

The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canada's Schools

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canada's Schools

by Paul W. Bennett

McGill-Queen's University Press (2020), 306 pages

ISBN: 978-0-2280-0084-6

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Seeing the modernization of the Canadian public schools as another case of embodying Max Weber's notion of modernity, Paul W. Bennett tells a story of the Canadian school reform, giving his critical diagnosis of this iron cage-like system. In his tenth book, *The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canadian Schools*, he paints it as a system that is alienating to students and parents, revealing a frightening picture of today's K-12 public education, which is meant to promote education democracy and equity (pp. 3-4). His concerns prompt the author to call for a fundamental structural change.

This book's 12 chapters can be roughly categorized into three symptom clusters: a history of accumulating the System's small problems, a symptom cluster regarding its bureaucratic administration, and another one affecting students and parents. The first chapter introduces the Canadian K-12 education system as a fortress-like, top-heavy, and unresponsive social organization under strain and stress, burdened by symptoms that have accumulated layer by layer over the last fifty years.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Bennett provides a historical perspective by retelling how the unnecessary educational bureaucracy of the modernized Canadian public schools developed from 1920 to 1993. The resulting "System" is characterized by three Bs: bigger, better, and bureaucratic (p.38). In such a vast, fortress-like system, most students' learning experience has been neither intellectually nor emotionally satisfying. To address students and their parents' concerns over "What had gone wrong?" (p.49), Chapter 3 describes ini-

tial remedial efforts to restore the System's accountability by implementing standardized testing in Ontario and other provinces from 1993 to 2015.

The crisis of public confidence in the modernized provincial school systems and its restoration coincides with school district consolidation in Canada. In Chapter 4, Bennett identifies the consolidation's advantages and disadvantages. For the former, he lists indivisibilities, increased dimension, specialization, and innovation and learning (p.69). For the latter, he reminds us of four potential problems of excessive consolidation. They are "higher transportation costs," "levelling up HR costs," "lowering of staff morale," and "less student and parent participation" (p.70). However, the hidden costs to pay for such "progressive" school consolidation are multifaceted. Accompanying it are a soaring expenditure busing and limited public education choices in a top-heavy system with a less competitive "success for all" curriculum. These worrying concerns as a symptom cluster are discussed from Chapters 5 to 8. Chapter 5 focuses on rising student transportation costs due to increased busing amidst consolidated schools. The yellow school bus symptom is associated with rising student transportation costs, which is the topic of Chapter 5. In Bennett's own words, "(y)ellow buses take a bigger and bigger bite out of regional school district budgets and a sizeable proportion of students depend upon buses to go to and from school" (p.94). In Chapter 6, Bennett discusses the public funding of faith-based schools in Ontario, the creation of linguistics boards in Quebec, and Saskatchewan's viable alternatives to public schools. Collectively, these cases show the extent of public choices in the modernized school systems.

With students' enrollment choices comes a new challenge: Inclusive education in the modernized public schools. Over the past two decades, Bennett notes in Chapter 7, "integrating students with special needs has been a high priority for Canada's provincial school systems" (Bennett, 2020, p.114). Citing the province of New Brunswick as an example, he explains that, although the Education Department full-heartedly promotes teaching students with a learning disability in the "one-size-fits-all" regular classroom model (p.130), in the eyes of the critics this strategy is illusory and turns a blind eye to students with complex needs, and to the needs of the teachers who may be overwhelmed by the growing numbers of such students.

Unexpectedly, more inclusive public schools also face another teaching strategy dilemma: How to teach? In Chapter 8, Bennett describes the conflict between the proponents of a balanced literacy program and the supporters of a whole language approach patched

with Reading Recovery. He adds that an ongoing math war also impacts today's teachers and students. For example, Manitoba mathematicians clearly express their worries over the continuing decline of students' scores, challenging the dominance of discovery math approaches while advocating a back-to-basics approach. Confronted with concerns over reading and mathematics challenges, public school advocates must balance how to ride with the new learning wave while avoiding stretching today's schools to their limits.

In contrast to the proceeding national-level narratives, in Chapter 9 Bennett recounts Ontario's student assessment reform as a unique example. Specifically, the focus on assessing students' social-emotional skills rather than measuring their actual domain-specific knowledge since 2013 may be an impediment to improving essential literacy and numeracy skills. In Chapter 10, he discusses the attainment-and-achievement gap amidst high graduation rates, implicating points out grade inflation and student disengagement in secondary students' increasing lack of preparedness for the transition to work and/or tertiary study. All in all, students' transition from school to work or university is not as satisfying as seen from the surface of high school graduation rates.

The last two chapters focus on school closures and school boards under pressure. In Chapter 9, Bennett recounts the rise and fall of the River John hub School Plan and other threatened rural schools from coast to coast, expressing concerns about being busted into the iron cage. As for school boards under pressure, he describes the Toronto District School Board in crisis from 2013 to 2015, the withering Quebec School Boards, and the disappearance of elected boards in Atlantic Canada. In the dissolution of School Boards in Nova Scotia, Bennett lists "some glaring and disguised deficiencies" (p.215), including being too big to be responsive, inability to address declining student performance, and a failure to monitor senior administration effectively (pp. 215-218).

After diagnosing these symptom clusters as occurring in K-12 education in Canada, in the Epilogue Bennett offers recommendations for treatment. Borrowing the idea of New Zealand's self-managed schools, he proposes to flip the System and rebuild the schools from the bottom up. He calls for developing a Made-in-Canada model of a local democratic educational governance. To achieve these goals, he considers three priorities: humanizing education for students, building a teaching-centred classroom, and engaging parents in family-focused schools.

While the public schools have been changing, new school systems in Canada have become too complicated to be understood by curious researchers, worrying parents, and

frustrated students. As a school reform expert, Bennett offers a unique perspective, which helps examine these issues in specific historical and cultural contexts. His understanding of historical events, heated debates, and significant cases in establishing the System has revealed a system out-of-balance. Speaking against the popular “Bigger is better!” he encourages readers to consider “Small is beautiful,” especially in light of the success of New Zealand’s restructuring of its public education system. Readers who care about the future of K-12 education in Canada will gain a valuable information perspective from this book.