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# Understanding Canadians' Declining Confidence in Public Education<sup>1</sup>

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Canadians' confidence in public education is declining. We present new evidence, both attitudinal and behavioural, confirming this trend. More significantly, we investigate several possible explanations for the trend, including demographic as well as institutional perspectives. Our analysis finds little support for demographic shifts as an explanation, but we do find that confidence in all institutions, not just public education, is waning. We compare and contrast various interpretations of these findings, building especially on the themes of the knowledge society and the risk society. We interpret these findings as showing that Canadians see schooling as increasingly important.

La confiance des canadiens dans l'enseignement public n'est plus ce qu'elle était. Les auteurs présentent de nouvelles données sur les comportements et les attitudes qui viennent le confirmer. En outre, ils se penchent surtout sur plusieurs explications possibles de cette tendance, y compris les facteurs démographiques et institutionnels. D'après leur analyse, il n'est guère possible de retenir l'explication démographique, mais ils ont effectivement pu observer la perte de confiance dans toutes les institutions, et pas seulement dans l'enseignement public. Les auteurs comparent diverses façons d'interpréter ces constatations en insistant tout particulièrement sur les thèmes de la société de la connaissance et de la société du risque. D'après eux, les résultats observés démontrent que les canadiens considèrent l'éducation comme étant de plus en plus importante.

## DECLARING AND DISCLAIMING A CRISIS

Public schooling is a core institution in the modern world. Public respect for and confidence in schooling is therefore crucial. More generally, democratic societies prosper with citizen support, whether through voting, public debate, running for office, paying taxes, or voluntary association participation (Putnam, 1993). Such support need not be direct and specific, but as Easton (1965) argued three decades ago, at least "diffuse support" must be forthcoming for institutions to fulfil their mandates. This is as true for public institutions, such as schools, as it is for private institutions, such as corporations or unions.

Recently, educators in many western nations have been rocked by journalists, intellectuals, and politicians proclaiming declining public confidence in schooling. For example, a *Maclean's* magazine Special Report posed the question

“What’s wrong at school?” and announced that “across Canada, thousands of alarmed parents have declared war on provincial public education systems which, they maintain, are doing a poor job of teaching their children” (Fennell, 1993, p. 28). Simultaneously, criticism of education has been bolstered by *Bankrupt Education: The Decline of Liberal Education in Canada* (Emberley & Newell, 1994) and *School’s Out: The Catastrophe in Public Education and What We Can Do About It* (Nikiforuk, 1993). Both books proclaim a collapse of public confidence in education, attributed chiefly to a substandard quality of schooling. Lewington and Orpwood (1993), moderates among the critics, open their book *Overdue Assignment: Taking Responsibility for Canada’s Schools* by declaring that “Public education faces a crisis of confidence in the 1990’s” and “Canadians are losing faith in public education” (p. 1). Politicians too, from Conservatives and Reform members to Liberals and members of the New Democratic Party, have joined the chorus of education critics.

But is there really a “war” between parents and schools, as *Maclean’s* proclaimed? Are families embroiled in a dramatic confrontation with public educators, or is this hyperbole? Defenders of public education, using language just as dramatic, dismiss claims of widespread disgruntlement as exaggerated, misplaced, or nonexistent. These observers — mainly educators themselves, leaders of teachers’ unions, and their political allies — flatly deny claims that the public has lost confidence in education. In Canada, the most famous rebuttal has come from Barlow and Robertson (1994), who in *Class Warfare: The Assault on Canada’s Schools*, portray the critics as wrongheaded and as having suspect political motives. Barlow and Robertson claim that criticism of education is cyclical and predictable. They doubt that dissatisfaction is widespread among the population at large; instead, they see criticism as emanating from media hype, the opportunistic rants of right-wing politicians, and the machinations of a tiny but very vocal minority of conservative zealots, self-interested upper-middle-class parents, and/or Fundamentalist Christian agitators (a similar argument for the U.S.A. is presented by Berliner & Biddle, 1996).<sup>2</sup> As counterevidence to the notion of an increasingly disgruntled public, these defenders of public education point to growth in parental involvement in schooling as a sign that Canadians remain committed to the universal principle of public education for all.

