

Canada

Bordering the United States to the south, the Atlantic Ocean to the east, the Pacific Ocean to the west, and the Arctic Ocean to the north, Canada is the second-largest country in the world in terms of landmass (after Russia). With a population of more than 33 million people, Canada is sparsely populated comparatively speaking, with approximately 90 percent of its inhabitants residing in the more temperate zone within a relatively short distance of the U.S. border. Canada became a self-governing confederation in 1867, with a parliamentary form of democratic government that continues close relations with the British Crown. Today, Queen Elizabeth II is still the titular head of state, with a governor-general of Canada carrying out duties as a de facto head of state and with a prime minister as the head of government. It is the prime minister who forms the cabinet and oversees the various ministries of the Canadian national government, including the Ministry of Education.¹

Canada consists of ten provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Saskatchewan, and the Yukon Territory) and three territories (Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, and Nunavut). Canada has experienced difficulties in establishing reconciliation between its majority Anglophone population and its Francophone minority (located primarily in Quebec); thus, the country has two official languages, English and French. Twenty-eight percent of its population is of British origin, 23 percent is French, 15 percent other European, 2 percent Amerindian, 6 percent other backgrounds (such as Asian, African, or Arab) and 26 percent of the population is of mixed heritage.

Economically and technologically, Canada shares traits similar to its southern neighbor, the United States: It is a prosperous, high-tech industrial society with a market-oriented economic system. The 1989 US-Canada Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, which also includes Mexico) initiated a significant increase in trade and economic integration with the United States.²

The Canadian educational system

Of course, education existed in Canada before the creation of the Canadian public school system. As in many other countries, the young were informally educated by the adults in their communities, using their natural environments as the classroom. Oral traditions such as storytelling served as ways to transmit the knowledge deemed important to the survival and growth of each new generation. Canada's first schools were established by missionaries and religious orders

primarily concerned with converting indigenous peoples and enculturating them into European belief systems. This approach had mixed results, embraced by some and rejected by others. As in the United States, missionary education included boarding and residential schools designed to assimilate native children. As Canadian settlement by the French, British, and others increased, their children might secure schooling from missionaries and private individuals to prepare them for religious orders or other pursuits, and a few might go to Europe for more extended academic and professional preparation; however, schooling among the general population, where it was available, was usually limited to basic skills and knowledge.³

Public schools developed in Canada during the nineteenth century, and today's Canadian educational system consists of a collection of diverse subsystems, including state-regulated public schools, private schools, and various adult education services. Public schools are governed primarily through the provinces, with significant responsibility for delivery resting at the local level with school boards and First Nations educational authorities. Institutions of higher education are both publicly and privately funded and controlled, and it is here that the greatest growth has occurred over the last half century. Elementary and secondary education have the largest enrollments in Canada's educational system, but the higher education sector receives disproportionately more funding. In terms of funding, the larger portion comes from the central government, but reliance on municipal and private sources has steadily increased.⁴

Issues that complicate school governance include accountability, school choice, and charter schools. The sources for these alternatives to existing policies and practices are similar in nature to those in the United States, including concerns about an educated workforce for international economic competition, what kinds of values schools should transmit, and bureaucratic barriers to change in school governance and policies.⁵

One theme in the Canadian school reform debates has focused on how to collect and interpret data and measure success in teaching and learning. Canadian scholars indicate that, given international comparisons, Canadian students by and large do well academically. Nevertheless, researchers and policy makers grapple with how best to improve the educational system and decision-making processes based on what is considered good evidence.⁶

Notes

- 1 Central Intelligence Agency, "Canada," *The World Factbook*, at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ca.html> (accessed on September 11, 2007); and "Parliament of Canada: Parliamentary Government," at http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/idb/forsey/parl_gov_03-e.asp (accessed on September 11, 2007).

- 2 “Canada,” at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ca.html> (accessed on September 11, 2007).
- 3 Terry Wotherspoon, *The Sociology of Education in Canada* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 46–65.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 65–68.
- 5 Wotherspoon, 196–200. See also Mark Holmes, *The Reformation of Canada’s Schools: Breaking the Barriers to Parental Choice* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998).
- 6 Patrice de Broucker and Arthur Sweetman, *Towards Evidence-Based Policy for Canadian Education (Vers des politiques Canadiennes d’éducation fondées sur la recherche)* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), p. 8.