IT'S TIME
for a National Dialogue **on Education**

BY Paul Cappon

DR. PAUL CAPPON HAS BEEN THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS OF EDUCATION, CANADA (CMEC) SINCE 1996. ESTABLISHED IN 1967, CMEC IS THE NATIONAL VOICE FOR EDUCATION. COMPRISED OF MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR LEARNING FROM EVERY PROVINCE AND TERRITORY, CMEC WORKS WITH THE BROADER EDUCATION COMMUNITY TO ENSURE THAT THE EXPECTATIONS AND NEEDS OF THE CANADIAN LEARNER ARE BEING MET, AND THAT CANADA'S SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION REMAIN AMONG THE MOST INNOVATIVE AND FLEXIBLE IN THE WORLD.

Education, it seems, is now high on the national agenda.

In the final week of last November's federal election campaign, the Globe and Mail's editorial pages called education the "forgotten" issue of the contest, and demanded that the federal government take a greater interest in the learning opportunities that are provided to Canadians. A day before the Globe editorial, the Ottawa Citizen reported that John Manley, a high-ranking member of the federal cabinet, wanted to see a first ministers conference on education. Provincial and territorial cabinets, meanwhile, are finding that their education portfolios are (next to health care) among the most challenging to manage, let alone reform, and this is a trend that has remained constant for much of the last ten years.

Politicians and pundits are often accused of meekly following polls, and in this instance they may be right in doing so. In the latest annual Maclean's year-end poll, education (10%) was in a virtual tie with the economy (11%), in response to the survey question "What is the most important issue facing Canada today?". While health care topped the poll (at 35%), so-called hot button issues like crime (3%), taxes (8%) and government spending (7%), were all well behind education, indicating that the public may in fact be ahead of politicians in seeing this as a priority issue.

The apparent shift towards greater public understanding of the importance of education, along with a renewed willingness among politicians to explore new ideas, is certainly a welcome development. There are, however, a number of questions that should be asked before Canadians undertake any significant changes in the way education is provided.

A NATIONAL PRIORITY?

If Canadians want education to be a national priority, how should education providers — and the politicians responsible for delivering the service — respond? How can a long-standing jurisdiction of provincial and territorial governments be co-ordinated along national lines? Or is this even a good idea? If we start discussing new ideas about education, who should lead the dialogue?

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A quick sampling of these questions reveals the complexities involved in any retooling of the way Canadians learn. This should not, however, be seen as an excuse for inaction. Much of Canada's historical development has been fuelled by revolutions in education, and there is no reason why the country's future should not continue to be tied to the way in which Canadians learn.

The extent with which education, and educators, have shaped Canada is obvious. Past figures such as Bishop Laval and Egerton Ryerson helped fashion the early Canadian state through their establishment of colonial learning institutions. The delivery of education was in large part the impetus behind the federal system of government that came out of the Confederation debates. Canada's strong network of public universities was built to educate returning war veterans, and the massive growth in the size of provincial governments throughout the 1960s was fuelled by the need to educate an entire generation of baby boomers.

The links between education and the country at large remain transparent today. Much of Canada's future progress is linked to the new economy, an economy that places a great emphasis on an adaptable, highly-educated work force. From what we have seen so far, it appears that Canada is well-positioned to take advantage of this new paradigm. While the changes brought about by the information revolution are still ongoing, they have already transformed much of Canadian society. Just as the modern Canadian economy is symbolized by Nortel and not the CPR, the modern Canadian classroom can be found in the portable, electronic notebook of a lifelong learner, where it once was found mainly in red brick buildings.

While Canada — in large part due to its educated workforce — has so far benefited from the new economy, there is no guarantee that our current prosperity is limitless. Indeed, if education is the key to prosperity in this new age, then perhaps the growing number of Canadians (if the polls are any indication) who see this as a national priority in the years ahead are on to something.

