Book Review

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

Paul W. Bennett
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Reviewed by: Bonnie Stelmach
              Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta

The introduction of *The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canada's Schools* captured the thesis: "Everywhere you look, the march of urbanized, bureaucratic, centralized K-12 education is nearly complete, marking the triumph of the System over students, parents, teachers, and the engaged public" (p. 4). The author argued that those who are closest to the classroom and the outcomes of K-12 schooling are least involved in making decisions and that high-level school and ministry of education administrators are the insiders who confine parents, teachers, students, and employers to the outside where they are subjected to top-down decisions based on managerial, rather than student learning, priorities. Bennett concluded sardonically that the education system "processes students like hamburgers in a fast-food operation" (p. 4). Such stark imagery was paired with other rhetorical devices to dramatize his argument. From the first page, for example, the author personified Canadian education as "the System", justifying this with Max Weber's iron cage metaphor to suggest efficiency, rationality, and bureaucracy have "found concrete expression in ... the 'School System'" (p. 5). Such an articulation reflects the lexical tendencies of critical theorists, and the reader may expect a theoretical trouncing will ensue. To be clear, however, as stated on page five, *The State of the System* was not an attempt to re-diagnose the problems with Canadian schooling; the author sourced both American and Canadian thinkers and scholars who preceded him in this regard. Most notably, he borrowed Lewington and Orpwood's notion of "Fortress Education" (p. 13); their imagery of insiders and outsiders was Bennett's launch point, and he suggested their almost thirty-year old characterization of the problems with Canadian schooling has been "virtually unchallenged" (p. 7).

Admittedly, the school reform movement has suffered from inertia according to the critiques and commentaries published by internationally reputed scholars. At key historical moments, such as the beginning of a decade (e.g., Sarason, 1990) or a millennium (e.g., Eisner, 2000), scholars have registered disappointment and cautionary tales about reform initiatives. Most recently, Murphy (2020) argued that despite the promise of America's improvement agendas, schools have not significantly changed over the decades, and innovation tends to be more aspirational than operational. Both scholarly work and practice in Canadian education have been and continue to be influenced by our southern neighbour. John Dewey's progressive philosophy, for example, made its way into more than one province, and arguably with residual

effects, even if the label has been updated. Thus, Murphy's claims about the inertia of school reform over the last 100 years suggests that Lewington and Orpwood's nearly 30-year-old book is a somewhat legitimate reference for discussing schools today. At the same time, even though Bennett acknowledged that the system is under stress, his update of Lewington and Orpwood's concept of Fortress Education as he claimed on pages 16–19 curiously ignored failure of the system with respect to 2SLGBTQ+ students, Indigenous and Black students, English Language Learners, refugees, or those experiencing trauma, poverty, or mental illness, arguably the most pressing issues facing the current era. To his credit, Bennett acknowledged that classroom composition is a primary challenge for teachers today, but diversity and equity issues tended to be addressed under the banner of school choice (chapter six), special education (chapter seven), and francophone education (chapter seven), which makes the book feel out of touch even though inclusion and marginalization are indicated in the title of chapter seven. If one can overlook this problem, however, then *The State of The System* offers insights into the impact of more conventional educational decisions related to organizational structure (chapters two, four, five, six, and 11) and curriculum and assessment (chapters three and seven–10). A descriptive account of educational policies does offer the reader a sense of the players and factors that have shaped education.

The subtitle promises an interrogation of Canada's schools, but it is more apt to describe this book as a comment on provincial Canada as the three territories receive no mention. With respect to the overall argument of the book, it makes sense that the territories were excluded because one of the pillars in Bennett's blueprint for flipping the system as he called it in the epilogue—a community governance model that affords stronger local voice—is arguably already part of the education foundation in territorial Canada. As one example, Nunavut's education system has as its fundamental principle Inuit societal values, and the concepts of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit are entrenched in the *Education Act* (2008). To be fair, the author did employ the phrase "provincial school systems" (p. 13) in the first chapter that lays out his argument, but a direct statement about delimitations might dispel any expectations for a comprehensive treatment. It would also assuage readers who might feel affronted by the omission of the territories, given Canada's history and the current commitment to reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). This point aside, anyone who attempts to capture schooling in Canada has to contend with multiple histories, geographies, and cultures, and the author should be commended for harnessing key educational moments on select issues in provinces across the country. Not many have ventured a pan-Canadian argument regarding education. Since education trends and issues do tend to march across the map, by charting events in certain provinces the reader is able to appreciate both the isomorphic tendencies of educational policy as well as influence of local context. Highlighting the court case and final ruling in Saskatchewan regarding the funding of non-Catholic students in Catholic schools (chapter six), for instance, can be linked arguably to current debates about dissolving Catholic schools elsewhere but serves also as a discussion point on how provinces take up matters of school choice (e.g., Alberta), Charter rights (e.g., Quebec), and educational financing, which are matters common to all provinces.

