EDUCATION REFORM IN CANADA

An Expert Discussion

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ABOUT CARDUS

Cardus is a non-partisan, faith-based think tank and registered charity dedicated to promoting a flourishing society through independent research, robust public dialogue, and thought-provoking commentary.

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PREFACE

MICHAEL VAN PELT

All education is public education. Sadly, the norm in Canada is to equate public education with government-run schools. Cardus is a leader in helping professionals and the public take a broader view of education, taking into account all contributions to the public good – be they from government-run schools or independent schools. To that end, Cardus convened a panel of experts at our Ottawa office to explore the issue of educational reform in Canada. Meeting on the sidelines of the March 2019 Manning Networking Conference, Calgary radio host Danielle Smith moderated a discussion with Cardus Co-Founder and Executive Vice President Ray Pennings and Cardus Senior Fellow Dr. Deani Van Pelt. A portion of their conversation is reproduced below, focusing on three themes: A Global Perspective on Education, Conservative and Business Perspectives on Education, and Spurring Innovation in Education.

MICHAEL VAN PELT is president and CEO of Cardus. He has more than 30 years of experience in public life and is a vibrant ideas generator and sought-after collaborator.

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATION

RAY PENNINGS: Welcome, all, to this discussion of education reform in Canada. Knowing that among our many guests here tonight we also have a large number of participants from the Manning Conference, I'm going to make an assumption that at least some members of the audience we're talking with tonight are conservative political activists. Thinking from that perspective, my hope is to offer a bit of challenge as to why education, and religious or independent education in particular, is a third rail in conservative politics.

I want to make the argument that when we think of reform in education at large, we need to include in our thinking the independent school sector. We need to think about introducing market principles into the delivery of education to create innovation. That's very much how Cardus's work on education has proceeded . . . I'm a fan. I sent my own son to independent school, and am a believer in the independent school movement. But I believe in the traditional arguments associated with parental rights. Obviously there's a faith motivation behind my own decision, but when I think of education reform at large, Canada is significantly out of step with the rest of the world in the sense of having real parental choice.

Even in the public education system, I was making the case to someone today that really what we have is postal-code-determined education for most Canadians. Based on where you live it's automatic where your child goes to school. The reality is, there is little diversity in the experience of most Canadian children in their schools, which reflect the social economic makeup of their neighbourhoods. So we've got wonderful macro data about the diversity of our education system, but for the experience of any given child, it actually is not that diverse.

Cardus over the last decade has been doing major survey work on the outcomes of education. We've been interviewing adults in both Canada and the United States, 29 to 39 years old, and asking, "Is there a school-sector effect in terms of spiritual outcomes, academic formation, and cultural engagement?" Whether you went to a government school or a non-government school, we've got tons of data, and there's a lot of nuance in it.

But I think the point we see in these surveys is that there are a variety of ways to deliver quality education, and that if we ask, "Is education reform possible?" I want to put my thesis out there and answer yes. But for conservatives to do that, it requires the introduction of market principles to drive innovation in education. That's my opening salvo.

DANIELLE SMITH: **Thank you, and let me go to Deani Van Pelt. I have a theory about why it is that education is the third rail in conservative politics. I'll propose it to you after we've heard Deani's comments. Deani has a very long title with a lot of different roles, one of them being that she is a senior fellow at Cardus. Deani, go ahead.**

DEANI VAN PELT: Good evening, everyone. For the last eight months, I have headed up an industry association in the independent school sector. It's a new association of independent Christian schools in Ontario, and we don't have a similar organization in any of the eastern provinces, so hopefully I'll be able to work with the six provinces across the country in the independent school sector, advocating for the sector. Something I noticed four years ago when I started as the director of policy for the Fraser Institute, and we took a look at how our conversation was going across the country in terms of understanding the education sector and market principles in the education sector

is that we actually didn't even have an overall sense of the national landscape on education.

So that was one of the first things we did. We said, "Let's hear from all the ministries." I would actually just like to know: What share of students in each province attend a government school? What type of government school? What share attend an independent school, and what share of students are homeschooled? We just pulled that together. It turns out that was kind of radical. No one had done that. I happened to notice a few months ago that Statistics Canada in November produced a very similar chart.

So it's great to have these national snapshots of what's going on in the country, and what we did indeed find is that the independent school sector is very small in a place that has an enormous amount of diversity. It's the province of Alberta. So there you have one of the smallest non-government school sectors in the country. Why? We can talk about what that answer might be. We definitely learned that, province by province, each one of our stories and the way we design and deliver education is different.

So my answer to the question, Is education reform possible in Canada? would have these two caveats: Yes it is possible, first, if we're willing to learn from one another and have more conversations across provinces, and second, if we're willing to learn from other countries across the world. I think Ontario can be encouraged to start looking elsewhere for really good solutions. I've just met a great organization out of Geneva called Oidel. They produce an index of education freedom, and they've got a book and you can just flip through it. It's one page per country. I learned so much about non-government school delivery in every single country across the world that my imagination was fervid with possibilities.

