Education and the politics that surround it – is on the minds of many Canadian families these days. As most parents and teachers will tell you, children are not the same as they were 20 years ago and this has become particularly apparent with the rise of certain childhood diseases and neurological and developmental disorders. It’s a lot of pressure on education and it comes at a time when the world itself is changing fast: ecologically, economically, and socially. It is recognition of these very world changes that led the Finnish Ministry of Education, already considered one of the best in the world, to decide to give even more attention to education. They attribute their continual success to “the education system (uniform, basic education for the whole age group), highly competent teachers and the autonomy given to schools”.

So, how does Canada compare in these and other areas? There is a lot that Canada is doing right, but there are a number of current trends in our education system that are cause for concern. To figure it out, I sat down with Chris Kelly, the former Superintendent/CEO of the City of Vancouver School Board who identified some key differences in the two countries’ current mainstream systems.

Mr. Kelly’s long and extensive career in education includes numerous senior administrative positions within British Columbia school boards as well as co-founding the educational Dalai Lama Centre for Heart-Mind. I also called upon one of my favourite Canadian thought leaders in childhood development, Cris Rowan, an occupational therapist and author of Virtual Child.

Two-Tiers of Access May Mean Double the Trouble

As a transplant to Canada from America, there are many aspects of the Canadian system that I find baffling. One of the biggest is the lack of consistency across the provinces. For example, while homeschooling is legal in all of the Canadian provinces, B.C. has the most supportive home education laws in North America with parent-teachers even eligible for some provincial dollars. Seven of the provinces and territories allow faith-based schools (such as Catholic or Protestant schools) to be supported with tax money. Independent or private schools that meet certain criteria get up to 70% of the funding of a public school in Alberta, up to 50% in provinces like B.C., Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Quebec, while in Ontario, most independent schools are defined as private and receive no comparable funding. Then there are the Francophone schools which restrict access to only those students with a Francophone parent and are then provided with federal dollars not available to other public schools.

The variation in the educational opportunities for children leads many, including Mr. Kelly, to argue that Canada has a two-tiered system that offers better educational options to those that can pay for it. Others complain that it’s more than just private versus public that provides a two-tiered system, but also the additional funding received by schools offering a French-language program. Mr. Kelly says that one of the reasons so many schools decide to offer a French immersion program, rather than, say, an art, science, nature-based or Spanish immersion emphasis, is because of the additional federal funding for schools offering French. There is often an unintended cost: “One of...
### At-A-Glance Comparison Between Finland’s and Canada’s Education Systems

Finland – already ranked as one of the best educational systems in the world – is undertaking comprehensive educational reforms: “Why improve the system that has been ranked as top quality in the world?” Irmeli Halinen, the Finnish National Board of Education’s head of curriculum development, asks of herself in a video posted to their website. She answers, “Because the world is changing around the school... globalization, development of technology and... challenges of sustainability. All of them are influencing... the environment of our children and also influencing the schools... There must be changes in schools too.” These changes will primarily be in culture – a big deal in a system that has no standardized testing and instead relies on curricula designed in an “open, interactive, and cooperative process.”

The new curriculum will increase emphasis on collaboration and positive emotional experiences. Their curriculum continues to include regular and rigorous feedback from teachers.

**a few other facts to consider:**

- Although both Finland and Canada, in 2011, spent approximately the same amount on education per student relative to overall spending – 24% per pupil as percentage of GDP per capita – Canada ranked 15th in overall educational achievement, versus Finland’s 4th.
- In Finland, compulsory education does not begin until age 7. In Canada, it varies from age 5 to 6. At the age of 16, Finnish students may choose to continue their secondary education (usually three years) on an academic track or a vocational track.
- The Finnish system does not track students, even with special needs, but allows them to see what is the best fit for the student. In contrast, the Canadian system tracks students in multiple ways, including French/Francophone/English schools and private versus public schools.
- Finland prioritizes schools nearby to homes and provides free transportation for students in rural areas. Throughout Canada, accessibility of free transportation varies tremendously by province and type of school.

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**Watch the completely refreshing video statement by Irmeli Halinen here:**


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### The Dangerous Game of More Technology and Less Play in Schools

Criss Rowan is the expert that I typically turn to for information regarding children and play. She started her career as an occupational therapist in the schools and saw, first-hand, the phenomenal rise in learning disabilities. “Twenty-five years ago I had a very limited case load,” she said, “and it was confined to kids with head injuries and other ‘concrete’ disabilities. About 15 years ago, my caseload skyrocketed and I began to see kids with a lot of fine motor and gross motor skill issues, ADHD.” It is clear to her that increased screen use and lack of free play correlate with the issues that she is seeing. She bought a Centurion, used as ‘plagued’ with health concerns such as developmental delays, obesity, mental health issues and other more general overall quality of life concerns. “To what extent are these child health issues related to technology overuse, and what is happening to happen if parents and health and education professionals continue to ignore the warning signs that children are simply not getting enough of the physical activity they need to be healthy.”

**The Learning Curve report says that to be ready to enter Kindergarten.” Kids should be getting at least an hour of vigorous activity a day from ages 5 to 18 according to The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines for Children and Youth. They found that even kids supposedly getting one hour of active play still had a third of a day’s play into the evening, and some didn’t get any vigorous play – think of a game of chase – for about nine minutes. And then they need to keep that in mind as they are walking and swinging – for another two hours.**

**Criss Rowan**

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### Feature

**Feature**

**Early Start Really Getting Ahead?**

Perhaps the rush to enroll our young children in full-time school is an unintended consequence of paying some of the highest fees for childcare anywhere in the world. When I moved to Canada, I was surprised to learn that in some provinces children are encouraged to enter full-time kindergarten as early as age 3. This is an issue of concern for Ms. Rowan. Compare this to Finland which starts full-time compulsory education in grade one, when children are aged approximately 6, because of the experts – the likes of Malcolm Gadwell and University of California researchers Kathy Bedard and Elizabeth Dhuey – have found that children who are among the oldest in their class have a competitive advantage over their younger classmates. Malcolm Gadwell proved this with hockey players. Bedard and Dhuey recently showed that older classmaters scored higher on math and science tests in grade school all the way through high school and were more likely to enrol in college or university than their younger classmates. This idea of pushing children into grades based on age, rather than developmental level, is something that Ms. Rowan is bewildered. “I was at a school recently that had their playground cordoned off with yellow caution tape, but they had just bought a whole new block of computers.”

**Is There Hope?**

Mr. Kelly made an important point: stories in the media have focused on how children are usually negative and don’t capture how much great education is actually happening in this country. He spoke optimistically about a sort of grassroots effort amongst parents, students, and teachers to persist in instilling education with their values. Ms. Rowan pointed to the growing movement of outdoor schools as one such hopeful example. “Even great schools may not be rocket science, but it sure seems to be an art.” The Learning Curve report says that “Education remains very much a black box in nature – a big deal in a system that has no standardized testing and instead relies on curricula designed in an ‘open, interactive, and cooperative process.’” The new curriculum will increase emphasis on collaboration and positive emotional experiences. Their curriculum continues to include regular and rigorous feedback from teachers.

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**Kelly, like the Finnish curriculum minister, says that access to a quality education for all students amounts to a human rights issue. As Canadians, the question is, then, whether we are prepared to do the hard work to make it so.**