

---

# Round Table on Restructuring Education

---

*Educational reform was the subject of one session at the 1996 Regional Conference of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in Winnipeg. The lead speaker was David Newman, MLA of Manitoba. Delegates from several other jurisdictions also participated in the discussion. The following extracts are based upon the proceedings prepared by Manitoba Hansard. The complete transcript is available from the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.*

**David Newman (Manitoba):** Talk about restructuring education often places an undue emphasis on cost. I am going to focus on some other issues. There are no longer geographic, jurisdictional, or subject matter barriers which can justify thinking narrowly about educational matters. Co-operation, collaboration and technology are overcoming barriers and improving the quality of education for the benefit of students. For example organizational boundaries are being blurred. It is difficult now to isolate the Department of Education from departments like Family Services, Health, Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, even departments like Urban Affairs and Public Housing or Justice. This is being recognized by certain integrated organizational changes. In Manitoba we have the Child and Youth Secretariat, which incorporates five of those six ministries I referred to in a supportive way and seems to be a means of bridging these boundaries.

We know that the problems in the school system include social as well as learning and teaching problems. So the theme of overcoming boundaries is an important one in understanding the restructuring that is going on and the rationale behind it.

Another issue pertains to character and citizenship. Do we focus enough on developing good citizens in our schools? There was a textbook written by R.S. Jenkins called *Canadian Civics*. Written in Montreal in 1909 it states certain timeless principles of education.

"One of the most important duties of the state is to provide for the education of the children who will someday be its masters. Democracy, with all its good and evil, must be accepted as the basis of modern government, though here and there a philosopher may scoff at the suffrage of the plow, yet social order and stability must henceforth depend on either the tolerance or the good will of the masses of the people.

The time when a small, educated class could safeguard the glories of civilized life and the arts by the use of physical or moral force is rapidly disappearing. Therefore it is a self-evident fact that the state ought to teach its future citizens the worth of our civilization and the ways of preserving it from impairment and of assisting in its progress. We must no longer, as those of an earlier age, walk calmly over the surface, underneath which slumbers the volcano of popular passion. The fruits of centuries of toil are too precious to be exposed to any possibility of injury. There must be a means sought for training our people in social and civic responsibility. Government is the foundation of the splendid fabric of our civilization. Therefore it is a subject about which the pupils in the school should receive very definite instruction.

There is also a passage on the duties of the citizen. Four duties are stated. They are timeless. The first one is to try and understand as well as you can our system of government and to keep yourself informed as to all the important acts of those who are in authority. The second duty of the citizen is to put your knowledge of the nation and its government to practical use by taking an active part in politics. A third duty incumbent on a citizen is to be ready to assist so far as you are able all good causes. The fourth one is to endeavour to lessen the cruelty of our civilization. There is hardly any doubt that if these duties were followed we should soon have a bright and happy world.

## Education Today

---

Commenting on our education system, William Thorsell, the editor in chief of the *Globe and Mail*, speaking to the annual meeting of the Councils of Ministers of Education in Edmonton, Alberta, May 9, 1996, challenged us all when he said:

"I have long arrogantly assumed that standards of literacy, numeracy and knowledge of such things as

history, geography and literature have declined since I graduated from high school in 1963. On reviewing some of the recent literature, I am surprised to find that my assumptions about this are pretty accurate. I find that after 10 years in school, 44 percent of young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are functionally innumerate and almost 30 percent are functionally illiterate. That is defined by their ability to understand a comparatively simple newspaper article."

According to the Economic Council of Canada's 1992 study, *A Lot to Learn*, 30 percent of our young people do not complete high school. By the end of secondary school, Canadian students perform poorly in mathematics and science in comparison with most developed countries. On specific tests of basic skills, there is evidence of a deterioration in achievement compared with the situation 25 years ago, particularly in reading comprehension and language skills.

The decline or stagnation of standards in education has occurred despite much higher per student spending, much improved teacher-student class ratios and far more investment in support services and administration.

Thorsell quotes from a book called *Education Wars*, and says, dealing with administration, that administration is resistant to change. He indicates that technology could displace so much labour in the system. It will raise the focus of education from local to national and small scale to large scale because technology will facilitate system-wide testing and evaluation of teachers, programs and schools and because technology will encourage competition by breaking the monopoly of the local and private level.

He goes on to suggest some solutions. He suggests public authorities must be responsible for defining minimum content standards for schooling and should offer specific means to achieve them in public schools. Manitoba has done that through *Renewing Education: New Directions, an Action Plan*.