### *Questions of Evidence*

The debate over declining public confidence in public schooling, striking for its quality of argumentation, relies largely on sheer assertion, a war of words with thin appeals to mainly impressionistic evidence. We examine systematic evidence bearing on the issue of changing levels of confidence about the state of public education in Canada. As well, we examine explanations about which of various publics, if any, may have changed their views about public schooling.

For many, the existence of reform initiatives across Canada (and in many other western nations; see Davies & Guppy, 1997) signals a lack of confidence in public schooling. The critics of public education also highlight the growing search for alternatives to the public school system as an indicator of public disaffection. More families are choosing home schooling for their children (Luffman, 1998) or are pressing for choice or charter schools. The Surrey Traditional School (B.C.) and Flowervale Traditional (Ontario), recently formed alternative schools with long waiting lists, were created through parental pressure for school choice. Similarly, in response to parent lobbying, Alberta has implemented charter school legislation, the first in Canada.

Perhaps another signal of disgruntlement with public schooling is the growing trend of families sending children to private schools (see Figure 1). Statistics Canada estimates that in 1998, 5.3% of elementary and secondary school students were enrolled in private schools. Whether the enrollments were in private religious schools, "elite" private schools, or special education schools, these students and their families chose to seek school opportunities outside the public system.<sup>3</sup>

Another tangible expression of discontent is the unprecedented rise of parent and teacher reform groups sharply critical of public schooling (e.g., the "Quality

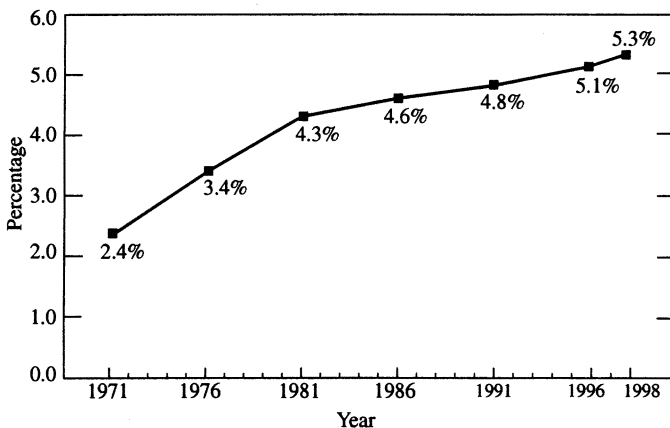


FIGURE 1

*Percentage of Elementary and Secondary Students Enrolled  
in Private Schools, 1971 to 1998*

*Note:* Data are from Statistics Canada, *Education Quarterly Review* (various years).

of Education Network” and “Teachers for Excellence”). Yet these groups remain a relatively small, albeit active and vocal, minority. They have yet to garner widespread citizen support or to move education onto the central political agenda. Indeed, Canada has not yet seen the same thoroughgoing reform and restructuring of schooling that has occurred in New Zealand, Great Britain, and the United States (Davies & Guppy, 1997). This implies that the “diffuse support” about which Easton spoke may still hold for public education in Canada.

If the existence of education reform groups does not necessarily point to widespread dissatisfaction with schooling, what form of evidence might be used to judge the broad public’s confidence in education? Perhaps the best available evidence of trends in public support for schooling comes from national public opinion surveys. On several occasions over the past few decades, Canadians have been asked pertinent questions about their confidence in education and other key institutions. Interestingly, both sides in this debate cite survey research results supporting their claims. Crisis advocates point to the occasional poll to fuel their arguments but fail to provide systematic evidence of a decline over time in public confidence in Canadian schooling. Defenders of the status quo, such as Barlow and Robertson (1994), cite national Gallup survey data from 1993 to argue that Canadians are “quite satisfied with their schools” (pp. 41–42). Yet their conclusions go well beyond their evidence, which fails to speak to issues of persistence as it consists only of snapshot, single-time-point data.

Strangely, neither side has taken advantage of the decades of poll data on public confidence in and satisfaction with education. Literally dozens of national surveys about attitudes to education, dating from the 1940s, offer a basis on which to judge whether public confidence in Canadian education has remained strong or has fallen. Some of this polling data has been summarized by Livingstone and Hart (1995). They find that Canadians’ ratings of quality, satisfaction, and confidence in public education have slowly but consistently declined.

