Great Expectations:
Essays on Schools and Society

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PART ONE: TEACHING IN INTERESTING TIMES 1

1.1 Par for the Course 3
Can teachers’ competence be evaluated by a single test? Ontario’s Tories bet that the public would love the idea almost as much as Mike Harris loved golf.

1.2 R-E-S-P-E-C-T 9
What happens when communities resist what they see as the destruction of their education systems? As one parent put it, “you don’t mess with people’s kids … when you do, you get it back.”

1.3 The Teacher Indentured Servitude Act 15
From time to time, provincial governments have attempted to strip teachers of their negotiated rights in the name of “accountability.” This article traces the path of Ontario’s bid to redefine teachers’ work. Can anyone fix a photocopier?

1.4 Tales from the Jungle 21
An important study of work/life conflict has identified teachers as among the most vulnerable employees, both because they work in the not-for-profit sector, and because the (growing) majority of them are women, a.k.a. “the juggling gender.”
1.5 Plus ça change

The emergence of College of Teachers models challenges the right of the profession to manage teacher competency and professional development. Some proposals for powers to be ceded to Colleges are reminiscent of the arbitrary measures used to control teachers at the turn of the century — the 20th century, that is.

1.6 Casting Call

Hollywood (and Hollywood North) happily advance stereotypes of school administrators that tend to suggest that only losers and sadists would consider administration as a career. Does this explain the dearth of aspiring school principals?

PART TWO: POLICY AND POLITICS

2.1 Bogus Points

Evaluating students’ achievement compared with public expectations is a murky business at best. At worst, it is a guarantee of orchestrated deception in the name of accountability.

2.2 That Draining Sensation

The “brain drain” argument has been manufactured by the Right to support their agenda of tax cuts and the restructuring of post-secondary education. Students prohibited from attending universities and colleges because of rising costs respresent a much greater loss to our country

2.3 The Politics of Choice

A brazen attempt to provide tax credits to parents of students in Ontario private schools receive little support, in part because the funding would have the effect of spending public money on private religious schools. But with parallel non-denominational and Catholic systems both receiving full funding, hasn’t that principle already been decided?

2.4 Getting Back to Essentials

At first glance, the idea of declaring education to be “an essential service” is appealing to politicians and the public. A closer look at the implications of such a designation reveals a cluster of unintended consequences that range from the serious to the silly.
2.5 An Overlooked Success in an Under-Appreciated Province

Those who push for standardized testing argue that results can be used to inform policy and to improve curriculum and instruction. If school improvement is the real motive behind comparative testing, why are the remarkable gains found in some jurisdictions utterly ignored by policy-makers in others?

2.6 Litigating Literacy

The idea that one single test — the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test — should determine whether a student graduates from high school may be ridiculous, but is it also a violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms?

2.7 By the Numbers

We are enthralled by numbers, and indulge what seems to be a national urge to measure everything that moves, especially indicators of the factors that predict, contribute to or describe educational outcomes.

2.8 Does Size Matter?

The first commandment of education reform seems to be “reduce class size.” Is the evidence sufficiently robust to put so much faith, and so much money, into this effort, or is small class size just a bite-sized political promise?

2.9 An Idea Whose Time Keeps Coming

The Canadian Council on Learning might come to usefully fill the void at the centre of Canadian Education, but much will depend on its ability to carry through on its commitment to consensus-building without self-destructing in the process.

2.10 Dropouts or Leftouts? School Leavers in Canada

There are many solid arguments for further decreasing drop-out rates across the country, and some promising initiatives are showing results. Refusing drivers’ licenses to non-graduates may catch sound-bites, but it tops the list of quick-fix solutions that are woefully off the mark.
2.11 The Caveat Emptor Index
The Canadian Council on Learning has released a report on Canada’s progress towards “lifelong learning.” Despite its lofty ambitions and praise from many quarters, the Learning Index is a poorly-executed (if well-marketed) number-crunch of suspect indicators.

PART THREE: STALKED BY THE MARKET

3.1 Shall we Dance?
Diverse interests are challenging the so-called monopoly of public education, and grooming the public to accept privatization. But Canadians like their public institutions. Shut out of “market share,” some hustlers are going after “mind share” instead.

3.2 Son of One
How and why a network of activists derailed a scummy attempt to import a slightly Canadianized version of Channel One. The failure of YNN to establish itself in Canadian classrooms remains a significant accomplishment in the battle against commercialization in schools.

3.3 Teachers, Trade and Taxes
As the service sector is drawn further into international trade agreements, public education’s privileged protection from international competition is being compromised.

3.4 Going with the Flow
If the Fraser Institute is to be believed, home-schooling has gone mainstream. What motivates the home-schooling “movement,” and who stands to gain (and lose) the most?

