



10 Advocacy: Engaging the Public

Reading

Public Engagement in Canadian Education: What Can We Learn From “Waiting for Superman”?

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The documentary film “Waiting for Superman”, which originally premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, was just released this month. This film provides an in-depth commentary and analysis on the US public education system.

The film provides a very serious critique of the US educational system. However, it also highlights leaders and organizations who are trying to implement change and reform in the public education system. It demonstrates how schools can have a positive and important impact on the community as a whole. Some of the leaders and organizations mentioned:

- Michelle Rhee, the chancellor of the Washington, D.C public school system
- Eric Schwarz of Citizen Schools
- Geoffrey Canada of the Harlem Children’s Zone
- Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

Bill Gates’ recent interview in Maclean’s magazine and an op-ed piece in the Washington Post provide an interesting analysis of the challenges in the US public system as well as recommendations for the future.

How do Canadian students measure up?

With the release of this film a number Canadian publications and commentaries have been released. Many are attempting to answer the question: what are the differences between the US and Canadian education systems, and how do Canadian students measure up?



In order to answer these questions, it is important to understand that the US and Canadian public education systems are fundamentally very different in their structure, policy and funding. The US model operates with a primarily centralized model, run by the US Department of Education. The Canadian public education system is decentralized. Education is under the jurisdiction of the provincial or territorial Ministries of Education.

Despite the fact that education is a provincial responsibility, there exist many similarities between the provinces. Organizations such as the Council of Ministers of Education, Canadian Teachers' Federation, Canadian Education Association and the Canadian School Boards Association regularly share information, conduct research and establish best practices in Pan-Canadian issues and priorities in education.

To assess how Canadian students fare in relation to their American counterparts as well as internationally, it is important to look at the results of The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). This assessment of reading, math and science skills is a combined effort by the member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The last results were compiled in the PISA 2006 Canadian Report. New results on the PISA 2009 Canadian Report will be available in December 2010.

Results from the PISA 2006 Canadian Report revealed that Canadian students are top performers internationally in reading, math and science. Out of the 57 reporting countries, Canada ranked 3rd in science, 4th in reading, and 6th in math. For a comprehensive compilation and analysis of these PISA results, see the Canadian Education Association's recent overview, "A Canadian Perspective".

Although Canadian students clearly excel internationally, there is more work to be done in the goal for continuous school improvement (such as the area of student engagement). The implementation of best practices, putting quality research evidence into practice, and continued collaboration between governments, industry, schools and communities is required to ensure that our students are leaders and innovators in the new global economy.



The importance of public engagement in education

Although a clear comparison cannot be made between the Canadian and US education systems, a quote from the producer of “Waiting for Superman” can be applied to the school system in both countries. Lesley Chilcott talks about the importance of public engagement in education for our future:

“Even if you don’t have kids, you should care about public education...if we want to solve global warming, poverty, health care and the economy, we need to have an educated society. Education is ground zero for tackling all these issues.” — Lesley Chilcott