For instance, Livingstone and Hart (1995) examined a Gallup poll question asking “Do you think children today are being better educated or worse than you were?” and found that between 1948 and 1989, the percentage of Canadians who felt children had a better education than themselves fell from 77% to 49% (p. 25). In isolation, the 1989 figure suggests a 50:50 split in views on schooling, but in the context of a 28% decline since the post-World War II era, the figure supports a claim of dropping confidence.

The question is not perfect, however, and the grammar is awkward at best. The survey asks respondents about “children,” not about “their children.” Family sizes have fallen appreciably since the 1950s, and so by 1989 many more respondents who answered the question may not have had any school-aged children or, indeed, any children at all. It is also unclear whether respondents interpreted “better” to refer to quality of education (e.g., teaching effectiveness) or quantity of education (e.g., years of schooling).

Another series Livingstone and Hart examined relies on the following question: "On the whole, would you say that you are satisfied or dissatisfied with the education children are getting today?" Levels of *dissatisfaction* rose from 1973 (45%) to 1992 (62%).

Again, the question has flaws. Once more the referent is all children. Furthermore, with limited data, the trend is not well established, although the more recent final time-point gives us a better sense of the current state of affairs. Moreover, the question asks about "education," but Barlow and Robertson (1994) wrote that "Canadians are and have been quite satisfied with their schools" (pp. 41–42). Education and schools are not the same; a question focused on the latter would be a better test of their claim.

The idiosyncrasies of specific questions means that a broader, more robust series of survey items is needed to confirm trends. Building on the work of Livingstone and Hart (1995), we explore public confidence in Canadian education by taking some of Livingston and Hart's poll data (from Gallup), extending the time-points with both older and newer data, and using new trend data from a different polling firm. Further, we conduct individual-level multivariate analyses to test various explanations for trends in public confidence. Finally, we discuss various interpretations of our findings.

## METHOD

We combed two sources, the Canadian Institute for Public Opinion (Gallup) data archive at the University of British Columbia and the Decima Data Archive at Queen's University, for longitudinal public opinion data pertinent to issues of confidence in public education. We selected questions that satisfied two criteria: identical questions were repeated at multiple points in time and the most recent poll occurred in the late 1980s or 1990s.

Our data are of two types. First, from longitudinal comparisons relying on aggregate data generated from results of nationally representative random samples of Canadians, we use summary measures (e.g., means, percentages) to show how Canadians' confidence or trust in schooling/education varied from year to year. Second, by reanalyzing some individual-level data for specific years, we also examine whether changes in perceptions of public education occurred "across the board" or were restricted to specific subgroups of the population.

## FINDINGS: A DECLINE IN CONFIDENCE

*Maclean's* Special Report claimed that parents felt schools were "doing a poor job of teaching their children" (Fennell, 1993, p. 28). The Decima data archive contains a question repeated annually from 1980 to 1993 asking respondents whether "schools in your province" are doing "a good job" or "a poor job" (a

neutral response category coded but not asked explicitly includes respondents who said "both" or "[it] depends"). Figure 2 shows that between 1980 and 1991, from 50% to 60% of Canadians reported that provincial schools were doing "a good job." In 1992 and 1993 the percentages fell sharply; in 1993, only 39% of respondents said schools were doing a good job. Although not a plainly linear trend overall, these data do show falling ratings in the 1990s.

This Decima question speaks to schools rather than education and so is more directly relevant to the work of Barlow and Robertson, but the referent that respondents have in mind when they think of "schools" may vary. Some people may be thinking of elementary schools, others of secondary schools. Also, respondents will likely have different things in mind when they say a school is doing either a good or a bad job.

Another series of questions focuses more directly on the issue of public confidence. Since 1974, Gallup has on six occasions asked Canadians the following question:

I'm going to read a list of institutions in Canadian society. Would you tell me how much respect and confidence you, yourself, have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some or very little?