This book was written to a Canadian reader. That Canada is set apart from other countries by having nothing more than the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) to mimic a national education body was taken for granted knowledge. The role of regionalism in Canadian education did come through with respect to some matters covered in this book, particularly those relating to language in Quebec, but anyone who has lived and taught in more than one province knows

that historical, political, economic, and cultural elements shape institutions in obvious and subtle ways. Despite the spread of educational orthodoxies through what Sahlberg (2012) has coined the *Global Education Reform Movement* (GERM), educational change and policy in Canada defies a universal description because of the provincial educational structure (Sackney, 2007). Prefacing the book with such an acknowledgment would assist an international reader new to the study of the Canadian education systems. Without this, the author's reference to "the System" might not translate to the figurative meaning that is intended.

Chapters two to 12 served to demonstrate the author's position that Canada's schools are failing students and parents. Bennett covered a lot of territory, including the history of school district consolidation, teacher union growth, progressive education, standardized testing, school choice, transportation, French immersion, Catholic schooling, assessment trends, high school completion, school councils, and rural school closure. The author approached his argument methodologically rather than theoretically, using case studies of provincial developments on these particular issues. With the exception of citing key Canadian scholars such as Corbett on rural education, or Galway on school boards, most of the references were based on commissioned research and books. Though data are cited, most were not based on peer-reviewed studies. Knowing conclusions from commissioned studies can be ideologically contained, this raises some questions about the overall approach, and the claims derived from it.

A case in point is chapter five on the cost of bussing. Bennett admitted there are few studies regarding the impact of bussing on students' ability to learn, and described school divisions as "flying blind" (p. 83) on their decision to bus more students, and to bus them at further distances. Yet, on page 89, he concluded: "Smaller schools are positively associated with improved achievement for impoverished students, so it's reasonable to assume that attending larger, more distant schools would have a more detrimental outcome." This, too, seems like flying blind toward a conclusion and discounts a constellation of factors outside of school size that have impacts on students' learning. Also, early in the book Bennett claimed that teacher preparation programs are stale because, except for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, faculties of education "are dominated by mentor teachers with little or no scholarly research interest or expertise" (p. 18). This argument is plainly false. Those who pursue academia do so because of a love for knowledge that is created through research, and in fact, the pressure to secure external research grants and to publish in peer-reviewed venues is immense for all tenured and tenure-track faculty in Canada, including those in education faculties that are not the OISE. These kinds of flippant moves detract from what the author presented. But, if one accepts that *The State of the System* is not intended to present a balanced debate grounded solidly in peer-reviewed evidence (although there is brief mention of the benefits of school board consolidation on page 69), then one could be a fellow traveller with Bennett in opposing school board consolidation, progressive education, standardized testing, rural school closure, and the corporatized organization of education units.

What is refreshing about this book is that the author took on some platitudes, assumptions, and distortions. In chapter eight, titled "Success for All," he argued that the assumption that schools should not only respond to, but solve, all social problems has continually expanded mandates and led to faddish reform that is hyper-focused on curriculum. The result is that knowledge-based curriculum gets pushed out by process-oriented curriculum (e.g., social-emotional learning) to meet the need of the day. His critique of this trend on page 149 was necessarily bold: "It may be time to ask how much of the expanding mandate of schools is the result of institutional failure elsewhere." Furthermore, he made an important distinction

between high school attainment and educational achievement (chapter 10) and demonstrated how policies such as social promotion and "no fail" result in credentialed but unprepared youth when it comes to employment or post-secondary pursuits. Finally, academics (e.g., Eacott, 2017) would agree with Bennett in his dismay over the influence of enterprising gurus and "TED Talk education rocks star(s)" (p. 66).

That Bennett is a proponent of small schools, back-to-basics curriculum, "deprogrammed" education ministries, and parent involvement in decision making was unequivocal. Left leaning readers may struggle with the book's overall argument, and its failure to include today's social justice agenda. As a treatise to re-engineer K-12 education from the schools up, as the epilogue suggests, it is questionable. First, Edmonton Public Schools is held up as a model of decentralization. But the division office, known locally as "the blue building," a three-storied edifice filled with consultants, coaches, and others bearing passkeys to the underground parkade, symbolizes the very corporate structuring and hierarchy that Bennett opposed. And Murphy (2020) declared school-based management one of the failures of school reform. Second, parent involvement is not a novel strategy, and Pushor's (2015) "parent knowledge" rests upon the platitude that "parents know their children best." In a pandemic study I conducted, a key benefit of emergency remote teaching was that for the first time, parents understood their children as learners (Stelmach, 2020), a critical epistemic positioning that Pushor overlooked in her typology. Furthermore, several chapters in Bennett described parent advocates who advanced their causes and commissioned studies. One even wrote a book. The problem is not that parents lack a say; the problem is that only some parents have a say. Parent involvement is not neutral. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a dominant consumer mentality of schooling whereby teachers are expected to deliver knowledge to passive recipients (Sahlberg, 2020). Bennett suggested more of the same. The key to success lies in an education system that promotes independence, resourcefulness, and resilience, and champions students who take responsibility for their learning (Sahlberg, 2020). This epochal moment has forced an interrogation of almost every assumption about schooling. Bennett's thesis rested upon these now questionable assumptions. It is no fault to the author that had this book been delayed, it likely would have been timely.

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Bonnie Stelmach is a Professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Her research includes parents' roles in K-12 schooling, particularly in secondary and rural contexts, and trends and issues in school leadership.