

PUBLIC SUPPORT OF PRIVATE AND
INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN CANADA:
SOME RECENT TRENDS

by
Professor J. Donald Wilson, Ph.D.
Faculty of Education
University of British Columbia

For: 1986 Yearbook of the Finnish Society
of School History, Helsinki, Finland

August 15, 1986

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Abstract

Private schools have always existed in Canada, but the growth in the number of and enrollment in such schools has been quite dramatic over the past twenty years. How do we account for this development? Likewise over the same time period several provincial governments have passed legislation providing for various levels of public funding to these schools. What factors have contributed to this change in policy where previously no public moneys were extended to non-public schools? What has been the public response to the shift of thousands of students from public to private schools? Is the continued predominance^a of the public school system threatened? What are the implications for the future of the public system? Of private schools? Answers are sought to these and other questions in the article that follows.

Public Support of Private and Independent Schools
in Canada: Some Recent Trends

At a time when public education in Canada has been experiencing continuous enrollment declines, attendance in private schools has increased dramatically. From 1971 to 1984, enrollment in private schools increased 60 per cent while public school enrollment fell by 17 per cent.¹⁾ In numerical terms, this means an additional 86,100 students were being educated in private schools while public education enrollment declined by 961,400 students. This amounts to an average growth of 6,867 students per year in Canadian private schools. Further, private school enrollment of approximately 229,000 in 1983-84 was an increase of 1.5 per cent over the preceding year as compared to a 1 per cent decline in public school enrollment.²⁾ In the past fifteen years private school attendance has more than doubled in Alberta and British Columbia, provinces which in that period introduced legislation providing for public financial support of private schools. But, interestingly, the same proportional increase is to be found in Ontario even though there private schools receive no assistance from the public treasury. In Quebec about 10 percent of all children in school attend private schools, mostly at the secondary level, but in that province public assistance is quite generous. It is clear, therefore, that private schools have become an increasingly popular choice for Canadian parents since 1971.

All told there were more than 800 private schools in operation in Canada in the early 1980's. One-third were Catholic, one-third Calvinist or evangelical Christian, about 200 affiliated with other denominations, such as Seventh Day Adventist and Jewish, and about 50 in the British tradition of private schools, such as Upper Canada

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1. Statistics Canada, Report, August 1984, pp. 1-4.
 2. Ibid.

College.³⁾ Overall the private schools' proportion of total enrollment is 5 per cent.

To account for the current popularity of private school attendance, one might suggest that it seems to match two recent phenomena: a mood of growing conservatism evident across both Canada and the United States, and increasing disillusionment with the failure of public schools to deliver on the many promises of the late sixties reform movement. With many parents these two trends seem to coincide in a search for more traditional values which they identify with moral instruction, better discipline, sometimes sex segregation, and almost always a "return to the basics," as they tend to phrase it. It is notable that a large percentage of the increase in number of private schools may be attributed to Christian schools affiliated with local evangelical churches: Christian Reformed, Pentecostal, various fundamentalist Christian denominations and Seventh Day Adventist, for example.

To understand the question of the public funding of private schools in Canada one must turn to the public funding of denominational schools as a historical reality in Canada. The acceptance of the principle of public support of some denominational schools, a principle found unacceptable in the United States because of the constitutional separation of church and state, dates from the mid-nineteenth century and the establishment throughout the colonies of British North America (later Canada) of a system of free and universal public education. Among Protestants and Catholics alike, the notion was widely accepted that education and religion were inseparable and that the evolving modern state had a responsibility to foster, wherever possible, a harmonious relationship between the two. As the Rev. John Strachan,

3. Jean Barman, "Private School," in The Canadian Encyclopedia (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1985), vol. III, p. 1489.