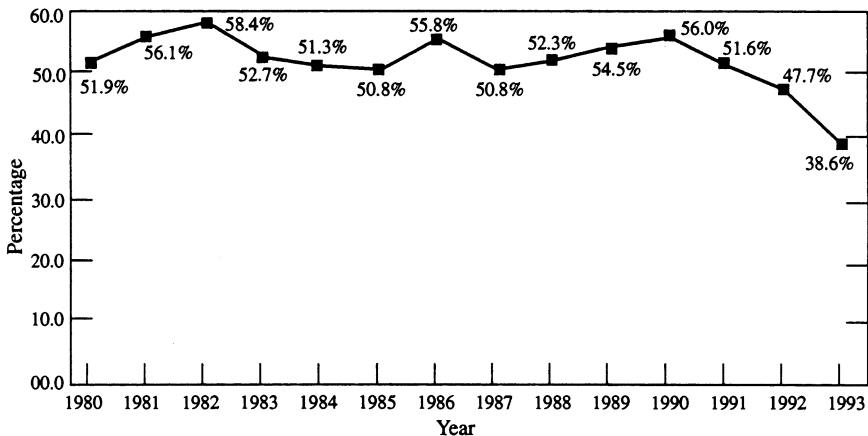


FIGURE 2

*Percentage of Respondents Rating Their Province's Schools as Doing "A Good Job," 1980 to 1993*

*Note:* Data are from Decima Quarterly Omnibus Survey.

The list of institutions, which varies slightly by year (but has always included "public schools"), was then read to respondents, with the order of the institutions rotated so that they appeared in a different sequence for different respondents. Livingstone and Hart (1995) present these data, as percentages, for selected years up to 1993 (p. 19). They find that public confidence in education dropped noticeably between 1989 and 1993.

We extend the time points for these questions by adding 1974, 1984, and 1995. There are several different ways to present the time trend for respondents' respect and confidence (see Table 1). Coding the responses along a metric, from a score of 1 for "very little confidence" to 4 for "a great deal of confidence," and calculating the mean, the averages by year go from 2.7 in 1974 ("quite a lot of confidence") to 2.3 by 1995 ("some confidence"). Alternatively, presenting the combined percentage of respondents who said they had either "quite a lot" or "a great deal" of confidence (the second data row of Table 1), we found that 55%–65% of Canadians felt confident about public schools through the 1970s and 1980s but that this figure dipped to 45% in the early 1990s. Finally, focusing just on respondents having "a great deal of confidence," the same dip appears. In the 1970s and 1980s, between 20% and 25% of Canadians said they had "a great deal of confidence" in Canadian public schools, but by 1993, barely 10% expressed such confidence (for similar results in the U.S.A., see Loveless, 1997, p. 131). Although on these measures confidence rebounded somewhat in 1995, levels of confidence remained clearly lower than in previous decades.

In sum, various questions, whether about schools or education, satisfaction or confidence, show quite similar patterns. Canadians' support for public education has declined over the past three decades.

TABLE 1  
*Canadians' Confidence in Public Schools*

<i>Summary Measure</i>	<i>Year</i>					
	<i>1974</i>	<i>1979</i>	<i>1984</i>	<i>1989</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>1995</i>
Mean <sup>a</sup>	2.7	2.8	2.8	2.6	2.2	2.3
Confident <sup>b</sup>	59%	57%	56%	64%	45%	47%
Confident <sup>c</sup>	24%	19%	18%	20%	12%	13%

*Note.* Data are from the Canadian Institute for Public Opinion (Gallup), various years (University of British Columbia Data Library).

<sup>a</sup>Calculated from a 4-point scale, with 4 "a great deal of confidence" and 1 "very little confidence."

<sup>b</sup>Percentage of respondents reporting that they had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence.

<sup>c</sup>Percentage of respondents reporting that they had "a great deal of confidence."



## EXPLAINING THE DECLINE

Our data allow us to investigate a few hypotheses that seek to explain the evidence that Canadians' confidence in public education has declined.

*The Hypothesis of Demographic Shift*

One explanation for Canadians' declining confidence in public education is that the population has changed in ways leading to a growing disgruntlement with education. First, in the era after the baby boom of 1946–1965, fewer Canadians have children living at home and those people who have lost touch with schooling may be the most disenchanted. Second, on a related theme, older Canadians without children may be losing faith in schools because today's educational practices are quite different from those in previous generations and thus seem unfamiliar, foreign, and ill-disciplined. Third, it could be that as Canadians' average level of schooling has risen, their standards, expectations, and demands for education have also risen. Education has not kept pace, in this view, with the rising expectations of an ever-more-educated population. Each argument points to changes in the country's demographic composition as an explanation for the loss of confidence, predicting specific subgroups in society who should be more disenchanted with schooling (i.e., families without children, older people, better-educated Canadians).

