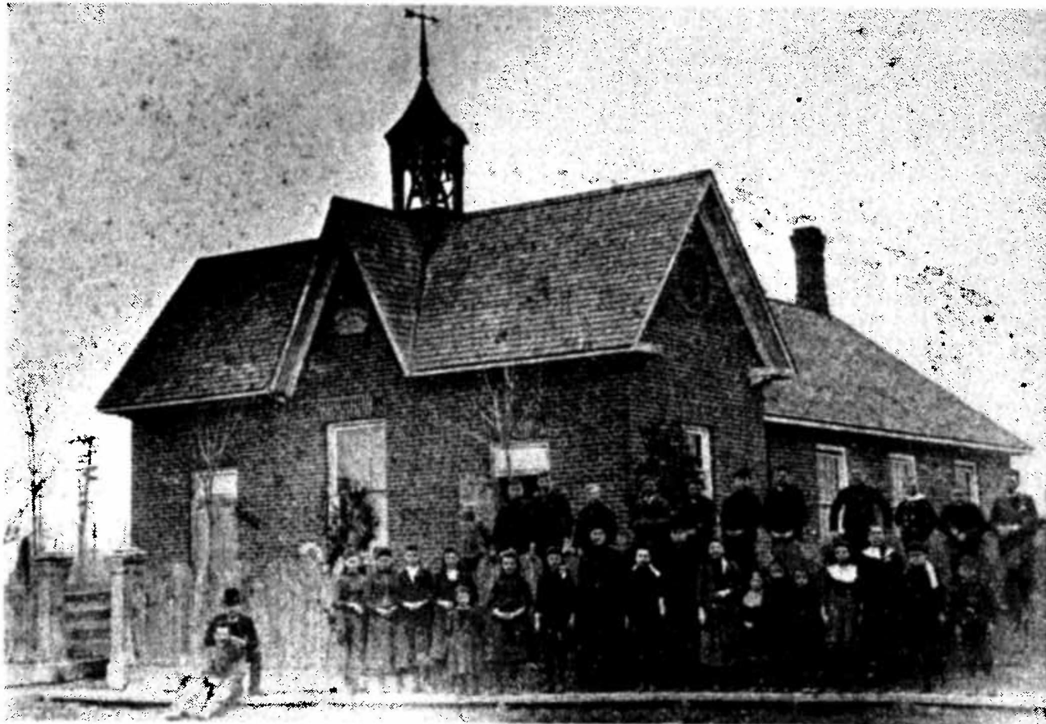
Compulsory schooling in Ontario: 1871



Rural secondary school in York Township, Ontario, built in 1874
(Ontario Archives, S18614; ID #20423)
http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/20423.htm

Free and compulsory public schooling was first instituted in Ontario in 1871, and most Canadian provinces soon followed its lead. Free, state run schools offered answers to major social and economic problems of the time. A better education would make a better society, reformers argued, as children would learn the skills needed to be good workers and good citizens. Because children's labour contributed to family survival, many parents were reluctant to send their children to school. Others objected to compulsory schooling because it did not match their language or religion. By the 1890s most people had come to hope that free and compulsory schooling would improve their children's lives and contribute to a more just and equitable Canada.

Overview of the decade: 1865-1874

Economic developments

In 1867, three and one-half million people lived in the new Dominion of Canada. Almost half of the population was under 17 years of age. Eighty percent of families got their income from a combination of farming, fishing, logging and the fur trade. Since the late 1840s, however, technology, international trade and improved transportation began a series of chain reactions that transformed the economy and the society.

Manufacturing was replacing Canada's dependence on the sale of raw materials like fish, furs and wheat. More people were employed in the factories and workshops of the rapidly growing cities. The population of the countryside grew as well, as people continued to carve farms out of forest lands. The Canadian government obtained the vast lands of the North West from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869. In 1872, the Dominion Land Act gave land free to non-Aboriginal homesteaders on the prairies, provided they planted ten acres of land, built a house and fenced some lands. European settlement slowly began to transform the prairie region. Buffalo were hunted to the brink of extinction for sport and to obtain the fashionable 'buffalo robes' that were made from their skins, ridding the prairies of a major threat to farm lands. The destruction of the buffalo led, however, to widespread starvation for the Aboriginal peoples who relied on the buffalo for almost all of their food and clothing.

