

Education Failure Puts Us All at Risk

Why doesn't Johnny want to do a good job of work?

by [Colin Alexander](#) (August 2024)



School children conducting simple experiments, Washington, DC, 1899 (Frances Benjamin Johnston)

Relevant for today's Canada is the 1983 US report, [A Nation at Risk](#): "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists

today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

The continuity of civilization and national prosperity depends on the education of next generations and their preparation as a capable and willing labour force. But many employers find Canadian-born youth lacking the required education, skills and work ethic. That’s one reason for lagging business investment and corresponding productivity. Only limited prowess exists beyond STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, mathematics). In universities it survives mostly among immigrants and their children, and foreign students. A Canadian-born friend doing a degree in engineering at McGill told me she did the writing for group projects “because engineers can’t write.”

Current orthodoxy includes the falsehood that ethnic differences determine outcomes. But it’s bigotry—often racist bigotry—to lower expectations for perceived minorities. Many factors explain why youth of any background may need supplementary help.

The [UN’s Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) requires signatories to enable children, regardless of ethnicity, for the maximum of their capability. Instead, however, the pursuit of equality of outcomes is the mantra of our time. Lagging students go up a grade anyway and those who could skip a grade get held back. That means some students could be ready for calculus alongside ones who don’t know their times tables. A retired teacher in Ottawa told me many students arrived in his Grade 7 maths class who hadn’t learned their times tables.

Certainly, some Canadian schools deliver success stories, mostly for youth coming from strong families. But ratings belie much abject failure, especially in remote settlements and urban slums. By contrast, two teenage black girls at the independent St. Mary’s Academy in New Orleans, run by Catholic nuns, solved a 2,000-year-old puzzle by [proving, with trigonometry, the validity of Pythagoras’ theorem](#).

In Ontario, the public school system is fragmented not only by where students live. It subdivides four ways into English and French, and Public and Catholic systems. Then there's further fragmentation, with a tiny gifted program, French immersion, and separate English streams in high school, with and without instruction in French. This diversification requires dumbing down to an ever-lower common denominator, and it leads to an exponential increase in behavioural problems, including assaults on teachers.

A teacher in Winchester, Ontario, lamented to me that she had 5 students in her Grade 6 class of 25 who had behavioural problems or learning difficulties, or both. She said, in effect, that nobody was really learning anything. It was all she could do to keep order. How many of her students will maximize their potential?

Teachers' unions press for smaller class sizes. But larger class sizes are fine when students' achievement levels are similar. [Average class size](#) is in the 30s in Japan, Singapore and South Korea. Of course, it's easier to teach a larger class when students are all around the same level. But there's another lesson both from their schools and from our own little red schoolhouses, and it can also de-stress a teacher's job. Education needs to go back to the personal study that spoon-feeding lessons has now supplanted, and back to rote-learning—and not just times tables. Achievement through effort builds confidence. But today's self-esteem theory doesn't require actually learning *anything*. Until the age of 14 when he left school, [Shakespeare](#) attended an all-grades class of 42 under a single teacher. Learning involved a longer school day, a longer school year, and directed study rather than being taught.

Educators miss the point that students deeply engaged in their studies seldom make trouble. Trouble starts with lack of discipline and structure in kindergarten and primary school. Admittedly, many parents abdicate their duty to their

children. But high expectations at school get good results, including good behaviour. Looking at this the other way around, students' success in school can stabilize a troubled home.

An important benefit of increased intensiveness and high expectations is its impact on teenage depression. Students immersed in their studies aren't hooked on social media—in effect, a narcotic like crack cocaine that impairs the brain. With good reason, high-tech titans curtail their own children's use of computer technology.

And one way to promote a healthy mind in a healthy body—seldom implemented outside independent schools—is to start the school day with an exercise class requiring universal attendance. In addition to releasing energy that otherwise might make trouble, it also lessens the challenge of obesity carried forward into adulthood.

Independent schools hire those who know and love their subject, and pass on their enthusiasm. So why do public schools require the make-work of a teaching degree? The BEd at McGill even has a full course devoted to [teaching maths in primary school!](#)

As demonstrated in the book [The Education of Eva Moskowitz](#), education thrives—especially for those in most need—in charter schools. By extension, whether run by the state, charter or otherwise independent, schools should get their money from vouchers allocated to students for the schools they want to attend. As Milton Friedman said in a 1995 [essay](#) in the *Washington Post*, competition for customers is as necessary in education as in any other field.

It should be obvious that an effective and prospering democracy requires an education system that delivers to next generations the capacity for evaluating choices. Today, however, social-justice indoctrination dominates education,

leaving far too many students deprived of basic knowledge, skills and work ethic.

Educational bureaucracies, school boards and teachers' unions uncompromisingly embrace wokeism, victimology and anti-capitalism. Their ideology connotes repudiation of the values of [the Enlightenment](#) and Judeo-Christian ethics that made of Canada a great country—personal responsibility and self-reliance, initiative and open inquiry. A grassroots movement can and must demand change of politicians. I envision it comprising business managers and supervisors, shareholders, investors and pension fund managers and, especially, the parents and youth that the current system short-changes.

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Colin Alexander's degrees include Politics, Philosophy, and Economics from Oxford. His latest books are [*The Ballad of Sunny Ways: Popular and scurrilous traditional verse about living, loving and money*](#) and [*Justice on Trial: Jordon Peterson's case shows we need to fix the broken system.*](#)

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