Comparing levels of confidence among subgroups in the population allows us to test these three demographic-shift predictions. Table 2 shows the results of two ordinary-least-squares regression analyses using data from 1974, 1984, and 1995. We merged these data sets to create a pooled sample of 3,042 respondents. Using level of public confidence as the dependent variable, we assessed whether any of the following attributes of individuals affected their degree of support for public education: region of residence, level of schooling, level of income, language spoken, religious affiliation, union status, age, and sex (number of children in the home was not asked in 1974, but see our discussion on page 274). In particular, the demographic explanation suggests that level of education and age ought to be statistically significant predictors of level of confidence. Also, if our earlier findings are correct, we should find that the year of the survey significantly affects confidence in public schooling (here, lower scores reflect greater confidence).

We found, first, with respect to the explanation based on demographic composition, that age does not affect level of confidence. Younger and older respondents have similar levels of confidence in public schooling. A person's education, however, does affect his or her view of public schooling: people with more schooling have less confidence in public schooling. This is consistent with the idea that more-highly-educated Canadians have greater expectations of the education system but feel that these expectations are not being fulfilled. Although

TABLE 2

*Ordinary-Least-Squares Regression of Public Confidence in Schooling  
on Selected Independent Variables for Two Pooled Samples*

Variable Name	1974, 1984, 1995 <sup>a</sup>		1984, 1995 <sup>b</sup>	
	Unstandardized	Standardized	Unstandardized	Standardized
Language (1 = English)	.053	.028	.019	.010
Religion (1 = Catholic)	.027	.015	.077	.043
Highest education (0 = low)	.020	.048*	.019	.046
Union (1 = union household)	-.089	-.045*	-.090	-.046
Age (in years)	.001	.007	.001	.012
Sex (1 = male)	.026	.014	-.035	-.020
Income (1 = low)	-.045	-.037	-.030	-.026
Maritime (1 = yes)	-.081	-.026	-.161	-.051
Quebec (1 = yes)	.318	.155*	.206	.105*
Prairie (1 = yes)	.049	.020	.059	.025
British Columbia (1 = yes)	.236	.078*	.232	.080*
Year (in years)	.006	.045*	.009	.053*
Children under 10 (1 = yes)	— <sup>c</sup>	— <sup>c</sup>	.071	.037
Children 10 to 17 (1 = yes)	— <sup>c</sup>	— <sup>c</sup>	.009	.040

*Note.* Public confidence varies between 1 ("a great deal of confidence") and 4 ("very little confidence"). Data are from the Canadian Institute for Public Opinion (Gallup), various years (University of British Columbia Data Library).

<sup>a</sup>Constant, -7.37;  $R^2$ , .028; number of cases, 2,478.

<sup>b</sup>Constant, -15.14;  $R^2$ , .021; number of cases, 1,442.

<sup>c</sup>Dashes indicate data not available.

\* $p < .05$ .

the effect of education has not changed over the decades represented in our sample (we tested this with interaction terms in our equations), the proportion of Canadians in this higher education category has increased, which partly explains why public confidence has declined (the effect is not particularly strong, though it is statistically significant).

Second, people living in Quebec and British Columbia have significantly less confidence in public schooling than do people living in Ontario, if all other demographic variables are statistically controlled. Conversely, people from households where at least one person is a member of a union are more confident. This latter finding can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, union membership effect may be a social class effect, indicating that working-class families are more likely to turn over responsibility for schooling to the school system. Working-class families typically have lower levels of schooling than do profes-

sional educators and are more likely to find participating in educational activities difficult because of obligations related to their jobs and childcare (Lareau, 1989). Second, since only a minority of the working class is unionized and most contemporary unions in Canada are in the public sector, this finding may also indicate that individuals employed in the public sector generally support public institutions.

The rightmost column of Table 2 presents similar findings, also using a pooled sample but now restricted to only 1984 and 1995, when a question asked about the presence of children. Again running against the grain of the demographic explanation, having children at home does not affect levels of confidence in public education. The schooling and unionization effects also do not hold with this smaller sample, which implies that these factors were stronger in 1974 than in later years. The regional effect that people in Quebec and British Columbia have less confidence than those in Ontario is maintained in this smaller sample.

