

Bennett, P. W. (2020)
The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canadian Schools.
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A provocative “tract for our times,” Paul W. Bennett’s latest offering, *The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canada’s Schools* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020), is a broad yet simplistic overview of the Canadian education system. Dr. Bennett’s book is written with verve and is an acidic commentary on a broad range of issues confronting public education. He traces a history from the 1920s, examining the shaping of a modern bureaucratic education system, through to a system focused on accountability and testing, and finally into contemporary times of school management and consolidation. Peppered throughout are Bennett’s seemingly fond recollections of days past with the one-room schoolhouse where students walked to their local school. It is through this romanticized lens that Bennett attempts to create a sweeping description of a singular Canadian education system. According to Bennett, “Reforming the System is essentially about parents reclaiming schools. Top-down decision-making, educational managerialism, and rule by the technocrats has run its course” (p. 237). So, how does Bennett’s call to action stand within the context of contemporary education, with all of its nuances and complexities?

Dr. Bennett has considerable first-hand experience as a long-time commentator on Canadian schools. He has a refined historical appreciation for the grey advocacy literature and commission nostrums, personalities, and panaceas purporting to bring our schools into the 21st century. In fact, Bennett’s book is one among many such jeremiads over Canada’s 150-year history that propose “solutions” for purported problems: to make education more humane, less bureaucratic, and as idyllic as possible, thereby restoring the relationships once found in a fictitious Arcadian past. If we are to situate Bennett’s tract within any particular tradition of educational reform in North American education, it would be Tyack’s and Cuban’s (1995) *Tinkering toward utopia in the United States*, to Lawton et al. (1995) *Busting bureaucracy to reclaim our schools*, and Michael Katz’s (1971) *Class, bureaucracy and schools—the illusion of educational change in America*, perhaps even as a riposte to J.E. Hodgins’ effusive Memorial upon Ryerson’s death in 1889 in Canada.

Since Bennett touts his book as a reality check, three central “facts” about Canadian education must be kept to the fore when reading such a prospectus, rather than retreating into the saccharine image of a Robert Harris painting of a school trustee meeting.

First, Canadian education is a behemoth when considered as a sector and not as a collection of isolated school buildings. That explains many of the difficulties in reforming “the system”—insofar as anyone can discern a single system. Approximately seven million students, or one-sixth of Canada’s 37 million citizens under the age of 18 enter a school and are “institutionalized” within it for about 180 to 190 days per year for 12 or 13 years in a series. If we add half a million teachers, school bus drivers, educational assistants, consultants, and “the bureaucrats” who structure and organize it, the ratio goes to 1 in 5 Canadians who are housed on a daily basis at immense taxpayer expense within the framework of “a school.” Education customarily is the second largest public expenditure of any provincial government, after health care. In 2015–2016, it was \$79B and is likely now hovering around \$100B per annum.

Rightfully, Canadian taxpayers as citizens have recurrently expressed concern with efficiency as well as quality in a mass education system.

Second, unlike many other countries, the Canadian constitution accords authority over schooling to the provinces. There is no national education bureau, unlike in the United States or France, but rather only a host of interest groups such as the Canadian Teachers' Federation and People for Education, among others, who operate on a pan-Canadian basis. The Council of Ministers of Education Canada accomplishes some coordination among provinces and has some pan-Canadian interests with Statistics Canada. But education is resolutely provincial north of the 49th parallel, even if educational rhetoric is routinely drawn from south of the border. The provincial Minister of Education in most Education Acts has sweeping authority within that province to enact changes but only in their capacity as a member of a Cabinet. Thus, educational policy is created in the provincial capital, and local education policy is created by a locally elected school board, where it exists. Power resides within democratically controlled mechanisms in every Canadian province.

