

# MACLEANS.CA

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MACLEAN'S ARCHIVE

Cover

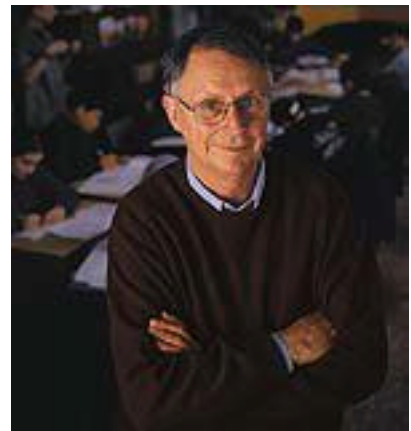
## Saving Our Schools

**We all know about the crisis in Canadian classrooms.  
Meet the local heroes who are doing something about it**

JOHN SCHOFIELD with KEN MACQUEEN in Vancouver,  
BRIAN BERGMAN in Edmonton and SUE FERGUSON in Toronto

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On a bright spring day in Toronto, a weather-beaten candy wrapper blew silently across the schoolyard at Valley Park Middle School, disappearing into piles of trash. The place was a mess -- in more ways than one. A month-long strike by janitors, secretaries and other support staff had virtually closed the country's largest school board, leaving buildings in disarray and 300,000 frustrated students and their parents to fend for themselves. Cockroaches and mice feasted in some deserted classrooms. In the washrooms, the intensity of the odour was stomach-turning. Not nearly as strong, however, as the anger outside. It was the third strike to hit the Toronto District School Board in the past three years. Last week, in the wake of back-to-work legislation, support workers grudgingly returned to school. But the city's students felt like the biggest losers. "It's been like a war every year," says Bronwyn Underhill, an outgoing 18-year-old in her last year at Malvern Collegiate Institute. "And that's not what education should be all about."



With ingenuity and grit, McLauchlan is reinvigorating an inner-city Vancouver school  
Photo: Christopher Morris

One hundred and thirty years after it was conceived by Egerton Ryerson, the first superintendent of education for what was then Canada West, Canada's public-school system is struggling under the strain of funding cuts, labour strife and the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. The signs of stress abound. Demoralized teachers and support staff are leaving the system in droves. A growing shortage of teachers threatens to cripple the system: Statistics Canada estimates that school districts across Canada this year are already suffering from a shortfall of 20,000 teachers. Meanwhile, trustees, hamstrung by strict provincial funding formulas, are closing schools and cutting subjects once taken for granted, such as art, music and physical education, as well as many special-ed programs. More than ever, parents and teachers are digging deep into their pockets to pay for textbooks and classroom supplies. And as they do so, a growing number of Canadians are beginning to question whether the system can survive -- and if so, how.

The road to salvation seems far from clear. Some provincial governments are turning to the marketplace for inspiration, demanding greater accountability, more standardized testing and wider school choice for parents. Innovative school districts, spurred by the funding crunch, are charting their own course for renewal. They have been joined by a new army of parent volunteers and activists, fighting to save the system.



A founder of People For Education, and mother of Molly and Katie, Kidder tracks how schools have been starved of resources

Photo: Craig Chivers for Maclean's

An increasing number of parents, however, fed up with the fighting and a perceived decline in quality, are opting out. An estimated 80,000 families across Canada now educate their children at home. And in the past 10 years, the number of students enrolling in independent schools has risen by 23 per cent. Last fall, Halifax business administrator Terry Temniuk and his wife, Janice Greene, a controller, enrolled their seven-year-old son, Daniel, in Bedford Elementary Academy, a new private school where tuition is set at \$3,800 and class sizes are limited to 16. "There are a lot of issues with our public schools here," says Temniuk. "Now, we don't have to deal with that nonsense."

For the vast majority of Canadians, however, opting out is not an option. The public-school system still serves 95 per cent of the country's school-age children. But too many of those students are falling through the cracks: Canada's high-school graduation rate at age 18 is among the lowest in the industrialized world. Public confidence in the overall system is mediocre at best: in a Gallup poll conducted this year, less than half of the respondents reported that they are satisfied with the education that Canadian children are receiving. In Ontario, polling by researchers at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education shows that the percentage of those who believe public education is improving has dropped from more than 35 per cent in 1979 to less than 20 per cent last year.

The doubts are well-founded. Since 1995, the percentage of provincial wealth devoted to education has declined dramatically. While such provinces as Saskatchewan and Alberta are gradually beginning to reinvest, the amounts fall far short of the hundreds of millions of dollars cut from education across Canada during the 1990s. "The anxiety over public education is far more widespread than ever before," says Michael Fullan, dean of OISE and an expert on education reform. "But people are also far more interested in what we're going to do about it."

Rocked by a steady stream of contentious school reforms, Ontario has emerged as the epicentre of discontent. Since 1995, the Conservative government of Premier Mike Harris has revamped the curriculum, imposed a strict funding formula, reduced the powers of school boards, increased the workload for high-school teachers, and threatened mandatory supervision of extracurricular activities. Recently, it introduced a brand-new round of reforms that call for standardized testing in every grade, and offer more school choice for parents.