Anglican bishop of Toronto and an early school promoter stressed, "Knowledge if not founded on religion is a positive evil."⁴⁾

As in the United States so in British North America, the conviction grew in the nineteenth century that it was essential to organize a system of truly public or common schools for all children to attend. Political, social and economic reasons seemed to dictate this sort of development throughout Western Europe and North America at the time. But how to get around the religious differences present in the British North American colonies? On the Protestant side there were four leading denominations who often clashed with each other especially over the alleged supremacy of the Anglican Church (Church of England). Equally contentious was the presence in each colony but one of a significant Roman Catholic minority. And in that colony, Quebec, Roman Catholics formed an overwhelming majority. If catered to through allowing the formation of a purely denominational school system (as eventually appeared in Newfoundland), it was feared that such denominationalism would contribute to factionalism rather than unity, a much desired objective in the face of constant political and even military threats from the republican neighbour to the south. If the British colonies were to retain their independence and eventually (after 1867) forge a Canadian identity, a system of common schooling with a common curriculum and state supervision and inspection was not only desirable but essential. Thus the evolving system must be as uniform as possible yet at the same time take account, to some degree, of religious denominationalism.

Inter-Protestant rivalry in early Ontario plus the presence of a substantial Roman Catholic minority, and an outright Protestant-Catholic split in nineteenth-century Quebec led those colonies to avoid establishing a non-denominational common school system such as appeared

 4. John Strachan to J.S. Sinclair, May 23, 1840. Public Archives of Ontario, Strachan Letter Book, 1839-1845.

in British Columbia after 1872. Instead those colonies, later provinces after 1867, moved to assume legal protection and financial support for some denominationally based schooling. Thus a pattern emerged, namely two parallel public systems: one an integrated Protestant or "common" school system ("confessional" in Quebec), the other one a Roman Catholic separate school system ("confessional" in Quebec). These arrangements, confirmed and consolidated in 1867 in the British North America Act, Canada's constitution, have remained intact in most provinces, modified to some degree by informal arrangements specific to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, and Manitoba since the 1960's. Only British Columbia has clung to an American-style non-denominational public school system. Hence the notion developed in Canada that church and state are partners in education not hostile forces. It is a notion that has made it possible for Canadian educational authorities to subsidize Jewish schools in Quebec, Hutterite schools on the prairies, Amish schools in Ontario, Salvation Army public schools in Newfoundland, and (Dutch Reformed) Christian schools in British Columbia. And that in turn makes possible public support of both denominational and non-denominational private schools by virtue of specific legislation passed in the last two decades in Quebec, Alberta, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and Manitoba. Similar legislation is currently under serious consideration in Canada's most populous province Ontario where in 1985 a royal commission set up to study this question came out in favour of extending similar support to these schools.⁵⁾

Another feature of Canadian society having an important bearing on this question is a general acceptance now by Canadians of the diversity of their society, or what today we call pluralism or the multicultural

 5. Bernard J. Shapiro, The Report of the Commission on Private Schools in Ontario (Toronto, 1985).

nature of Canadian society.⁶⁾ The former British and Protestant predominance in Canada is no more, replaced by a bilingual state in a multicultural framework with no one official culture. The creation of an ideal national type in which all Canadians could see something of themselves, and which they could all strive to emulate, was impossible. The national preoccupation became one concerned with differences, not with similarities, with creating a nation out of culturally disparate groups, not with establishing cultural uniformity.⁷⁾ There could never have been "a new Canadian man" in the sense in which de Crèvecoeur could speak of "a new American man." The basis for Canada's present-day pluralism is thus of long standing.

After the attainment and consolidation of public school systems throughout Canada in the 1870's, private schools, although in reduced numbers, still continued to exist and to draw support from certain categories of parents. Most private schools have performed and some still do perform a religious function especially as the public school curriculum and overall ambiance became more and more secularized. But private schools in Canada as elsewhere have also played a role in class differentiation. They became, therefore, a way to distinguish one's children from the children of the masses who went to public schools. Numerous boys' and girls' schools founded in Canada in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth were consciously modelled after their British counterparts. For example, the exclusive boys' school, Upper Canada College, in Toronto called itself "the Eton of Canada."⁸⁾