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Alfred Miller, Plains tribes driving buffalo to death over sharp drops, thereby creating a massive meat-supply, 1867

(National Archives of Canada, C-403)

For Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, and for both rural and urban dwellers, more aspects of people's daily lives were brought within the capitalist economy of salaried jobs and the sale of goods for cash, gradually replacing household labour on the farm. The Grand Trunk Railway linked the Maritimes with markets in central Canada. Steam powered machines improved transportation and the way work was done. Rural populations were slowly obtaining more money to buy the consumer goods manufactured in those industrialized cities. Hamilton, St. John, Montreal and Toronto went from being large towns occupied mainly by artisans to industrial cities in these years. By 1870 these cities could claim 70% of their workforce working in factories. These included heavy industries, like those associated with the construction of railway engines and track, to lighter industries of footwear, brewing and textiles.

Social developments

Although the majority of people in the new Dominion lived in the country, the conditions of urban families became an increasing concern during these years. Reformers (groups seeking to improve social and economic conditions) were concerned with saving people's souls to prepare them for an eternity in heaven. There was, however, a growing belief that society should use the new technologies and the new knowledge of science and of human nature to create a better society here on earth. Members of the middle class (professional families like doctors, lawyers and educators, and wealthier business people who had both money and status) increasingly sought to reform the masses. The challenge was to convince the masses to work harder, save money rather than spend it on liquor, and participate in productive leisure activities to become better citizens. Reform movements emphasized moral reform through religious education and curing the social problems though the building of institutions such as insane asylums, hospitals, prisons and workhouses for the poor. For the thousands of children who worked in workshops and factories, the institution of public schooling appeared as a way to organize, discipline and improve their lot.

The Ontario Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Belleville, Ontario, built shortly after Confederation

(Ontario Archives, S1421; ID #20420)

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Political developments

In 1867, the Dominion of Canada was created from the confederation of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec and Ontario. The government established taxes that raised the price of foreign manufactured goods, encouraging Canadians to buy what was manufactured in their own country. With this protection, Canadian manufacturing increased. A little later, Prince Edward Island (1873) and British Columbia (1871) joined Confederation with the Dominion's promise of increased transportation routes (steamship service to PEI and a railroad to BC) and a payment of each colony's extensive debt by the federal government.

Western lands, long considered worthless for farming anything but fur-bearing animals, were now identified as potentially rich farmland. Farmers in the west would not only have a market for their farm produce, but they could purchase manufactured goods created in central Canada, goods which would also be carried by rail and sold at a good profit. While farmers and business people began to see the west as a land of commercial opportunity, the Canadian government saw western expansion as a way of stopping American expansion into British North America and establishing a Protestant and English speaking region. When Canada purchased Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869, no one had thought to consult with the Native and Metis people who were living in the area. When the first road building crews arrived at the border of their 'new' territory, they were confronted by Louis Riel and his supporters worried about the new government, and the Red River Rebellion was launched. Metis people successfully negotiated a system for holding onto some of their lands, and, with support from the province of Quebec, a guarantee of Catholic and French language rights in education.

Aboriginal people did not fare so well. Through a series of treaties (1871-1876) the Canadian government acquired Aboriginal lands. These treaties were intended to convert Aboriginal peoples to a European way of life by encouraging them to turn from hunting to agriculture, and from Native or Catholic religion to Protestantism. By 1885, the Canadian legal system was completing what the over-hunting of the buffalo had begun—the foundations of the traditional prairie economy, society and culture were destroyed.

1871: Compulsory school attendance

Education before 1871

Although all five colonies in British North America had, since the eighteenth century, set aside pieces of land to provide for education of the population, there was no system of public and free education in the colonies in the first half of the nineteenth century. Education for children of the ruling classes then, as now, was a private affair. Sons and daughters were educated at home while they were young, and sons were sent to private schools abroad, or to Upper Canada College in Toronto. Schooling for most people (i.e., not the rich) was originally seen as the responsibility of the Church of England or, especially in Quebec, of the Roman Catholic Church. In the first half of the century, most children lived in rural areas or small towns, and there they would have received some education in a small and informal setting. For the minority of children who, before the 1840s received any formal education, most would likely have attended a school irregularly for two or three years, with perhaps five or six students and one teacher, usually a volunteer.

In the late 1820s, for example, Kate Andrews opened a private school in the basement of her home in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, shortly after she had married for the second time. She had educated herself, not having attended any formal educational institutions, but she nevertheless became well respected as a school mistress. Mrs. Andrews mainly taught day school children, but had a few borders living in her house. She had a servant and later a niece who helped her out over the fifty years that she ran her school. The daily curriculum involved reading, writing and arithmetic for everyone, and the girls also studied needlework. For most teachers, teaching was not a full time, permanent occupation, but instead, it was a voluntary, part time or temporary activity. Most students would have spent more time 'helping out' at home or, when they were older, working for family and neighbours, rather than attending school.

