# THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN
## The State of Public Education in Canada

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Some teachers and students, as well as some parents and members of the general public, are in full battle cry over what they see as the diminished state of public education in Canada. Not a month goes by without these voices, sometimes in chorus, bemoaning how this once significant institution has fallen upon hard times. And not a month goes by without newspapers and magazines, radio talk shows and TV stations doing stories on the failure of public education. Escalating discipline problems, teacher incompetence and exhaustion, a lack of standards and rigor, insufficient monies for resources and training, and sorely out of date and irrelevant curricula have all been thrown on the table as evidence of this decline. And to some extent there is a legitimacy in these claims; however, there are some significant ways in which this is far from the actual picture.

In the first place, public education has its own struggles — what social institution today does not? The family, the church, the local community, they are all showing signs of fatigue. That is not to say, however, that the school system (or any of these other institutions for that matter) does not work. The school system may very well be one of the last successfully functioning social institutions that we have, and ironically, its successes may have much to do with what its critics would claim are its inherent weaknesses.

Firstly, our public schools do not have (nor would they want, I suspect) the easy luxury of doing what so many other institutions do (including private schools): the disqualification of "unsuitable" candidates. The public school system is mandated to accept all students and, as a consequence, there are some who might question the caliber of some of those students entering the system and even the nature of the system itself. They will cite "evening news" statistics and anecdotal "tales" that attest to this: favorites usually include teen pregnancy rates, rampant drug use, and an accelerating frequency and intensity of bullying and violence. While these are indeed problems in need of our attention, they are not the norm, nor are they the benchmarks by which our students should be evaluated.

By and large, our students today are a far more comforting, responsible and helpful group than the adult population at large. What's more, there is probably more violence, apathy and reckless disregard in the adult population than in our schools. This generation has had placed in front of it (by our hands) almost every conceivable temptation — drugs, cybersex, endless consumption of manufactured goods, virtual and real violence — and has done, for the most part, a fine job of resisting these temptations. They may very well be the first generation that does not have the luxury of community, family or church to help them maneuver through all of this undamaged. Those who fail to see the rich character of today's youth might really only be showing their position on the human nature debate (man is inherently evil vs. man is inherently good). In any event, like Pascal's wager, it benefits us to proceed only on the basis that our young reflect a human nature that is both positive and decent. What would be gained in believing otherwise?

At this point I feel I must grant the Cassandras — those that lament the state of public education — one significant concession: while the vast majority of students entering the public school system continue to have wonderful minds and hearts, that portion of the school population that has always entered our doors in need now comes to us in even greater need. These children, so very much damaged because of their upbringing in a reckless age, need more guidance, more resources and more help to ensure their success. And today many efforts are being marshaled to reach just this end.

Another substantial reason for the success of our schools lies in their on-going efforts to reach that fine balance between character education and content education; that balance that aims to create adults of good character and adults who possess fine skills and abilities — both of which are essential for living a good life.

An individual who has mastery over specific skills and ideas but has no compassion for the unquelled hunger in the world (or the hunger in his own neighborhood for that matter) is no more an educated person than that individual who might possess the most intense passion for the world's suffering, but have no tools to alleviate it. Education of value is essentially an attempt to reconcile the importance inherent in both of these elements. And while some of those voices mentioned earlier cry out for "back to basics" and more rigor and focus on academic excellence, and still other voices cry out for schools that are more humane and student focused, our schools seldom make the mistake sacrificing one for the other.

Instead of having students blindly consume and recycle data in an endless spiral, we now focus in on their ability to analyze, evaluate and create information. Instead of assuming that some other institution — usually the family or the church — is going to equip all children with the attributes and values needed to succeed, we now bring this goal, as well, into the classroom. The teaching of knowledge is as vital as the teaching of how one of character should use knowledge.

By way of conclusion, a third significant factor contributing to the success of our schools must be mentioned — even if only briefly. Public schools in Canada are still places where a sense of hopeful future exists; where students, as author Jennifer James would say, think in the future tense. It is a place where committed teachers and administrators reach through the flux of a difficult time to nurture and polish a new generation rich in potential and aspiration. Bill Woods, an administrator with the Vancouver School Board, recently said that the true benchmark of a school's success can be seen by measuring the impact that it has on the lives of its children and by how far towards personal success they have taken these students. Unquestionably true words. An institution that works so well in its overriding goal to ensure the ascent of its students, is surely not itself in decline.