Most of these formerly denominationally based schools are today officially non-denominational and admit boys or girls of all denominational and ethnic backgrounds. Such class-based schools still remain attractive

6. J. Donald Wilson, "Multicultural Programmes in Canadian Education," in R.J. Samuda, et al. (eds.), Multiculturalism in Canada: Social and Educational Perspectives (Toronto: Allyn and Bacon, 1984), pp. 62-77.
7. Allan Smith, "Metaphor and Nationality in North American," Canadian Historical Review, 51, 3 (September 1970): 247-275.
8. Barman, op. cit.

today to those economically advantaged parents who can afford their high annual fees. As the noted sociologist John Porter put it: "The acquisition of social skills and the opportunities to make the right contacts can be important reasons for the higher middle classes to send their children to [such] private schools."⁹⁾

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How can we account for the increase in numbers of and enrollment in private schools in Canada since the 1960's? The origins of this trend can be found in the late sixties. It may be significant that this same period saw the appearance of a number of alternative or "free" schools.¹⁰⁾ Based in varying degrees upon the radical and socially permissive philosophy of A.S. Neill's Summerhill School in England, almost all of them had disappeared by 1973, or else been absorbed into the public system in some form or other. The other, mainly church-run private schools, however, persisted and began to flourish during the seventies. Their popularity derived not only from their religious and moral underpinnings, but also from the stress they placed on academic subjects, discipline and deference to authority. A study carried out in British Columbia in the late seventies revealed parental choice for private schooling was motivated by the following reasons: 54.5 per cent for religious reasons, 51.2 per cent for strict discipline, 30.4 per cent for academic quality, and 18.1 per cent for the individual attention offered by a smaller school.¹¹⁾

9. John Porter, The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 285.
10. For some typical examples, see H.A. Stevenson, R.M. Stamp and J.D. Wilson (eds.), The Best of Times, the Worst of Times (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 470-488.
11. D.A. Erickson, L. MacDonald and M.E. Manley-Casimir, Characteristics and Relationships in Public and Independent Schools: A COFIS Study (Vancouver: Educational Research Institute of British Columbia, 1979).

Likewise, a survey of public attitudes toward public education in Ontario done in 1980 revealed that "lack of discipline" was the most commonly perceived problem, followed by "poor curriculum" (either in terms of low standards or irrelevance to future life) and "inadequate teachers" (teachers who lacked interest in students or who were considered incompetent).¹²⁾ A much smaller survey of five Vancouver secondary schools put discontent with "incompetent" teachers at the top of its list of student-perceived problems.¹³⁾ The Ontario study noted the correlation between the rapid growth in private school enrollments and the emphasis of most of these schools on student discipline.¹⁴⁾

Not unexpectedly, the trend to private schooling in the 1970's was accompanied by demands from parents for a share of public funds to support private schools and correspondingly reduce the financial burdens these parents faced. As with private school supporters in the United States, so independent school supporters in Canada tend to rest their case for provincial funding on their rights as citizens. Without some public financial support they argue their children's rights to "public" education are being denied. Since they are obliged to pay school taxes like everyone else, they feel justified in asking that some of that money should go towards the support of the non-public schools they favour. They believe the responsibility for educating children lies with parents not the state. They believe also that education is never neutral, but rather that underlying each educational enterprise are deeply held convictions about the nature of man, the nature of reality and the nature of knowledge. In their view therefore the convictions underlying the public schools are based on a unifying philosophy -- liberal or secular humanism -- a world-view they detest

12. D.W. Livingstone and D.J. Hart, Public Attitudes Toward Education in Ontario: Third OISE Survey (Toronto: OISE, 1981), Table 5, p. 9.
13. "Our Schools," Vancouver Sun, April 7, 1981.
14. Third OISE Survey, p. 3.

and fear.¹⁵⁾ Instead they insist upon the primacy of God and Judaeo-Christian values and the inclusion of a Christian perspective on all of life. They agree with Coons and Sugarman that "in practice the primary value transmitted by a [public school] teacher may be the emptiness of all values."¹⁶⁾