Finally, in Table 2 and Table 3 the year of the survey significantly affects levels of confidence. This not only confirms our preliminary results in Figure 2 and Table 1 but demonstrates that even after controlling for theoretically relevant independent variables, confidence declines. This implies that declining confidence is limited neither to pockets of people nor to special-interest groups who are dissatisfied with public education.

The regression results suggest that demographic characteristics are relevant at the multivariate level, though some key theoretical variables— income, age, and, in the latter model, having children at home—are not significant predictors of

TABLE 3

*Percentage of Canadians with "A Great Deal of Confidence" in Institutions*

<i>Institution</i>	<i>1974</i>	<i>1979</i>	<i>1984</i>	<i>1989</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>1995</i>
Church	36	33	28	27	19	19
Supreme Court	30	29	22	25	19	15
Public school	24	19	18	20	12	13
House of Commons	20	14	7	9	5	5
Newspapers	15	12	10	9	7	8
Labour unions	11	8	8	9	6	6
Large corporations	9	10	6	7	6	8
Political parties	— <sup>a</sup>	8	5	5	2	3

*Note.* Data are from the Canadian Institute for Public Opinion (Gallup), various years (University of British Columbia Data Library).

<sup>a</sup>Dash indicates data not available.

confidence. Further, when all independent variables are controlled for, year is a significant predictor of confidence in both models.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Hypothesis of Disenchantment with Institutions*

Declining public confidence in education must, however, be set within a wider context. Some commentators claim that trust in the full array of public institutions is eroding in all industrial democracies (see, for example, Weiler, 1983), and by this logic, a decline in confidence in education would hardly be surprising. Others see declining confidence in education as part of a particular animus against welfare-state institutions. For example, Lipset and Schneider (1987) found that in the U.S.A., people's confidence in and ratings of many institutions declined over time, though confidence in education eroded less significantly than confidence in some other institutions (see also Livingstone & Hart, 1995).

Has Canadians' confidence in Canadian institutions other than public schools also declined? Barlow and Robertson (1994) claimed that "public support for schools persists despite the fact that public satisfaction with familiar institutions is in quite rapid decline" (pp. 41–42). If public confidence in other institutions such as the Supreme Court or large corporations had dropped while trust and respect for schools remained stable (or even declined less rapidly), this would be strong support for the education system. Conversely, it may be that confidence in public institutions has eroded because of their affiliation with government. Schooling may thus be tarred with the broad brush of public cynicism towards government and the public sector more generally.

Table 3 presents data relevant to these claims. The third row shows the drop in public confidence in schools, from 24% to 13% between 1974 and 1995. This is a noticeable drop, but erosion of confidence in modern institutions is widespread. Barlow and Robertson were correct in noting that public support for "familiar institutions is in quite rapid decline," but wrong in asserting that schools are exempt from this decline. Support for the church, labour unions, and newspapers, as for schools, has fallen by about half. Conversely, confidence in political institutions, whether political parties or the House of Commons, has plummeted. There is no evidence here that public schooling is being unfairly tarred with the broad brush of public cynicism towards the public sector. And private corporations have also received lower levels of support more recently.

Compared with other institutions, schools fare quite well. Over time, schools have consistently ranked third out of the eight institutions typically rated. Does this mean Canadians are implicitly giving schools a vote of confidence? Perhaps. Lipset and Schneider (1987, p. 79) suggest that in the United States, institutions more oriented to disinterested public service (e.g., the Supreme Court, public schooling) receive higher confidence ratings than do institutions with particular self-serving interests (e.g., political entities, unions). This interpretation is consistent with the Canadian patterns.

## DISCUSSION: CULTURAL SHIFTS AND THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

We began by asking whether critics of Canadian public education had overstated their case when claiming that public confidence in schools has declined. The evidence we gathered—which stretches across several decades, involves different survey questions, and comes from two different national polling firms—shows that public confidence in Canadian schooling has declined. Further, it shows that this decline is not due to a change in the demographic composition of Canadian society. Levels of confidence have declined in all population subgroups.