Secondly, public authorities should establish and administer system-wide competency tests at regular intervals and publicize the results by school. National tests would be the ideal. Manitoba's blueprint, *New Directions*, is committed to that process as well.

Thorsell suggests, hiring, compensation, promotion of teachers should allow for full individual accountability and merit. Routes to certification should be diversified. The monopolies of education, the faculties and teacher unions should be ended. This whole matter is under very considerable debate throughout the country and certainly in Manitoba.

He urges funding for schools should come out of general revenue where it competes against other social needs and is more visibly accounted to the voters. Schools should no longer be funded by the almost

invisible education property tax tacked onto municipal levies. Manitoba has not addressed that issue and the status quo prevails in that respect.

He says equal per student public funding should be available to all schools that commit to the core public curriculum and to system-wide testing. Parents should be allowed to add to the financial resources of the school of their choice, whether it comes under the umbrella of a public system or it is a privately chartered school. Schools should be bound by the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in their admission policies.

The Manitoba approach, which really echoes what is happening across the country, is to focus on core content, essentials, basics and outcomes to produce good citizens who are numerate, literate, can compute and problem solve.



**Lorne Bonnell (Senate):** I am one of those lucky Canadians who was able to get the Senate of Canada to support an inquiry into post-secondary education in Canada, realizing all the time that education is a provincial jurisdiction. The same day that the Senators defeated the Pearson Airport bill, a day when everybody was going their own way, I had the audacity to stand up and say that education in Canada was in crisis and needed to be studied and reported upon. I got unanimous support. Not too many times does everybody in the Senate agree on one thing. A subcommittee will go to the provinces to talk to the Ministers of Education, to the Premiers, to universities and post-secondary colleges, to see if we can come up with some kind of national standard in education for the 21st Century.

In my province of Prince Edward Island, we have people with B.A. degrees and B.Sc. degrees and business administration degrees holding a flag at the side of the road during road construction to get 12 to 14 stamps so they can draw employment insurance because there are no jobs for them. We have people graduating with engineering degrees who are unable to find jobs. I think the time has come for the provinces and the federal government to work together and come up with standards of education, quality of education and jobs for students when they graduate. Young students today are graduating with a \$50,000 debt before they ever get a job. If we do not change things, only a rich man's family will be able to get an education.

Education should be something like Medicare. You should be entitled to an education regardless of whether you live in the outports of Labrador, the Northwest

Territories, the Yukon, or even Prince Edward Island, just the same as people who live in cities where there are universities in the community.

With the new electronic highway, there is no reason why a professor teaching at a university cannot be seen and heard in high schools in rural Canada or the Territories.

I do not believe there is any need to have students leave their high school to go to university for the first couple of years. Maybe Grade 13 and Grade 14 could be taught right in the high schools instead of closing out some of them. Children could stay in high school and hear whole lectures through the electronic highway. We now have cable in the classroom all across Canada, and this can all be done electronically.

To me, there is no reason why industry and big business cannot be involved in education. I was in Taiwan a few years ago, and I noticed that students who went to university were sponsored by industry. It did not matter whether students were sponsored by the telephone, the business, the electrical or the mining industry. During the summer months students went to work for the industry sponsoring them. And when they finally graduated from university there was a job waiting for them because they were taking special courses that fit that specific industry. Graduate students became experts in their fields the day they were hired. During their education, business helped to pay some of their costs. We should be co-operating with business and industry and other people to get our education.



**Shiraz Shariff (Alberta):** As a former teacher and social worker I found a common thread in clients who were perpetually relegated to the status of poverty. It was a lack of education and a lack of social skills. At the college level, most of my students had very poor literacy skills, could not read and write effectively. Many students who entered elementary school requiring English as a second language did not get adequate resources provided to them. Between 60 and 80 percent of those students did not finish high school. That raises an important issue about the emphasis, focus and the totality of education resource allocation.

We have entered into an era in which we will be going through numerous career changes. Some studies indicate that any child born after 1964 may go through five to eight career changes in a lifetime. Are we prepared for this challenge?

Let me give you one other example. The Conference Board of Canada has done a study which shows that in

Germany, apprenticeship is a norm in high school entrance, and usually by the age of 16, a child has already identified a career. In Canada, apprenticeship usually begins roughly around 21 years of age, which indicates that this is the last choice in a career path. Where have we gone wrong?

