

Public Miseducation

To judge by the mudslide of confused letters [to *The Edmonton Journal*] that strained to avoid the central argument, critics of my views on the dangers of public education have suffered far too much of it.

What we get is the same old spectacle of entrenched vested interests arguing insanely to protect their turf by ignoring the educational trinity of mind, body and spirit. But as I said, the game is over: on the whole, in the long run, despite even the best intentions, public education cannot be successful because it is run by government, and inherent in all government enterprise is a tendency both to crowd out the resources intended for the consumers of the service, and to displace community values with state values.

What's needed to reverse this, is structural change to ensure that the party with the greatest interest in the educational trinity always has the option to directly reward or punish the service provider.

Parents need choice in education.

While not perfect, some form of voucher system would at least begin the process by changing the paymaster from government to parents. All parents should receive one educational voucher worth the per-capita unit cost of education for each child, and be allowed to spend it at any school of their choice. No government needed. Gone. The parents will be the first to discover bad schools, and the first to find a better. Overnight, public schools would get what they fear most: competition for quality, discipline, and standards, all stemming from competition for parental approval - and dollars. Bad teachers hate such competition. Good teachers welcome it. To test the idea, just answer this question: If we had such a system, and the government tried to compete, would you give your voucher to a private school, or a government school? I wager even most public school teachers would send their own kids to private schools. Many already do.

And sky-high drop-out rates and illiteracy rates would soon tumble. Contrary to my critics, these can't get much worse. Statistics Canada's 1990 literacy report for the National Literacy Secretariat (which "builds upon" the 1987 Southam survey I mentioned in an earlier article), merely chops up the bad news. It divides numeracy and reading skills into three or four levels that range from low (barely "recognizes" a number, or "cannot read"), to high ("enables them to meet most everyday demands"). That's "most" everyday demands. Not all demands. Even Statscan's highest literacy/numeracy level, aims low. Examples of everyday demands at the highest level were: calculating a simple bank deposit slip, figuring out a swimming pool schedule, or writing a letter to complain about an appliance. None of this is about true literacy, but about getting by.

Actually, Statistics Canada tells a story that glides over an appalling situation. First, its target survey group is neither representative, nor random. Residents of the Yukon and North West Territories, of the armed forces, those on Indian reserves, and

inmates of institutions were not included in the sample. Thousands of Canadians known to have the very lowest abilities - were intentionally left out. Second, the analysis and descriptive language are everywhere too flattering: even having no skill is called a skill. And I was dead wrong on the 25% illiteracy figure. According to Statistics Canada, it's actually 38% for numeracy when you add up those stopped by level one (24%) and level 2 (an "additional" 14%). And I'm not including the "estimated 820,000" who were excluded because they couldn't read either official language of Canada, or couldn't understand the most basic questions. An additional whopping 1.2 million Canadians apparently undertook, but "refused to complete" the writing tasks. If because unable, this reality ought to have been included.

But here's the rub for teachers: a measly 64% of those who actually completed high school reached the highest (and very undemanding) numeracy level. In other words, 36% of all of our graduates are not sure to get through the everyday, numberwise. So my question is, How did they graduate? Even worse: of those 16-24 years of age (prime student years), fully 44% didn't get past level 2! It's time to ask for our money back.

As for reading? More bad news. Not 25%, but again, fully 38% of Canadians cannot reach the highest everyday level. And fully 47% of Canadians could not write a simple letter requesting the repair of an appliance.

Here's more: only 70% of those "with high school completion" make it to level 4. Public school teachers are graduating a lot of ignoramuses, and devaluing the high school degree in the process. It's a rip-off.

Never mind the public university scam: fully 7% of those "with a Bachelor's degree or above," and 16% of those with a community college diploma or certificate, could not make level 4. As supposedly educated people go, they're illiterate - with a degree to prove it.

So there's the picture: Stupefying illiteracy rates, shameful drop-out rates (even if we accept Statscan's padded number of 18-20%, it's very bad. Germany's rate is 10%; Japan's, 2%); and unconscionably high per-capita costs.

It's time for parents to assume the direct responsibility they ought never to have surrendered, and take back their schools.