Given this relatively consistent finding (cf. Livingstone & Hart, 1995), a key question emerges: How should these survey results be interpreted? Perhaps the simplest interpretations are offered by the two diametrically opposed positions we discussed at the beginning of this article. On one side, many critics of education assert that public confidence in education is falling because the quality of schooling has declined. A weakness of this interpretation, however, is the lack of systematic evidence of worsened school performance in Canada. Critics depend on impressionistic evidence, dramatic anecdotes, and often sheer assertion to make their case, or they claim that drop-out rates, illiteracy rates, or rankings of Canadian students on international standardized tests are unacceptable. Yet, the data show neither that illiteracy or drop-out rates are increasing nor that Canadian students are losing ground in international rankings (Nagy, 1996).

Conversely, defenders of public schooling are largely dismissive of the poll data. Barlow and Robertson (1994), along with their U.S. counterparts Berliner and Biddle (1996), argue that any decline in the national status of education is a “manufactured crisis,” the consequence of negative stereotypes propagated by right-wing politicians and sensationalized by the media. There are, however, several difficulties with this position. First, it presumes a gullible public whose views on education are easily manipulated. Second, it presumes that schools are indeed enduring a barrage of adverse coverage in the media. Although there are instances of such reporting, no one has established empirically that media coverage of education is on the whole negative or that it has become more negative over time. We should not ignore how the education establishment fights back in the media wars, buoyed by well-funded public relations campaigns (Barlow and Robertson’s book is one example). Indeed, this raises another issue: if the defenders of schooling trace negative views of education to media hype, then it would follow that negative views of other institutions, as clearly shown in Table 3, are also products of media sensationalism. Few social democrats would accept a claim that Canadians’ negative views of private corporations stem from media hype.

These two polar positions—attributing falling public confidence in schools either to their deteriorating performance or to media sensationalism—are simplistic. A more nuanced understanding of the polls is needed. Loveless (1997) attempts this in describing the U.S. case. He notes that declining levels of public

confidence, as measured by polling data, reflect public perceptions of schooling but that this perceptual evidence does not correspond with public action. Examining poll trends in the U.S.A. similar to those in Canada, Loveless claims that attitudes and behaviour may not be congruent. He questions whether the polls focused on local schools or on the national education system, because people in the U.S.A. rate the former more highly.<sup>5</sup> Further, he claims that although U.S. residents say they lack confidence in schools, they still act as though they have such confidence. As evidence he cites lower drop-out rates, smaller proportions of U.S. children in private schools in recent years, and sustained funding for public education. Loveless argues that these phenomena illustrate, if anything, heightened confidence in education.

Yet, applying Loveless' reasoning to the Canadian case raises problems. First, in Canada, unlike in the U.S.A., a growing minority of people are voting with their feet and leaving the neighbourhood public system in search of alternatives (e.g., private schools, home schooling, virtual schools, charter schools). At least among a vocal minority of Canadians, public criticism and public action coincide; both indicate that Canadians have less confidence in their public school system than U.S. citizens have in theirs.

In Canada, polling data and public behaviour are broadly consistent. Public confidence *has* fallen. The nub of the critics' argument is best understood not as a simple failure in the school system's performance but as an underperformance by the system relative to new, heightened public expectations (for a similar discussion about the U.S.A., see Graham, 1993). We argue that this gap between reality and expectations is what underlies declining confidence. Our interpretation is premised on a changing cultural context. Greater uncertainty in society coupled with a more knowledgeable public has generated a "malaise of modernity," seen most directly, perhaps, in greater public cynicism about core institutions. This cynicism, however, is coupled with higher expectations for institutions, particularly education, which, we argue, is increasingly criticized because the public deems it increasingly crucial for individual and societal well-being.

We suggest that our society is in the midst of a slow but steady cultural shift. Ideas of progress towards a better world are increasingly challenged. Modern institutions, as the cross-institutional data in Table 3 show, are ever more frequently seen as failing to fulfill that promise. Core institutions are increasingly seen as big, cumbersome, and inefficient. As the (relatively) jobless growth of national economies continues and as family incomes barely meet inflationary increases, public disenchantment with modern institutions intensifies.

As Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990) argue, the world's growing complexity creates greater levels of uncertainty, resulting in people's taking more and more time to plan, especially to reduce risk. They go to financial planners, adopt registered retirement savings plans, install security systems in their homes and cars, and engage in preventive-maintenance exercise programs, all to minimize

risk. For parents, a principal way to enhance the security of their children's futures is to encourage their educational development. A critic of contemporary schooling need not believe in a past "golden age" of schooling. Rather, changing standards are readily understandable in the emerging economic climate. Labour market statistics show that education is an increasingly powerful determinant of wages and employment (Guppy & Davies, 1998). Thus, besides encouraging their children to stay in school for longer periods, parents today also arrange a formidable array of shadow education practices (e.g., private tutors, art classes, computer camps) and education planning ventures (including registered education saving plans). Surveys show that more Canadians than ever rate post-secondary education as "very important" (Livingstone & Hart, 1995).

Institutions come under further attack because citizen reform groups have a greater ability to challenge institutional experts. Whether local groups are concerned with the environment, education, or criminal justice, they have never been as well armed with knowledge and expertise and have never enjoyed a greater capacity to lobby governments and force change. Interest groups, particularly those populated by the educated middle classes, can mobilize to effect change. The ability to raise funds, organize, communicate, lobby, and network and the ability to use the law and the media enable outsiders to question social policies and to challenge powerful organizations. Well-educated activists are increasingly able to read professional research literature, not only in education but also in such areas as medicine and ecology; this allows them to challenge professionals — "expertise is no longer the sole prerogative of experts" (Giddens, 1990, pp. 94–95).

These processes are helping to transform education. Today's cohort of Canadian parents is the most educated and informed in history. Parent-led interest groups are less deferential towards the educational establishment and are more likely to feel entitled to challenge experts. With a greater ability to get involved in school issues and with raised expectations for schooling, they have helped to fuel the sense of falling confidence. Demands for school choice in Canada epitomize these processes.

Interestingly, different professional groups have reacted differently to the evidence of declining public confidence. Barlow and Robertson's approach — denying the existence of any negative trend — characterizes many professional educators and entrenched bureaucrats. Teachers' unions have been reluctant to admit that confidence has widely declined. Instead, they have pointed to "special-interest groups," often the New Right and religious groups, as the sole doubters of the merits of public education. This is, of course, partially true: New Right politicians and various religious groups have been quite critical of public education. Nevertheless, as we have shown, these groups are not the sole doubters. Public support for education has been eroded, and it has been eroded across the board.

Declining confidence has consequences for policy. Politicians favour poll-sensitive reforms like standardized testing, published school-level results, parent councils, and clearer and higher curricular standards, despite the vigorous opposition of many educators, because they see these changes as tools to restore some measure of public confidence. What consequences might follow from this quickened pace of legislative reform, exemplified most recently by the Harris government in Ontario, which is aimed at appeasing education critics? Although legislative reforms are designed at least in part to assuage sagging public confidence, they may in themselves heighten worries about the system by highlighting perceived inadequacies.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the August 1997 meetings of the American Sociological Association in Toronto.
- <sup>2</sup> Indeed, much growth in private schooling is in religious schooling, partly the result of new funding opportunities (see, for instance, Barman, 1995) and perhaps partly the result of surging fear of decaying religiosity in society, which sparks many groups to demand religious schools.
- <sup>3</sup> The key point here is that, for whatever reason, more families look outside the public system for schooling. Some commentators (e.g., Barman, 1995) note that the extent of public funding for "private" schools has increased in recent years, and no doubt some expansion of private schooling may have occurred because enrollment is thus easier for families to afford. However, family incomes in Canada have been relatively stagnant for over a decade, so a commitment to private schooling remains economically taxing for many families.
- <sup>4</sup> To further explore the data, we dichotomized the confidence rating in two ways ("a great deal of confidence" = 1, all other responses = 0; "a great deal of confidence" and "some confidence" = 1, all other responses = 0) and ran logistic regressions. No demographic variables were significant in these results.
- <sup>5</sup> This type of survey finding is quite common across institutional spheres. Poll respondents are more likely to be critical of systems in the abstract, be it the political system or the healthcare system, than of their local embodiments, such as the local political representative or hospital (Lipset & Schneider, 1987). In education, people distinguish between schools and school systems, and tend to rate the former more highly. The target of their criticism is typically the system, not the local school. This finding certainly fits with the claims of critics who point to the education bureaucracy as a chief culprit (Davies & Guppy, 1997). Yet, polls in the United States suggest that confidence is eroding in local schools as well (Elam & Rose, 1995).

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