Basically, independent school supporters insist that the right of parents to provide an education compatible with their beliefs and values is a democratic right derived from freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. In argument they often cite the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, section 26(2) which states that parents must be allowed the freedom to exercise their "prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." Most political parties have found difficulty in opposing this argument. Critics of public support of private schools, however, point to several concerns: the continuation in grant-aided schools of restrictive admissions policies on the basis of sex, religious and academic qualifications, and ability to pay; restrictive and discriminatory employment practices (some Catholic independent schools hire only Catholic teachers);¹⁷⁾ permissive features of some provincial legislation which specify only a modicum of accountability and conformity to the public system; the potential for diversion of aid from strictly educational expenditures; and the support of non-denominational elite (like Sigtuna in Sweden) as well as denominationally based schools. Most critics remain strong supporters of a continually reforming public school system and fear a diminution of parental and government support for public schools and the long-term

15. For a discussion of recent court cases in the United States where parents have charged the schools with preaching secular humanism, see E.G. West, "American Schools on Trial," New Society, Jan. 26, 1978, pp. 178-180.
16. John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman, Education by Choice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 82.
17. One such school in North Vancouver actually fired a teacher because she married a divorced Protestant. Moreover, many teachers employed in independent schools would not qualify to teach in public schools. L.W. Downey, "The Aid-to-Independent-Schools Movement in British Columbia," in N.M. Sheehan, J.D. Wilson and D.C. Jones (eds.), Schools in the West: Essays in Canadian Educational History (Calgary: Detselig, 1986), p. 319.

deleterious effect this could have on the Canadian public school system.

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What follows are some examples of current provisions for funding of private, or "independent" schools as they are called, in Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia. Since the late 1960's these provinces have led the way in providing public support for private denominational schooling. The most generous has been the Province of Quebec which extends financial support from public funds to all sorts of day, ethnic, private, parochial, and independent schools. Legislation dating from 1968 establishes two categories for funding.¹⁸⁾ Once an institution is declared to be of "public interest" (largely dependent on the extent to which its curriculum coincides with the provincial one), it receives a grant equal to 80 percent of the average cost per pupil "for public establishments of the same class." Even though it has not been declared of public interest, an institution may be recognized for grants. In this case the grant basis is 60 cent. The great majority of private schools in Quebec are Catholic.

In 1967 Alberta added private schools, not previously eligible for funding, to the public schools and the separate Catholic schools qualifying for tax support. A decade later British Columbia agreed to provide public money for its independent schools by the provisions of Bill 33 (The Independent Schools Support Act). These western provinces were following the broadminded principle adopted in the United Kingdom of funding "public education." In neither province has the aid been limited to denominational schools, but in both cases religiously based schools have profited the most. Alberta's 1967 legislation and pertinent regulations in 1972 required that private schools have been in operation for at least

18. For details, see Law and Regulations: Private Education (Quebec City: Éditeur officiel, 1978).

three years, that they have at least two teachers, that all teachers have Alberta teaching certificates and teach the Alberta curriculum, that students write provincial examinations, that the schools be open to regular inspection, that school buildings conform to provincial standards, and that parents of students be Alberta residents. British Columbia's Bill 33, passed in 1977, is much less stringent. Although eligible schools must have been in operation for at least three years, teachers do not need provincial teaching certificates, and there are few curriculum restrictions. Schools must not promote racial or ethnic superiority, religious intolerance or persecution, or "social change through violent action." The implementation of the act has, however, brought about a closer monitoring of curriculum offerings than its wording seemed at first to indicate. This has presented problems to some grant-aided private schools. Government insistence on province-wide examinations especially those at school-leaving has meant that fundamentalist Christian schools have had difficulties preparing their students for certain examinations, in particular biology. (These schools do not teach Darwinian science.)

