondary students speak of the necessity for certain outcomes as prerequisite to graduation. Thus, we suggest that there must be specified learner outcomes at the end of Grade 12, just as there are for the lower grades; and that these outcomes must include a majority that are common to all learners, as well as some that are specific to courses offered as OApCs or OAcCs. And we recommend an increase in the amount of province-wide curriculum and

examination review at this level, as well as earlier, so that educators and the public can know how successfully the curriculum is being learned, and so that some consistency is guaranteed across teachers and schools.

We also call for a more efficient system at this level, one that does not encourage students to extend their stay in secondary school by a year or two beyond what is necessary to take the required number of courses and graduate. While we make it clear that we continue to support flexibility in learning time, and have no intention of making matters more difficult for students who need longer to complete their course of study for legitimate reasons connected to how they learn, or to other circumstances in their life, we do not wish to see the majority of students take longer than three years, beginning in Grade 10, to complete their diploma. No other province keeps most of its students in secondary school so long, and there is no clear advantage to doing so, but considerable expenditure that we believe is better spent early than late. Hence we make recommendations designed to limit the number of credits students may accumulate before they graduate.

As well, we call for a universal literacy test to be given first in Grade 11, and to be passed eventually before a student can receive a diploma. The emphasis that we have put on literacy, beginning at age 3, culminates here in a literacy guarantee: what we believe should be a promise to the public that any high school graduate in Ontario can read and understand, and can write and convey information and feeling, as an educated adult should be able to do.

Consistent with our emphasis on continuity of concern for students' progress, we suggest that secondary schools maintain contact with and support for students until they are 18 years old, whether or not they remain in school to finish their diploma. Students need help with the transition to work, not only to post-secondary education, and until they are 18, school should be there for them, just as it is for their peers who are going on with their education.

And just as we began our discussion of the formal learning system before age 6, we do not end it at age 18. The increasing number of adults wanting to complete their secondary education deserve the same opportunity as younger learners, and we recommend that space be guaranteed them in the public system. As well, we strongly recommend that the literacy guarantee that we want our school system to make be also a literacy promise for adults who, for whatever reasons, wish to become fluent and literate in either of the official languages. Those adults include, after all, parents and future parents, grandparents and future grandparents, whose literacy is perhaps the most significant part of the learning legacy they pass on to their children and grandchildren.

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