

EDUCATIONAL RESTRUCTURING IN QUÉBEC: THE THIRD WAVE OF REFORM

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Guest Editors

This special issue of the *McGill Journal of Education* is devoted to the current reform of education in Québec. All of the authors represented in this publication are both observers of and participants in the Québec education scene. They come from the Ministry, the university, school boards and schools, and together provide an eclectic perspective on the reform.

Education reform is neither new nor unique to Québec. It is a world wide phenomenon which dates back to the 1980s as various "waves of reform" have swept in and out of the education scene. The first wave was based on the assumption that the educational problems of the country could be attributed to low scholastic standards and poor quality teaching. The first wave was thus characterized by a "top-down" approach and a belief that the key policy levers to change were controlled by government.

The second wave of reform was almost a mirror image of the first. "Bottom-up" replaced "top-down" and the empowerment of teachers replaced the regulation of teachers. As Hanson (1991) states, "if the first wave of educational reforms identified teachers as the problem, the second wave identified them as the solution" (p. 34). Models for restructuring schools, including an emphasis on school-based management and the "empowerment" of teachers became the currency of the second wave.

The third wave of reform is best known by the term – *restructuring*, an eclectic term that encompasses a wide variety of *systemic* changes to the way education is governed, managed and provided. This third wave recognizes two fundamental principles: that *neither centralization nor decentralization works*; and, that schools may be the key locus of change but they *cannot go the distance alone*.

The history of education in Québec mirrors the above waves of reform with one major caveat. Whereas western education systems are generally portrayed as evolving steadily until the first wave of reform mentioned above, the modern Québec system began abruptly only thirty-five years ago as a result of the massive reforms that together produced Québec's "Quiet Revolution."

Prior to the Quiet Revolution education was administered by the Catholic and Protestant Committees of the Council of Public Instruction, a time when direction from the State was minimal and Catholic and Protestant school boards functioned in "splendid isolation" from each other and the State. Arguably the most significant governance reform effected during this period was the creation of the Ministère de l'Éducation [MEQ] as the primary "engine of change." If education was previously the preserve of the Church, it now belonged to the State which henceforth would decide both the means and the ends of the education system. Expansion and accessibility were the trademarks of this tidal wave of reform.

The second wave of reform in Québec occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the stated aim of moving beyond the problems of "bricks and mortar." Although governance, particularly school board reform, had a high place on the government agenda, the key reform issues of the decade were curriculum and school organization. The Government adopted new and expanded regulations governing elementary and secondary education. Usually referred to as the *régimes pédagogiques*, these regulations reflected a marked increase in government control over curriculum and covered a wide range of topics, including the nature and objectives of educational services, organization and framework for educational services, certification of studies, prescribed subject times, etc. Similarly, Ministry programs of study and accompanying guides were very detailed and prescriptive.

The next wave of reform was more tentative in nature, as the Ministry attempted to shift from the role of "change agent" to that of "facilitator of change." In keeping with the *second wave* of reform occurring in the United States and elsewhere, Ministry policy papers now spoke of faith in teachers and support from parents: "The Ministry, for its part, will strive to make the education system more flexible in order to give freer rein to those who work closely with the student" (MEQ, 1992, p. 14). Before anything conclusive could come from this reform effort, there was a change in government and another wave was soon on its way.

This most recent wave of reform is the subject of this special issue. The public catalyst for reform was the convocation of the Estates General on education in 1995. Its interim and final reports led to a new government policy statement and plan of action (MEQ, 1997) that set the agenda for a comprehensive and fast moving reform of education which is still ongoing.

Smith, Foster, and Donahue deal with the first major aspect of this reform – the governance of the education system. More specifically, they examine the trilogy of legislative reforms that began with the amendment of the Constitution. This was followed by the transformation of school boards from a denominational to a language-based system. Finally, the Government amended the *Education Act* to provide for a new distribution of powers, particularly at the school level. Although they review the reforms in a positive light, they caution that “there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that the lack of support provided to date for these fledgling structures [school governing boards] has already placed them at risk” (p. 220).

The second major aspect of reform – curriculum – is dealt with by Henchey in the next article. If governance provides the foundation and the facade for the reform, then curriculum provides the core. This is the most profound change in this domain since the above mentioned reform in the 1980s. As Henchey states: “These changes will have important implications for how schools are organized, how teachers do their work, the way in which programs are adapted to individual and community needs and the types of learning that are given priority in schools” (p. 227).

The next three articles do not deal with specific aspects of the reform but are more cross-cutting in nature. Freeland provides insights into the context and implications of the reform for the English speaking community of Québec. She states that: “In spite of the various challenges, the English community seems to have been re-invigorated by the introduction of linguistic boards and is showing every indication of a will to work together to maintain its network of schools and to take ownership of the reform in education” (p. 248).

Wiener is more skeptical than Freeland. Recognizing the centrality of teachers in any reform effort, he concludes that “despite the considerable intrinsic merit of the reforms currently underway or under development, the existing adversarial relationship between the provincial teacher federations and the government is too deep-rooted and too

intense for much progress to be made in the current context” (pp. 277-278).

Finally, we end with a focus on the school, namely the search for the “quality school.” Sturge Sparkes, with contributions from various practitioners and a Ministry official, uses the metaphor of the puzzle to examine the elusive nature of school quality. Her article serves to remind us that structural and other reform efforts are only the beginning of reform: “Beyond that, the *real* challenge, the building of the quality school, begins” (p. 303).

As alluded to above, the current reform is still ongoing. In 1997, the Minister of Education formed a Task Force on the Place of Religion in Schools in Québec, headed by Professor Jean-Pierre Proulx of the University of Montréal. The Task Force has just released its report (1999), which recommends a complete secularization of education. There are new policy papers on inter-cultural education and children with special needs (MEQ, 1998a, 1998b, 1999). A commission on municipal finance is recommending the elimination of property taxes for education and the replacement of school boards by some form of super-regional government (Commission nationale sur les finances et la fiscalité locales, 1999). Meanwhile, provincial negotiations with teachers and other education system employees are underway and already reform has become a sub-text of the negotiations as each side seeks to enhance its reform objectives or buffer itself from unwanted effects.

It is obvious therefore that this special issue does not – and indeed could not – provide a definitive analysis of the current reform. Even if it stopped moving, it is too vast to be dealt with in a single issue. We hope, however, that taken together these five articles will provide the reader with insights into the principal aspects of the reform and a basis for further reading and reflection.

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