With a larger number of private non-denominational schools than Alberta, British Columbia's legislation cannot be characterized exclusively as aid to religious schools. Nonetheless, the largest proportion of funds has gone to the province's Catholic schools and to schools run by Protestant evangelical groups. The latter are especially likely to benefit from the legislation. Of the 230 schools listed in the directory of the Federation of Independent School Associations in British Columbia, 65 Protestant evangelical schools were established between 1977 and 1980. Nevertheless, there are many fundamental schools coming into existence -- some 115 in 1986 in B.C. -- that have not applied for funding under Bill 33 and continue to be self-supporting.¹⁹⁾ In Alberta, schools affiliated with the Christian Reformed churches have proliferated; the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges of Alberta and the Edmonton Society for Christian Education are among the most active education lobbyists

 19. Gordon C. Calvert, "Growth of Non-Funded Christian Schools in British Columbia" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, forthcoming).

in the province, especially in gaining advantageous changes in department of education regulations. Indeed, so effective have they been that grants to Christian schools, which began in the late 1960's at 33 per cent of the basic per-pupil grant to public and separate schools, by 1980-1981 had reached 70 per cent of the Foundation Grant (the Foundation Grant amounts to 70 per cent of the average public school cost). In British Columbia, in contrast, per-pupil grants amounted to approximately 30 per cent of the basic per-pupil grant, but indications were that the province's Federation of Independent School Associations would press government and ministry officials for increased levels of funding. FISA is, however, conscious of treading softly so as to avoid any possible backlash or public outcry.

Many independent schools besides having provincial and nation-wide affiliations also have international connections. The approximately 100 Christian Schools in Canada, for example, are linked with the continent-wide Christian Schools International based in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The Association of Independent Christian Schools, of which there are 57 in British Columbia alone, use the Accelerated Christian Education curriculum which is a programmed learning package developed in the United States. Likewise, Seventh Day Adventist schools which stretch from coast to coast use many textbooks prepared in their church's curriculum development centre in the United States. In this sense the spread of religiously based private schools in Canada is very much linked with similar developments south of the border where the activities of the Moral Majority have been very visible during the Reagan era.

As we enter the 1980's, public education in Canada is under severe pressure. Enrollments are declining while popular criticism of the schools is rife. Competition with other public services for the tax dollar is intense. Meanwhile, the challenge of non-public education alternatives is greater than it has been in over a century. Freedom of choice, it is argued, should be the right of all parents not just those who dissent for religious reasons. We can therefore expect private and independent schools across Canada to press for more public aid in those

provinces that already grant it, and for the rest to make comparable provisions. To this end these schools now have a nation-wide lobbying organization centred in Toronto.

Other groupings of parents with language, ethno-cultural or educational interests not currently served in public or grant-aided private schools are likely to emerge and demand support in a version of Canadian educational pluralism unmatched since the pre-public school era of the mid-nineteenth century. That support may take the form of the present statutes and regulations or even tuition tax credits or vouchers as debated in the United States for over a decade now.²⁰⁾ The level of support may also increase, at least in those provinces which have not yet reached funding levels of 80 per cent. In any case it seems safe to predict that the pluralism of Canadian society made official in the 1970's by a federal government policy of multiculturalism will be further reflected in a multiplicity of non-public educational institutions receiving various forms of public aid throughout the 1990's.²¹⁾ One thing is clear: denominationally-based and other private schools have acquired an educational prominence in Canada few would have predicted a generation ago.

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20. D.K. Cohen and E. Farrar, "Power to the Parents?" The Story of Educational Vouchers, The Public Interest, no. 48 (summer 1977): 92-97; E.G. West, "Tuition Tax Credit Proposals: An Economic Analysis of the 1978 Packwood/Moynihan Bill," Policy Review, 3 (winter, 1978); Edd Doerr, "The Case Against Vouchers and Tuition Tax Credits," Review Journal of Philosophy and Social Science, IV, 2 (winter, 1979): 164-176.
21. Cornelius J. Jaenen, "Mutilated Multiculturalism," in J. Donald Wilson (ed.), Canadian Education in the 1980's (Calgary: Detselig, 1981), pp. 79-96.

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