

Taking charge of the future

This country depends more on what happens in our schools than what happens in our banks

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What is the role of schools in creating the Canada we want?

It's time to start thinking about what kind of country we want to live in.

That was the message of a forum this week sponsored by the Canadian Education Association and People for Education.

Do we want to live in a country of engaged citizens who feel they "belong" to something? Do we want to be a nation of innovators contributing to the rest of the world with our strong environmental policies, our dedication to global citizenship and our examples of social responsibility? Do we want to be able to harness the power of our population's diversity?

Or do we want to continue to lead the world in our rate of consumption? Do we want to watch passively as the gap between the rich and everyone else continues to grow, as we lose hundreds of species from our environment, and as fewer of us choose to vote?

According to Glen Murray, former mayor of Winnipeg, president of the Canadian Urban Institute and chair of the Canadian National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, Canada is at a crossroads. Our population, our economy and our environment are being transformed.

So we have to decide what we want. Then we have to decide how we're going to get there.

Our best chance to influence our country's future may lie in our publicly funded schools. More than 90 per cent of Canada's young

people go to public schools (in Ontario, that percentage is even higher) and those schools can be the leaders of the change. As Penny Milton of the Canadian Education Association put it, "Schools should condition social progress, rather than be conditioned by it."

Our schools are doing a pretty great job in their drive to improve students' literacy and numeracy – test scores are up, Canadian students are among the top 10 OECD countries in reading, writing, math and science, and our graduation rates are among the highest in the world. But is that enough? What kinds of students are we graduating? Do they have the right attributes to allow them to succeed? Are they really the creative thinkers and innovators that we need? Do they have a sense of citizenship and social responsibility? Do they all – rich, poor, newcomer, aboriginal, those who live in cities and those who live in rural areas and the North – feel they have an equitable chance for success? Probably not.

Our future is going to be determined much more by what happens in our schools than what happens in our banks. So what do we need to change?

Herveen Singh, one of the panellists at the forum, formerly a "student at risk" and now a graduate student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, says that first of all our education system has to acknowledge the change in the world around it. "We've got to listen to the voices of students, we've got to build more bridges between schools and the world, and we have to expand our notion of what equity means."

Glen Murray says we've got to do a much better job at breaking the pattern of mass marketing and mass consumption in this country. And he says the only place we can do that effectively is in our schools. We have to figure out how to instill the value of citizenship in our students. In the U.K., for example, citizenship is taught as a fundamental ideal. They challenge students to be critical thinkers; they get them to solve real problems and debate scary things like values and politics. They assume that young people can think independently and can participate in effecting change.

But in Canada these days, in their consumerism, people identify more with the economy than with their country, and our schools have shied away from challenging that.

At the forum, people wanted practical ideas about what needs to be done. Everyone agreed that our hope lies in our schools. And everyone agreed that schools have to lead. And everyone even agreed that the shift in our collective thinking about schools – from viewing them as something that was good for the country to something that was more a private good, focused on individuals' economic success – was part of the problem.

So what needs to be done? The school system itself has to do a much better job at making the connections between schools and the world around them. It has to be less afraid of tackling world issues and values. In fact, it has to see it as its responsibility.

If critical and creative thinkers are what we need in the 21st century, we have to rejig what has become a two-tiered curriculum, where we have relegated the kinds of courses that produce those very attributes to the bottom tier. We have to redefine success in education beyond simplistic targets for test scores, because they don't tell us much about the overall health of our education system. We have to look critically at our focus on literacy and numeracy and make sure that political targets haven't gotten in the way of truly educational ones.

And to answer one of the biggest questions asked at the forum: Why should anyone else (outside of parents and teachers) care about what happens in our schools? Because our country depends on it. Because our schools have the potential to lead the change and the potential to create a brighter future for all of us. But only if we demand it of them.

Annie Kidder is executive director of People for Education, an independent parent-led organization. Clips from the forum will be available on the websites of the CEA and People for Education: www.cea-ace.ca and www.peopleforeducation.com