

# Myths and Facts

**More on "Class Warfare: The Assault on Canada's Schools"**  
**By Thomas Schweitzer**

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Politicos, hack journalists and lobbyists are, in a sense, a godsend for the defenders of Canada's educational system. They can be set up as straw-men and then pushed over with great fanfare, often with pitifully-weak arguments. This is done in the above-mentioned political tract of Maude Barlow and Heather-jane Robertson (B&R). B&R maintain that unjust criticism of the Canadian educational system is spreading several myths.

**Myth #1: "At least 25% of Canadians are illiterate, and for this we can blame our schools". (p. 25)**

*According to B&R, "In 1989, Canadian-born young people in the 16-to-24 age group with literacy problems, according to Statistics Canada, was in the range of 3%". (p.27)*

Comment: The criticism is based on FUNCTIONAL literacy. Statistics Canada reported its findings grouped into four levels, with increasing literacy. Level 3 is defined as "Canadians at this level can use reading materials in a variety of situations provided the material is simple, clearly laid out and the tasks involved are not too complex. While these people generally do not see themselves as having major reading difficulties, they tend to avoid situations requiring reading." Level 4 is defined as "Canadians at this level meet most everyday reading demands. This is a large and diverse group which exhibits a wide range of reading skills." B&R's judgment is that Level 3 is sufficient for the Canadian society's social, political, cultural and economic well-being. This reviewer, with all respect, disagrees. He regards Level 4 as the indispensable minimum. And here we find that among Canadian-born 16-24-year-olds who have received at least some secondary schooling, 28% did not reach Level 4. The situation is even worse in functional numeracy.

**Myth #2: "Our drop-out rate is at least 30%; this figure alone proves our schools are failing." (p.28)**

*According to B&R, "It turns out that Canada's drop-out rate in 1991 was 18%." (p.29)*

Comment: Statistics Canada publishes at least six different concepts which can be regarded as proxies for the drop-out rate. Each differs in the method of collection or reporting; each has its own strengths and weaknesses. The one reporting 32% was obtained by comparing the Ca-

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nadian sum of high school graduation certificates issued by the provincial ministries of education with school enrollment three or four years previously (depending on the school system of the province). This is one of the few methods which has been reported for a long period and permits us to form an idea of the decline in the drop-out rate. B&R's preferred 18% is based on a one-time telephone interview of 9460 persons aged 17, 18, 19 and 20 who were asked whether they had obtained their high school diploma, were still studying or had given up. Thirty-one percent of the 19-year-olds and 23% of the 20-year-olds reported that they had not yet graduated. Of these, 15% of the 19-year-olds and 5% of the 20-year-olds claimed to be continuing with their high school studies. A Canadian student who proceeds through the school system in the normal manner, without repeating a grade or dropping out at least temporarily would complete high school at age 19 at the latest. Thus the two methods discussed above do not really contradict each other.

**Myth #3: As Canadians, we spend more on education than [virtually] any country in the world, and we have less to show for it. The money is wasted on huge bureaucracies and overpaid teachers. Whatever our problems may be, they certainly can't be solved with more money." (p.30)**

*According to B&R, "To use figures that reflect Canada's high participation rates of adults in post-secondary training and study to allege fiscal irresponsibility and waste within our elementary and secondary schools is gross dishonesty." (p.32)*

Comment: Canada's spending on all education when measured as a percentage of GDP places us among the top third of the industrialized countries. This is due to a large extent to big Canadian spending on post-secondary education. But the question is: Do so many Canadians go for post-secondary education because the high school diploma has been completely debased?

**Myth #4: "Students in all the countries with which Canada competes work harder and longer. Take Japan - Japanese kids go to school at least 243 days a year. Our kids go only half a year." (p.33)**

*According to B&R, "In every province and territory, at every grade level, Canadian students are exposed to more hours of instruction annually than are Japanese students." (p.34)*

Comment: Here B&R have a point, but it is an irrelevant one. International studies find little relationship between student achievement and the length of the school year (and school day). It is the intensity of use of the time spent in school (and on homework) that matters. It is certainly

no compliment to our educational system if countries with shorter school years and school days are doing better than we (e.g. Hungary).

**Myth #5: "When our students' results are compared with those of our international competitors, we are beaten by nearly everybody." (p.35)**

*According to B&R, "When apples are compared to apples, Canadian students meet or exceed the mathematics performance of students from other countries tested." (p.38)*

Comment: B&R are using the evidence very selectively. They quote only two studies of the 12 international studies in which Canada participated. Even in these two, they omit several countries (Korea, Taiwan, the Soviet Union, and Hungary) which outperformed Canada. Furthermore, they are setting extremely difficult criteria for what constitutes "significantly" better performance than ours. Only if the likelihood of other countries doing better than we reaches 97.5% are they willing to concede that the difference is significant. This extremely-high criterion, borrowed from the exact sciences, results in almost every country doing as well as almost any other country. Very convenient for the vested interests in the educational establishment. But the cumulative effect of 12 studies suggests very strongly that we are mediocre in the lower age-groups and weak at the end of high school. B&R maintain that valid comparisons are not possible at the end of high school, because of differences in the selectivity and other characteristics of the various school systems. In this they are simply wrong. (See Schweitzer, Thomas T., "International and Interprovincial Comparisons of Student Cognitive Achievement", Economic Council of Canada Working Paper No. 39, 1992). In this study, the raw achievement scores were adjusted for selectivity and years of schooling. Fourteen educational systems participated in the Second International Mathematics Study (1980-82). On the basis of raw scores, Ontario placed eighth and BC 13th. After adjustment, Ontario moved down to 12th (because of the additional school year of grade 13) and BC moved up to 10th. In the Second International Science Study (1983-86), 15 systems participated. On the basis of raw scores, Canada (English) placed 12th and Canada (French) 15th. After adjustment, Canada (English) moved down to 13th place and Canada (French) up to 12th, not much to be proud of. To conclude, we all have the quality of Canadian education at heart. Improvement is possible only if we face up to our shortcomings. Denying away the problems does nobody any service.

*(Thomas Schweitzer was Senior Economist with the Economic Council of Canada between 1964 and 1992. He was one of the authors of the Council's publications "A Lot to Learn: Education and Training in Canada" and "Education and Training in Canada: A Research Report". He is also the author of "International and Interprovincial Comparisons of Student Cognitive Achievement", (Economic Council of Canada Working Paper No. 39, 1992), "Schooling and the Statistics Canada Survey of Literacy skills used in Daily Activities", (Economic Council of Canada Working Paper No. 36, 1992) and "Collective Bargaining, Teachers and Student Achievement: A Comment", (Journal of Labour Research. Vol. XII, No. 3, Summer 1991).*