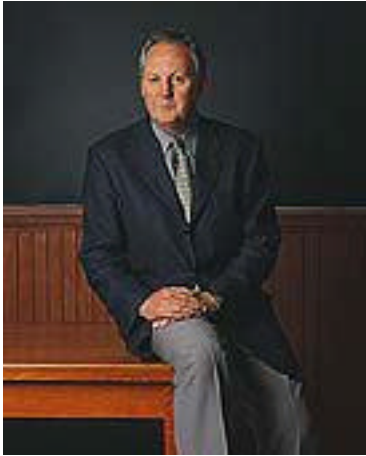
People for Education, a provincewide parents' advocacy group, has systematically charted how elementary schools have been starved of resources. In its most recent tracking report, the group reported that students in 66 per cent of the 940 Ontario schools surveyed had to share textbooks; special needs students in many cases were waiting more than a year for assessments; and 85 per cent of schools had only a part-time principal. "There's an ad hoc quality to these changes," says Annie Kidder, a Toronto mother of two and a founder of the group. "And there's a danger that we'll actually reform public education to death."

The turmoil spreads far beyond Ontario. In Nova Scotia last year, deep cuts to education ignited angry protests across the province, eventually persuading the government to soften the blow. Even so, school boards are slashing millions of dollars, schools are being closed and teachers are losing their jobs. Many Newfoundlanders are still smarting from the massive disruption caused by their province's move to non-denominational schools. In British Columbia, a battle royal is shaping up between teachers and premier-apparent Gordon Campbell, who has repeatedly vowed to remove teachers' right to strike if he wins office in the May 16 election. In Alberta, most teachers' contracts expire on Aug. 31, and union leaders are making it clear they expect the same double-digit wage increases that the province has granted to doctors and nurses.

The unrest only compounds the difficulties of a system struggling to meet the needs of enormously diverse communities. Take British Columbia's Richmond School District: students in the suburban Vancouver board represent 75 distinct languages and cultures. And thanks to the policy -- now common across Canada -- of integrating special-needs students in regular classrooms, Richmond has three times the provincial average of autistic children. The number of students in English-as-a-second-language programs has jumped from 300 a decade ago to 7,000. Add to that a liberal sprinkling of children with behavioural problems and troubled family backgrounds. "It's a much more complicated world than it was when I started in 1976," says David Chudnovsky, president of the B.C. Teachers' Federation. "Kids come to us with many more complex home and social problems than ever before."

The challenges seem daunting, and magic solutions are in desperately short supply. But from his base in OISE's bunker-like building in downtown Toronto, Fullan has been jetting around the world for years, helping leaders in government and education revitalize their ailing public-school systems. Though far from a household name in his own land, the 60-year-old academic is recognized as one of the world's foremost authorities on educational reform. Through years of hands-on work, Fullan has proven that successful reform is achievable. But it is never an easy task. "There's a fair amount of inertia in the public-school system," says Fullan, a product of Toronto's separate-school system during the 1950s. "We've inherited a bureaucracy, and there are a lot of bad habits that have accrued."

In recent years, Fullan has garnered attention as the guiding light behind the impressive turnaround of England's public-school system.



Fullan believes that educational reform is doomed without comprehensive support for those on the ground  
Photo: Rick Chard

As head of the team evaluating the effectiveness of reforms at the elementary level, he flies there at least three times a year. The government of Prime Minister Tony Blair has based its approach on Fullan's belief that educational change is doomed without equal measures of government pressure and comprehensive support for those on the ground. Schools must be given the tools to heal themselves. That's where governments often fall down because support requires strategically directed investment and a generous dollop of patience. "The time line for implementation," says Fullan, "is always longer than the next election."

Powered by his own passion for education as "the great liberator," Blair began implementing his strategy for renewal within days of taking office in 1997. Working closely with Michael Barber, a former education professor at the University of London, Blair developed a plan that hinges on three main initiatives: the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies at the elementary level; fundamental reforms to secondary education, due to take shape over the next three years; and what the government terms the "modernization" of the teaching profession. All three strands have come with real increases in spending, totalling eight per cent this year alone. As part of the literacy drive at the elementary level, 23 million new books have been purchased since 1997, and virtually all of England's 190,000 elementary teachers have been retrained in more effective methods of teaching reading, writing and math.

Despite controversy over some aspects of the plan, including an initiative linking teacher pay and performance, the Blair strategy appears to be working. After four years, the percentage of 11-year-olds scoring in the top two levels of the national literacy test has risen from 56 per cent in 1996 to 75 per cent last year, and the results for

numeracy are equally impressive. In addition, students in the lowest performing area of the country have exceeded the national average in literacy in only four years, while the poorest performers in numeracy have achieved the same feat in only two years. Says Barber, head of the standards and effectiveness unit in the department for education and employment: "The government is demonstrating that you can reform publicly provided education and it can win parental confidence."