Finally, this emphasis on the Internet as a medium is fine and dandy, however it does not provide the opportunity for developing social skills. We have to be cognizant of that at every level. Children need to develop good social skills, as well as be able to take advantage of the science research and technology that exists today.



**Roger Pomerleau, (House of Commons):** One of the first goals of education considered up to now is to prepare people for the work market, and we know now that there is something false in this. More people than ever are prepared for the job market, and when they get out of school, they do not have jobs, even if they are lawyers, even if they are engineers, accountants. I have some in my office every day who have two diplomas, sometimes even more, and they do not have jobs at all. Even if they want to travel, there are no jobs in their field.

So we can see the job market is shrinking even if around the world in a few areas, it is booming. Machines, of course, will replace a lot of people, doing a lot of jobs. I was a carpenter before being in politics, and today 80 percent of what I was doing by hand is now done by machine.

Even if we consider intellectual work, we can see by our banking system that machines today will give you money, put your account up to date without using anybody to do it. It will be done by itself. We can see secretarial work being done now by computers faster than ever, and we can see that the total of all this mechanization, robotization, computerization will inevitably cost us an awful lot of jobs.

So when young people come into my office and they tell me that they are dropouts, I cannot tell them that they are not smart. If I was young, I would be a dropout because it is not true what we say to our young, that if you go to school, you are going to get a good opportunity for a job. It is not true anymore, so I think when they say they are dropouts, it is because they do not see any future ahead of them. They will not go and work 10 years in school and get indebted to know that at the end they will not have a future. So I think we have moral goals to pursue, and we have to rethink much more deeply, not only education but our values behind all this.

---

We will have to review our values of what is profit, what is wealth, what is work. We know that in the future it is not true that everybody will have work. Work will be a privilege, so what do we do with the rest? What is their value? Do they have value if they do not work? Do we have value as human beings if we do not work? Those are profound questions that are closely linked, as far as I think, to education, and they will have to be part somewhere of our rethinking of all these things.



**Don Tannas (Alberta):** Alberta has been involved in fiscal restraint and paying down the debt since in the 1993 election. That was the position of two of the main parties, the governing party of the day and the third party in the House. When the smoke cleared, the party that did not choose to accommodate fiscal restraint was wiped out. The Liberal Party had virtually the same kind of program as the Conservatives. One said we were going to have massive cuts, and the other said we were going to have brutal cuts; I cannot remember which was which.

In any event, fiscal restraint does provide an opportunity to re-evaluate what you are doing, and we have taken advantage of that. I want to say just in response to a couple of other people that I am not so sure there is as much a crisis in education as there is a crisis in the observation of it. We ought to focus not just on what is going wrong. If you try and do anything from just what you perceive is going wrong, then you will have a rather peculiar system. I think you need to focus equally and perhaps more so on what is your success, as well as what you perceive is going wrong.

In any event, the opportunity is there to re-evaluate what we are doing. We have come up with three-year business plans for government, and that includes the Department of Education. We focused on greater parent and public involvement. A big part of the last three years, particularly the first year and a half, were round tables, response guides, all kinds of presentations and on the basis of that we have come up with some areas for improvement and change. For instance, we have school councils and have made them mandatory which provides for a much greater parent and public involvement. It opens up education a little more with school-based management, school-based decision making. That is just beginning, and that will not happen in one year. It will happen over a great period of time. We have even opened up public charter schools, I think there are eight to date in the whole province, and the press seems to like to focus on that particular item when there are many more fundamental things going on.

We started into taxation equity. For the last 40 years, about 50 percent of the money that goes to a public school comes from the property tax, and 50 percent comes from the provincial government funds. That means if you have a little district that just happens to be surrounding a sulfur plant, then your taxes might be a whole lot lower.

So we have moved into equalized assessment and a uniform mill rate across the province. That is going to take about three or four years to invoke, but it does not matter whether your house is worth a hundred thousand in Calgary or Medicine Hat, it will be approximately the same mill rate for taxation on education.

In addition funding for instruction purposes shall now be equal regardless of whether it is urban, rural, north or south, east or west, and whether it is Catholic or public schools. We had a number of nonoperating boards. A lot of those were centred around some big industry. We have eliminated those and reduced 141 remaining boards down to 66. Again, we allowed local involvement where we said, this is going to happen, you have to have a certain size in order to be viable, get out and negotiate. Many districts did and came up to agreements. A few districts who could not make any agreements were required to merge.