3.5 Stalked by the Market: Market Populism as Curriculum
A little forensic research reveals links among the Ontario Government, the National Post and the Investment Industry in promoting “investment education” in schools. Students end up learning more about neo-liberal ideology then they do about strip bonds and market cycles.
3.6 Doing it Daily

Daily physical education is the new darling of education policy-makers, who trumpet its benefits thanks, in part, to funding from the junk-food industry. The folks who would rather have childhood obesity blamed on inactivity than on caloric intake are firmly in control of the agenda.

3.7 The New, Improved Water Cycle

The “Refreshment Industry” has generously written guidelines about which of their products can be sold in school vending machines. In some cases, their proprietary brands of bottled water will replace pop. That’s good news, isn’t it?

PART FOUR: THE EQUITY AGENDA

4.1 Poor Logic and Poor Children

When Campaign 2000's report on child poverty is released annually, hands are wrung from coast to coast. Unfortunately, there is little appreciation among the public of the link between student achievement and socioeconomic status, and the educational arguments for eliminating child poverty.

4.2 Decolonizing Schools

There is a continuing debate over how to improve educational outcomes and graduation rates for Aboriginal students. Is improvement possible in a system dominated by non-Aboriginal adults?

4.3 Une génération castrée

The idea that boys are being shortchanged by public education is promoted, at least in part, by the same social conservatives that lament gender equity in general. Recognizing boys’ legitimate needs is likely to get lost in a dispute over gender-segregated schooling.
4.4 Lost in Translation
Schools in major urban centres bear a disproportionate share of responsibility for helping immigrant and refugee children make a successful transition to their new communities. English-as-a-second-language (ESL) funding is not keeping pace with the demands placed on it, in part because parents of ESL students lack political capital.

4.5 Under the Rainbow
Schools that literally or metaphorically display the rainbow flag, the universal symbol of rights and respect for sexual minorities, have made a profound difference in the lives of thousands of students.

4.6 Bend it Like Azzy
The principle of “reasonable accommodation” becomes political fodder when an 11-year-old girl is banned from a soccer pitch for wearing a hijab.

PART FIVE: THE DIGITAL SCHOOL

5.1 Going Bananas
What parents think their children are doing on-line, at home and at school, turns out to be a tad optimistic. Two surveys, one of adults and one of students, suggest yet another type of digital divide.

5.2 Recycled Promises
The Canadian Government continues to promote discredited claims from the technology industry that student achievement is boosted by using their products. Whatever happened to the “schools of the future” that served as sites to profile the promises of technology?

5.3 Black Magic
A subversive idea is starting to go mainstream. Perhaps tithing to technology, especially in the face of other education budget cuts, has turned out to be a really bad idea after all.
5.4 Postman does Penguins  
The commercialization of the “screen culture” of young children isn’t the only hazard with which parents and teachers must contend. Can Parquet make friends in Club Penguin?

PART SIX: THE MIRROR OF SOCIETY  
6.1 The Devil’s in the Demographics  
The changing demographic profile of students and teachers is creating new dynamics in schools. Both the nature of recent education reforms and teachers’ reactions to them are somewhat predictable indicators of our demographic footprints.

6.2 Strike Laws, Not Children  
Section 43 of the Criminal Code, which has the effect of permitting teachers to use force in the control and correction of students, has been unsuccessfully challenged in the courts despite the lack of any cogent arguments supporting its retention.

6.3 Sad, Bad, Mad: The Health of Canada’s Children  
Most research into the circumstances of Canada’s children focuses on resources (child poverty) or performance (standardized testing). More attention should be paid to the mental health of children and youth and its association with more attention-grabbing statistics.

6.4 The Right to Rights  
Canadians felt a certain smug satisfaction when this country ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, isolating Somalia and the United States as the only countries to refuse to endorse it. But talk is cheap, and this country is far from living up to its international commitments.

6.5 The Decline of Small Pleasures  
What happens when we treat every moment of childhood as nothing more than preparation for some other stage of life? Is every interaction with children, including reading to them, just another opportunity to get ahead?
6.6 **Incent This!**  
Privatization takes many forms and wears many disguises. P3 schools, among the first “public-private partnerships” in the education sector, turned out to be an economic and political failure in Nova Scotia.

6.7 **J-School Journal**  
What do journalism students think should be the priorities of Canada's schools, and how do these views differ from those of the public? Do these assumptions colour how they understand and report on education issues?

6.8 **Txt the Vote**  
Can the democratic deficit be repaired by Can-West Global and Nokia? Using the pretext of increasing voter turnout among youth, these corporations promoted their products through schools, encouraging students to “txt their votes” in the 2004 Federal election.

6.9 **Friendly Fire**  
The cross-border friendship between Canada and the United States is partly expedient, partly genuine and almost always problematic. Although there are measurable differences between us on a number of important issues that should result in different public policies, it is difficult to escape America’s influence when framing Canadian education debates.