The Blair reforms also bear Fullan's mark in other respects, including the key role given to testing. While many educators today take aim at policy-makers for their apparent obsession with standardized tests, Fullan argues that testing based on clear standards can provide the leverage needed to improve the system from its slumber. In the age of accountability, he argues, testing is not going away. His bottom line? It's not the raw scores that count, but what you do with them. By pinpointing areas of weakness, testing can be a catalyst for improvement. "I think it's reasonable for the public to say, 'We want to know how our schools are doing,' " says Fullan. "But unless educators build up their ability to work with testing, it's going to be a blunt instrument."

Even more important, England's emphasis on professional development underlines the essential role that teachers play in educational change, and the critical importance of collaboration in breaking down teachers' traditional isolation. Research shows that the impact of a talented teacher on a child is much greater than enrolment in a particular school. Fullan's philosophy also recognizes the value of a strong principal in building an effective school. Last year, the Blair government demonstrated its commitment to developing top principals when it opened the state-of-the-art National College for School Leadership at the University of Nottingham.

Oddly, governments in Fullan's own backyard have been slow to embrace his prescription for change. In a climate of fiscal constraint, the provinces have moved quickly to make school districts more accountable, but have shown less enthusiasm for offering support. The missing link is money. If anything, support in the form of resources or teacher training has been chopped. Canadian educators who have launched Fullan-style reforms have relied instead on private funding.

Striking workers in Toronto last month  
Photo: Craig Chivers



A grant from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, and Fullan's personal involvement, helped spearhead an outstanding Canadian initiative in 1991: the Manitoba School Improvement Program Inc. Fullan chaired the program's educational advisory committee for six years. The nonprofit organization's mission is to improve the learning experiences and outcomes of secondary-school students by building a school's ability to engage them actively in their learning. At the behest of individual schools, MSIP consultants kick-start a process of dialogue and exploration involving students, staff, parents and the community before undertaking a five-year commitment to provide assistance, including modest annual grants. In the early 1990s, Winnipeg's Glenlawn Collegiate sought help to reverse a spiralling dropout rate. Among other things, the grants were used to reshape curriculum and train teachers in new skills. Since 1992, the school's graduation rate has improved by 15 per cent. About 43 schools have opted to maintain an ongoing relationship to promote continuous improvement. "Schools direct their own improvement journey," says Sharon Pekrul, the program's executive director. "But change is slow, and it's really hard work. It's all about risk-taking."

Powered by \$750,000 in private funding this year, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board's Beacon School program also relies on a spirit of dialogue to integrate schools more closely with their surrounding neighbourhoods. Established last year, the initiative gives principals at 20 schools, all with a high percentage of needy students, new freedom to foster community partnerships. Connaught Public School, for instance, serves downtown Ottawa's low-income neighbourhoods, and its catch-ment area includes emergency housing. Ten to 15 per cent of its students are technically homeless at any given time. In Suzanne Schroeter's kindergarten class, the teacher is scrambling eggs -- supplementing what may have been a meagre breakfast for each child, and her lessons. With her pupils sitting politely at low tables with gingham tablecloths, Schroeter begins serving the snack. "This is how you eat at a party with good manners," she tells the children. Signs on the wall offer harmonious messages: "We listen to each other. Hands are for helping, not hurting."

In the school's largest partnership, members of a local Kiwanis Club chapter come in once a week to read stories to children one-on-one, a literacy-building exercise that few of them share with their parents. Teaching English is a particular challenge at Connaught because many of the children's parents have low literacy levels themselves. "Kids who need the most need to be reached through the schools," says

principal Nancy Douglas. "We need to feed them and clothe them. We can't do our jobs if we don't do that first." Barb Stollery, a superintendent with the board who spearheaded the program, says the effort to reach out to the community has also been motivated by the difficult funding environment that schools face today. "We've been forced to become more creative in how we handle things," she says. "You can't stand alone anymore."

Elsewhere, as in England, educators have responded to challenging times by expanding the role of the principal and giving schools more independence. By offering a dramatic degree of autonomy to principals and their schools, Edmonton Public Schools have earned an international reputation for providing choice within the public system. The board offers 31 distinct programs, including two Christian schools, a soccer academy and a Spanish academy. Fully 58 per cent of students attend schools outside their catchment areas. While the pros and cons of choice are hotly debated, Edmonton superintendent Emery Dosedall is convinced he's giving local families what they want, and that his principals and teachers are key to the board's success. "Ninety-two cents of every available dollar here goes to the schools," says Dosedall. "I hold my principals accountable to get me the results."

In the final analysis, says Fullan, the only meaningful result is how well school systems narrow the achievement gap between their most- and least-advantaged students. No system is better positioned to do that than public education. "If you're not working on closing those gaps," he says, "you'll have an underclass that's not surviving in the system. There will be greater tension, greater crime and greater health bills." A society's success in avoiding that fate comes down to whether its leaders see education as a cost or an investment -- and how much it really values its youngest members. "Everyone says our most precious resource is our children," says Dosedall of Edmonton Public Schools. "But that's a myth. If they believed that, our spending priorities would be a whole lot different." Among the many lessons of school reform, that one may be the most bitter.

Michael Fullan is dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
of the University of Toronto.

He is the author of *Leading in a Culture of Change*, the *Change Forces Trilogy*, and  
*The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*.

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