A FEW SUGGESTIONS

If Canadians want to revamp the way(s) in which we educate ourselves, then how should we go about it? Below are a few suggestions:

Focus on educational delivery, not just constitutional responsibilities. In Canada, education is the exclusive jurisdiction of the provinces and territories. While the federal government has historically played a significant role in the funding and support of education (particularly in colleges and universities), the principal vehicle for educational delivery has always been the local, and not national, government. This is unlikely to change. If significant improvements to the delivery of Canadian education are warranted, they must be implemented with the full support of provincial and territorial governments. If pan-Canadian action is required, than it can be achieved only through the co-operation of provinces and territories that desire to seek improvements. Any and all systematic attempts to change the way Canadians are educated must recognize this.

Try new ideas, as well as new technologies. The revolution brought about by modern computing and the internet has certainly been felt in the classroom. Students now have access to more information than ever before, and learning institutions are struggling to find ways to keep up with technological innovations. But a focus on new technologies only provides the learner with an incomplete experience, since new ideas about how individuals learn are also beginning to transform the classroom. Researchers are learning more and more about the capacity of the human brain, and their studies are suggesting that greater stimulation of this vital organ can lead to an increase in learner development. A number of groups, such as the trans-national 21st Century Learning Initiative, are attempting to use this knowledge while designing new methods of teaching. Canadian schools could become more involved in the current transformation of the way in which individuals learn, and focus as much on pedagogy as technology.

Compare and contrast results and procedures, then see what works. In recent years, one of the most prevalent trends in Canadian education has been the increasing use of standardized assessments in schools. This trend has caused plenty of controversy in postsecondary education, as rankings (such as those undertaken each year by Maclean's) have opened up all sorts of debate about the merits of comparing distinctive universities and their programs. In the elementary and secondary sectors, uniform province-wide tests in core subjects have also generated much discussion.

While these forms of assessment may be in need of fine-tuning, their presence is useful; it has enhanced the ability of Canadians to undertake improvements to their education systems. By knowing to what degree institutions — or, on a pan-Canadian basis, jurisdictions — are succeeding in their attempts to provide a high-quality education, Canadians can have a more informed discussion about best practices while they determine how to achieve the best possible results.

This sort of information has been used to great advantage by our major trading partners. The United States has been tracking student progress in public schools since 1969, under the form of NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress). The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), in comparison, published the results of its first pan-Canadian standardized assessment (under its SAIP program) in 1993. In order to track generational trends and derive greater benefit from this information, these assessments should continue.

Replace debate with dialogue. Perhaps the most deliberate way in which we can change how Canadians learn involves a reshaping of how the current discussions over education take place. In the past decade, most (if not all) provinces and territories have attempted to restructure their education systems, only to face a barrage of criticism. While public questioning of government initiatives is an important part of Canadian democracy, indiscriminate resistance to change does not serve the Canadian learner. This is because the very forces that have been behind education reforms — the information revolution and globalization — will not simply go away if educators ignore them. The world is in fact undergoing an important economic and social transformation, and this transformation must be reflected in the classroom. It is critical, then, that a fair and frank dialogue replace acrimony, and that all stakeholders participate in the transformation of the Canadian classroom.

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A NATIONAL DIALOGUE

The time appears to be right for a national dialogue in education. There are important issues, ranging from the retirement of a generation of university professors to the proper use of new communications technologies in schools, which need to be addressed. The Canadian public, if polls are any indication, appear to be ready; the same might be said for Canada's political leadership.

There are a number of groups that can help frame the ideas for discussion, both within and outside the education community. These include organizations like the Canadian Teachers' Federation, the student federations, the Conference Board of Canada, the Canadian Education Association, the Canadian Federation of Labour, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges and the Business Council on National Issues. There is also, of course, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, which is — given its membership — a logical vehicle for any national dialogue.

Who leads the dialogue is not what's important. What is important is that there be a lot of participants, and that the dialogue should start soon.

It is time to hold a national dialogue on education.