

**Sam Allison and Roger Magnuson**

## **Woolco High**

Thousands of years from now archeologists will look for the “pyramids” of an earlier Canadian civilization. That they will unearth evidence of schools and shopping centres there can be no doubt. What may be wondered, however, is whether they will be able to tell them apart.

The trend to large regional high schools is a recent development. Only yesterday schooling was a neighbourhood activity carried on in relatively small institutions surrounded by grass and trees. Students even walked to school. But today high schools have succumbed to cement and centralization. In size and shape they increasingly resemble shopping centres, from their massive structures set low in sprawling parking lots to their intercoms barking out school announcements to an adolescent public. Moreover, high schools are now so far removed from residential areas as to be unreachable except by transportation. The result is that the yellow school bus has become an integral part of contemporary school life.

The decline of the neighbourhood high school can be attributed, in the first instance, to the changing community. Not too long ago the community was a place where people both lived and worked. But suburban development and zoning laws have changed all that. The traditional community has been replaced by the residential community, which excludes factories, hospitals, high schools and other institutions.

The rise of large regional high schools, or comprehensive schools as they are known, is due also to an educational philosophy that equates bigger with better. According to this view, large schools are educationally superior to small ones because they have the size and financial capacity to provide a comprehensive program. Small

high schools, it is said, do not have the facilities to meet the needs of all students.

Unfortunately, the comprehensive school has not been the educational panacea that many predicted it would be. There is growing criticism that a school whose clientele numbers in the thousands creates more problems than it solves. A frequently heard comment is that comprehensive schools are too large, too impersonal, and responsible for declining educational standards. It is also charged that they look and act more like department stores than like institutions of learning.

One effect of the comprehensive school movement has been greater educational centralization. Not only are schools larger and more distant from the population they serve, they have lost ground to provincial authorities in matters of decision-making. In short, the provincial ministry of education issues regulations for all schools, determines curriculum, and now has replaced local authorities as the principal source of school funding. Increasingly dependent on the ministry, comprehensive schools are responsible for implementing regulations emanating from above. The relationship is certainly not unlike a chain-store operation. Like branch stores, comprehensive schools deliver a product that is designed and packaged by head office. A practitioner of good marketing techniques, the provincial authority is constantly exhorting its branch schools to adopt the latest in curricular offerings and sales pitches.

Size has imposed administrative changes on the comprehensive school. The staff has been enlarged to include vice principals, department heads, counsellors and others, and the role of the principal has been redefined. The principal of Woolco High is cut in the cloth of a district branch manager, being less a head teacher than a director of a large enterprise. It is more than likely that he has taken a postgraduate degree in educational administration at the local university, where he has been trained in the techniques of managerial science. As a result he is knowledgeable in timetable planning, personnel management, and school organization. To him the good school is the efficient school. This is no bad thing. Should he fail as school administrator, he can, with his managerial expertise, find employment in a supermarket.

In the comprehensive school, teachers no longer teach, at least not in the conventional way. Preoccupied with union matters and professional development, and infected by the philosophy of student-centred education, they have become paid spectators in the learning process. Quite simply, teachers are no longer as active and

visible as they once were. They have abdicated their traditional teaching role, and now function more as passive clerks than as instructional leaders.

It is in the area of curriculum that comprehensive schools are most clearly differentiated from traditional high schools. On the principle that schools should cater to the interests of all students, comprehensive schools offer a dazzling array of curricular goods ranging from chemistry to cooking to calisthenics. Unlike the traditional high school where choice is limited, students in the comprehensive school can choose from among academic, vocational and commercial programs. Like consumers, students are free to shop for the courses they want. Too often, however, they are given to electing "junk courses," which add up to a poor educational diet. The result is that many of them leave school educationally undernourished. In the student-centre atmosphere of Woolco High almost nobody fails. Such a policy is useful since it keeps youngsters in school and therefore off the streets and off the labour market. On the other hand, the indifference to standards suggests that comprehensive schools are essentially custodial institutions.

Rare is the teenager who does not spend most of his adolescent life in high school. Educational officials will tell you that Woolco High's popularity is the result of an extended school-leaving age and a curriculum that appeals to individual needs. The truth is otherwise. What really attracts the adolescent to comprehensive schools is an efficient heating system and adequate parking space. Why else would attendance fall off dramatically in the spring and the schools themselves close in the summer months?