We have tried increased accountability in a variety of ways. Achievement testing at Grades 3, 6, 9 and 12 gives us benchmarks along the way, and we are now moving to publishing the general results for a system and for schools, as well. Some systems were already doing that. Others expressed shock and horror that we would have to have such apparent competitive accountability.

We are trying to improve teaching through working with the stakeholders, improving the training and the evaluation process. A better evaluation process is the kind of thing that will address, in the long run a lot of the criticisms of the teaching profession. We have begun a program to reduce and restructure the Department of Education. At the current time, it has moved from about 857 people to about 625 people, so we have cut it by about a third. We have had to take some steps of putting some general guidelines up for transportation costs and administration.



**William Ramsay (Newfoundland and Labrador):** Newfoundland and Labrador has been the focus of the hearings by the Parliament of Canada through the Senate recently about the changes that we require from a financial and governance perspective on our education system. We only have to look at the overadministration in the early '70s that has resulted in a huge bureaucracy,

not only in our province, but I would suggest in a lot of other provinces. We sought to decentralize our school systems, gave a huge amount of authority to the boards in the given areas and along with the decentralized system we maintained and increased the centralized administration of the school system as well.

In Newfoundland-Labrador this was compounded by the variety of different churches running the school system, so you had a lot of duplication, triplication in some cases. We have not paid attention to the basics and fundamentals of education, the three Rs. It is almost like we have allowed the students to get through school at times without the basic fundamentals intact.

I think we have to look at the recent advances in entrepreneurship in education as a key to the future in having students realize that with the effort they put into it, they get a lot more out of it. As more and more courses offer enterprise education we get that daring entrepreneurship entering into the fray, and a lot of the jobs that we worry about being available for students in the future will come from the students themselves. They will create a lot of their own employment. They will essentially be more ready to contribute to the economy of their nation and will essentially have done a lot better for themselves because of having been taught entrepreneurial means and methods.



**Lillian Ross (Ontario):** This issue is a very complex one and I am sure most of us are undergoing major changes in education to try to keep up with what is happening, not just here in Canada but around the world.

I think we need to focus more attention on our young people in their earlier years, and I am talking about Grades 6, 7 and 8. Start them either into community involvement or get them interested in the community as volunteers working in fields that interest them. Then as they get through their junior years, through junior high, more training, co-op training programs need to be given. These students can get a better understanding of what is happening in the working world in fields that they think they might want to go into.

Oftentimes what happens is they direct their energies into one field and find once they get there, it really was not what they wanted to do anyway. So I think more dollars need to be spent in co-operative education. I think the private sector really needs to come on board and get involved.

Computerization and technology are fast growing and ever changing, and I think we need to look into that field

a little bit more so that we can train our own people in our own provinces.



**Ray White (Nova Scotia):** Reform, like the tide, keeps coming in and happening over and over again in education. We have to ask ourselves what is the prime goal of reform, and I would hope that any reform undertaken would focus first on the learner. What tools can we provide the educators to provide the skills that students will need to meet the challenges that we face.

In education, so often we are forced to react to special interest groups who feel that their agenda should be reflected in the education system, and somehow we have to balance that out to make sure that the skills that we provide the students will enable them to deal with the changing world and the demands that are placed upon the system.

We have various groups saying this or that should be a priority of education. We keep putting more and more pressures on the system to deliver more with less resources.

If we are talking about reform of administration, then I think one of the prime goals would be to do an evaluation to make those systems as efficient as we possibly can so that in a time of restraint, any money saved can be directed to the prime person that we are trying to serve and that is the learner, be it a child or an adult who is going through literacy upgrading, to open the doors to provide for them employment.

Accountability is usually a buzzword we hear, but if we do put into place any national or provincial testing, then part of that testing is not just to look at results but how can we use those results to improve the delivery of education at whatever level we are talking about.

We have talked about the role of industry today. In a province such as Nova Scotia we do have co-operative education. Our community colleges have told industry, if you have a need, we will sit down with you and we will design a program to provide the skills, either to your employees or to others which will open fields that may not exist at this time and there are many examples.

As a former educator I think that any reform in education has to clearly focus on the learner. It has to clearly look at the institutions that we have in place from the very beginning up through to university and establish linkages, so that they do not operate in isolation, so the universities do not just say, well, the high schools are not preparing students for the academic training—but there is communication as to where the weaknesses are and how can they work together to strengthen those skills.