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Dickson's Hill School, Markham Township, York County

(Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, Black Creek Pioneer Village, ID #20406)

http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/20406.htm

By the 1820s, there was a growing feeling within the British colonies that education was the key to a better life. Not everyone agreed that it should be either free or compulsory (students must, by law, attend school). Some members of the elite classes felt that education would give the working classes knowledge that would raise them above their station, to challenge their inferior place in society. Other objections came from poor families who relied heavily on the work of children to support the household, and could not afford to have their children attend school even if education was free. In rural areas, children's work in the house, farmyard and fields was crucial to the success of the family farm. As the economy changed to provide fewer opportunities for children's labour and as laws were passed that stopped many forms of children's employment, more parents felt able to send their children to school on a regular basis.

Problems and promise of compulsory schooling

In 1871, Ontario passed the first compulsory school law—an example that other provinces quickly followed. Ontario provided for education in English and French, and for both Catholics and Protestants. Schools were not always free. Some schools charged admission, either as religious schools or as 'private' schools, much as they do now. However, the public schools were free to students and compulsory from the beginning; they were paid for by the Ontario government and the municipal taxpayers equally.

Children did not have to attend school for as many years as children today, and most children left their formal education behind at age fourteen. In rural families, children's responsibilities on the farm were so extensive, and interfered with their school attendance so much, that even when compulsory education laws were passed in Ontario in 1871, children were only compelled to work half days, leaving them time to help out their parents during daylight hours. Canadian schools instituted one of the longest summer holidays in the world, to allow children to work on the farm for their families.

Language of instruction and religion, however, provided barriers to public education in many parts of the country. Indeed, this issue became a central point of conflict in Canada in the 19th century. In the decades after Confederation, the idea that Canada had two founding nations with language and religious rights was not accepted by many. Public education was seen by some English Canadians as *the* means of getting French Catholics to adopt the Anglophone Protestant way of life. This fear of assimilation reduced support for public education in New Brunswick, where French language schools were not paid for by the government. In Quebec, the rural majority was largely against schooling run by the state and funded by municipal taxes. They preferred a religious education that did not promote the values of the dominant English

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educational system. Compulsory education was not instituted in Quebec until the 1920s, and school attendance in Quebec remained at levels well below most other provinces. In Manitoba, the government was obliged under the Manitoba Act of 1870 to provide French language instruction. By 1890, however, when Anglophone Protestants had come to outnumber Francophones, the government passed the Manitoba Schools Act, removing public support for separate (i.e., Catholic) schools. The issue increased tensions between Anglophone and the Francophone Metis populations in the province.

Education was compulsory and free through much of Canada by the 1890s, and students in Ontario were, after 1871, expected to gain a fairly standardized education within a single educational system. In practice, however, poverty, race, gender, class and geography restricted access to the public systems. Aboriginal peoples fared the worst. Because of their race, Aboriginal children across the country were educated in system of state education that was different from but parallel to the system for non-Natives. Residential schools (schools where students lived as well as studied during the school year) were created under the Indian Act with the explicit goal of bringing Aboriginal children into Anglo-Canadian society. Although the curriculum was the same as in the regular public school system, poorly trained teachers, lack of resources, and reduced hours of instruction (usually in favour of practical training) resulted in an unequal system. Asian children were not numerous in Canada before the 20th century, but their access to public education was limited by discrimination in schools and classrooms. In central and eastern Canada, African-Canadian children were educated in schools that were segregated by race. They could be excluded from white public schools if there were enough families to operate a separate public Black school. This type of discrimination was still in effect in some areas until the 1960s.

Despite the inequalities in the public system, many Anglophones, Francophones and recent immigrants often found an education that met their religious, language and cultural expectations. For these people public, free schooling was seen as a great benefit. For many immigrants, education offered the practical means to a better and more secure livelihood at a time of great insecurity and change. Education promised release from a life of hard physical labour and poverty. Many rural owners of family farms saw education as the key to understanding the political and economic systems that increasingly controlled their lives. Although the colonies and provinces were not democratically run—the majority of people were still not allowed to vote in elections—the idea of democratic rights and responsibilities was becoming an important topic of conversation. Education taught people how to become better, more informed citizens, a goal that was repeatedly supported by reformers like Egerton Ryerson, the man responsible for establishing a compulsory school system in Ontario.

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