



CANADA

REFERENCE PAPERS

INFORMATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
OTTAWA - CANADA

No. 45

(Revised May 1960)

THE CANADIAN SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

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This paper is designed for persons who are not acquainted with the organization of education in Canada. At the outset it may be helpful to explain that each of the ten provinces is autonomous in respect of the organization and control of education within its borders according to the agreement reached at the time of Confederation in 1867. Division of responsibility between provincial departments and local authorities exists throughout, since each province delegates a considerable degree of control to the local school districts for public elementary and secondary education and to the governing bodies in higher education. A strong conviction that the citizens of the provinces and local communities should have major control of education is seldom questioned. The provinces enforce few restrictions on those operating private schools and colleges. Federal interest, which is inevitable today, is shown concretely through grants to vocational education, to higher education institutions, and to research.

Interest in education has not only increased, it has changed. Few after-dinner speakers reminisce nostalgically today, as they used to, about the "little red schoolhouse", whether a red-brick, box-like shell, a one-room structure of rough-hewn logs, its crevices stuffed with moss, warmed by a generous fire blazing in an open fire-place, and standing sentinel in a forest clearing, or a frame structure heated by a pot-bellied station stove, a beacon on the wind-swept, snow-covered prairies. Instead they are likely to engage in the great national polemic over the aims and purposes of education, a controversy that has included vigorous criticism of our schools, teachers and pupils, ending too often with the nostalgic suggestion that we should regress to the good old days of their childhood. If, however, the present struggle is evidence of genuine interest on the part of scholars and other citizens, it may be read as a sign of health and a portent of progress.

In the early days, schooling at the elementary level consisted of reading, writing and number work, which was considered adequate for the majority. The forefathers of our French-speaking population were interested in its practical use for the occupations and professions, and the Roman Catholic Church showed tireless zeal in the conversion of the Indians and the production of good citizens with some knowledge of reading, writing, arithmetic and religion. The English-speaking population from the beginning was more secular, but possessed an equal respect for the role of education. In the eighteenth century, there were church schools, parish schools, charity schools, private venture schools, and, at the secondary level, Latin grammar schools and academies.