Third, Canadian teachers are professionals and have been since at least the 1930s, perhaps earlier. They undergo extensive and expensive training to acquire their skills to obtain a teaching credential. Teachers are further expected to maintain ongoing competence through frequent professional learning. In Canada, all teachers in the public system belong to a professional association, or a "trade union," as a misguided media call it. Teachers are paid according to the terms of a collective agreement which is negotiated with the government and/or local school board. Much of the paperwork and other decision-making, and hence the bureaucracy of schooling, revolves around supporting all the pieces that underpin the professional status of half a million full-time equivalent teachers. To slice away that bureaucracy, is to take a slice at teachers' professionalism.

To find your way through his expansive commentary, you might first look for Bennett's central argument as found in the Epilogue:

The fundamental test of an initiative would be its efficacy in turning the school system right side up and building from the school level up, not the top down. Turning the situation around does require a structural change to set right a system where a closely knit educational leadership class have co-opted the educational agenda to preserve and protect their interests rather than serve the needs of children, teachers, parents, or local communities (p. 227).

To support this vision, Dr. Bennett delves into several key challenges of education systems: the closure and consolidation of small schools, transportation, and notions of school choice. He notes schools have become larger in recent decades, with the smaller schools within walking distance of the community victims of school closures. Without specific data, Bennett blames declining student outcomes and the growing costs of the education system on the consolidation of schools, which leads to ballooning central offices, and thus school systems larded with bureaucrats. The support for this argument is drawn from examples from Canada's largest urban centres; however, the communities that have experienced the most change as a result of consolidation are rural schools. Bennett's argument lacks the nuance of context, lumping the experiences of urban, suburban, and rural school divisions into over-drawn platitudes that are misleading.

Dr. Bennett's arguments surrounding the hidden costs of busing students are similarly flawed. Setting the stage for the chapter on busing is a necrotized image of the yellow school bus, lumbering its way through communities, picking up and dropping off students so that they can access their education. Throughout the chapter, Bennett focuses on the negative implications of bussing, and there are many, including increasingly lengthy bus rides, bullying, and potential health impacts from the exhaust. The unintended consequences of shortening or eliminating bus rides, such as increased expenses to achieve shorter bus rides, are not examined. Bennett's argument is bolstered with examples from Atlantic Canada and West Virginia in the United States. Specific, quantitative data is presented simply as a budget line expenditure, without meaningful analysis of the cost per student, average run times, and other factors that could provide more insight into the meaning of those numbers. Yes, transportation costs have increased significantly over time. So too have fuel, insurance, maintenance costs increased, as well as wages. Little attention is paid to transportation in the prairie provinces or on the West Coast, where experiences may well vary from Atlantic Canada. Once again, Bennett makes sweeping generalizations to support his argument.

In Dr. Bennett's analysis of the Canadian education system, parent choice and parental understand-

ing of an optimum education system trump all else. Bennett opens the argument regarding school choice with the ongoing discourse about whether or not Canada's public education systems should fund religious education, namely Catholic separate schools. In several provinces in Canada, Catholic education is entrenched, though there are periodic legal and political challenges to the legitimacy of parallel public education systems. Interestingly, the chapter on school choice is followed by chapters on inclusion or, as Bennett derisively calls it, "success for all." In these two chapters, Bennett makes the argument that there is too much diversity in schools and that the system is called upon to meet the diverse needs of many through inclusion. The undertone of Bennett's "success for all" terminology is one of scorn. Bennett perpetuates the narrative that any education system's primary goal is to select and sort students for post-secondary. But if the public education system is not intended for all students and their success, where are students who do not fit the compliant, conforming, and well-achieving stereotype to go for their education? Bennett frames his argument as empathy for teachers, given that all teachers are asked to go beyond teaching, which has merit. However, he does not propose solutions to provide teachers with greater support to do their work more effectively, nor does Bennett address how his idealized education system is not one of segregation.

Indeed, the central issue becomes who makes the choices for whom: Is it parents who can choose small schools without many or indeed any options for students because the local school is too small to offer a range of programs. Of course, all choice is governed by the basic rule of an "economy of scale." Is it a larger school with multiple program offerings and students choosing among different pathways and courses in a building large enough for students to have alternatives such as a course in design, consumer economics, or French Immersion? Obviously, Dr. Bennett has no understanding of the capital costs of building schools versus the costs of running a fleet of buses. He prefers simple diagrams and misleading organizational charts rather than delving into the economics of education and considering the capital costs of running an education "system." In the continuum between parent choice and student choice, he explicitly values the former over the latter.

Dr. Bennett proposes that schools run by councils of parents would be far more effective and would ensure that parents' voices and choices were honoured. This is a noble prescription. Versions of this proposal already exist in multiple formats, including elected trustees for school divisions and parent councils for schools within school divisions. While many parents are well-meaning, thoughtful contributors to the education system, there are others who have particular agendas or are using the political experience gained as part of a school board to further their political capital.

Perhaps surprisingly, Dr. Bennett never defines the "system" or the "state," notwithstanding his title and the capital 'S's. Such conceptual frameworks are necessary for carrying out and illuminating a thesis and thereby preventing his assemblage from becoming a simple pastiche of his online blog entries. Is he referring to David Easton's definition of a system and systems thinking in political science at the University of Toronto (certainly the font of all wisdom in Bennett's optic, since his alma mater alone seems to offer graduate education in Canada! —what about York University, the University of Alberta, Laval University, or UBC?), or von Bertalanffy's general systems theory, or even David Schon's reflective practitioner. It is one thing to decry a system, but without knowing what the nature of that "system" is, it remains difficult to uphold his thesis. Certainly, the metaphor of school as a factory is overdrawn, stale, and far from novel in conveying a very traditional view in organizational theory that ignores human resources and symbolic cultural views of schooling.

Second, and perhaps more alarming, is Dr. Bennett's fuzzy view of the "state." Presumably, it is any appendage, agency, or vehicle of civil government, which he hopes to "radically" flip upside down. Bennett's view is that the state stands apart from the citizenry, that parental participation in the democratic process is not part of the state, and that critics such as himself are not part of the Canadian educational state but rather sit outside it. When people who advocate as reformers, who tout themselves as radical, who claim that bouleversements will somehow render our schools more "humane", we should undoubtedly become nervous.

Inexplicably, for a book about education, the book is nearly devoid of students. Student aspirations, perspectives, and experiences are absent from Dr. Bennett's conceptualization of the educational state, and the focus is squarely placed on the adult actors within the system. Bennett fails to consider how the day-to-day realities of students have changed over the past century: they are entering the education

system with vastly different aspirations and experiences, both over time and even among their contemporaries. The needs and experiences of families also vastly differ from the era that Bennett harkens back to as an idealized form of education. If we were to revert to Bennett's antiquarian ideal, most students would obtain their grade 8 and leave school. Canada is now highly urbanized, with a significant number of families having all parents working to support the family; post-secondary degrees are no longer a guarantee for a specific type of quality of life. Students who access the education system are increasingly complex and have nuanced experiences, but their voices do not enter into Bennett's analysis.

So, the question remains: is this scholarship or polemic? Footnotes, a bibliography, and a doctoral author are certainly prerequisites for scholarship. McGill University-Queen's Press as publishers lend the tract a marquis and a cachet as an academic publication. Yet when key concepts such as the state, system, policy, bureaucrat, or choice are not defined, nor even less, put into a framework, it remains difficult to ascribe this as an academically-sound text. Instead, Dr. Bennett's *The State of the System* reads like a keynote speech at a large conference, heavy on the sweeping generalizations, light on research, and conclusive with grandiose pronouncements that have no hope of being implemented in a context as diverse as Canadian education. There is little recognition that education is the purview of the provinces, each operating within quite different policy and governance realities. As he concludes, Bennett calls on us to "...focus our energies on what is really fundamental: regaining control over our schools, rebuilding social capital, and revitalizing local communities" (p. 237). But Bennett's nostalgia for a romanticized one-room schoolhouse does not take into account the changing and growing societies in which we live. So, our advice will always be to side with policymakers and civil servants who have devoted 150 years to adapting and operating a "system" that Canadians have created. Our hope is that Dr. Bennett continues to wield a polemical pen, rather than setting up misplaced barricades to change and honking his horn against bureaucratic over-regulation.

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