The third place we need to look for solutions is not only across the country and across the world but also locally. A lot of our solutions reside in our communities, at the school level. We need to look to parents, because they know best what their children need. We need to look to teachers in classrooms, and we need to look to school leaders. Principals need to be empowered, particularly in government schools, with more authority, more autonomy. So yes, education reform is possible, but we need to be looking for good solutions in a variety of places.

CONSERVATIVE AND BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION

DANIELLE SMITH: **A big part of the fight over education reform has to do with unions and also with regulations on schools.**

Here's a proposal to spark debate: Why not say that if you are going to be in the education system, everyone has to have Alberta Teachers Association certificated staff, and they all have to be part of the union? Okay, knowing that Catherine Swift is here and she might tear her hair out because of this question, just know I'm being provocative. But the reason I ask is I look at health-care reform in Sweden. Part of the reason they've been able to advance health-care reform is that they're such a heavily unionized place that it doesn't matter whether you're working at a government hospital or a private hospital. The union isn't out for money, so they've been champions of choice because they know that choice gives better working conditions for their people. So maybe we're looking at this the wrong way. Rather than fight the unions, why not embrace them?

RAY PENNINGS: I think there are a couple of things. Number one, I'm pro-union. I've written a piece, "The Conservative Case for Collecting Bargaining," so I'm pro-union in terms of the benefits that they can bring in various settings along the way. I'm not opposed to that argument; however, that presumes a very different mindset than Canadian unions and Canadian teacher unions in particular would have. So even if that theoretically was possible, moving from the current reality to that is a huge step that isn't there along the way.

But let me push two things in terms of the mindset and the assumptions that are there. Deani and I coauthored a paper that was released earlier this week on the topic of funding fairness for Ontario families with children who have special education needs. The Ontario government spends more than three billion dollars on special education programs. But students needing assistance in independent schools receive nothing from the Ontario Ministry of Education. We also learned that some ministries have more exclusionary policies and practices than others. For example both the ministries of health and education fund trays to help some students with special needs organize their learning materials. If the tray is provided by the ministry of health, students can use it in either a government or independent school. However, if the tray is funded by the ministry of education, and a family decides to switch schools to an independent school, that tray may not go with the student to their new school. We have to put that tray away.

So we highlighted that even if you funded independent schools at 25, 50 or 75 percent of the amount government schools receive, you could provide more comprehensively for the

needs of challenged children in Ontario. That was striking to me, so we pitched it, sent out the media release, followed up with education reporters.

We had an expression of interest from an education reporter at a mainstream newspaper, but then an email came back that said, "Oh, I didn't see that this covered private schools. Not interested." So this is a story about helping special needs Ontarians, but if you go to an independent school, the assumption is, "Sorry, that disqualifies you. I'm not even interested in covering the story."

So I think there's a pervasive underlying mindset that we have to deal with.

Can I throw a second challenge? That mindset is easy to talk about because those people are out there, presumably not in this room as attendees of the Manning Conference. But when conservative policy even thinks of the public education system, what do we talk about? We talk about cutting dollars. We talk about the costs of the education. We don't talk about excellence. We don't talk about outcomes, and standardized tests, as if this checklist of rules is going to give us the outcomes. Well, maybe we should move instead of input measures to output measures, and allow creativity and innovation. Would that not be a more conservative, principled approach? And then, I suggest, we will have a lot more room in terms of policy as opposed to the tired stuff we always see.

When we think of reform in education at large, we need to include in our thinking the independent school sector. We need to think about introducing market principles into the delivery of education to create innovation.

– Ray Pennings

DANIELLE SMITH: **Well, I think it's a great point. This is one of the traps that conservatives have fallen into. I saw it with Ralph Klein when we used to have individual hospital boards. He said, "Oh, well that's inefficient. If we could just move to regional boards, we'd get rid of all of these layers of management." And then seventeen boards didn't work so we went to nine, and then ultimately went to one, and we've got a larger bureaucracy than we've ever had in health care.**

But I think that nobody is willing to do what actually needs to be done, which is say, school boards have outlived their usefulness. They've become too big and unwieldy. The trustees don't have effective oversight. There are multiple layers of managers. Maybe every school actually needs to be directly chartered with the province, and we need to get rid of school boards altogether.

DEANI VAN PELT: What I would say to that, and I'm thinking about Ontario, is that we have already had an amalgamation of school boards. We're down to something like seventy-two or seventy-six in the province. What I would say to that is to reduce an emphasis on centralized dictation and allocate a certain amount of dollars, whether it's distributed through the school districts or at the school level, but decentralize the decision making. So we have a conversation right now about class size in Ontario. That is actually a nineteenth- or twentieth-century concept, and we're stuck in talking about something that's tethering us to the past.

But, for example, if at the local school level the principal has a certain amount of money, has goals to achieve, and can determine within their own context the best way to allocate that money, there can be so many more healthy and robust decisions. So I don't know about getting rid of school boards, but I do know about decentralizing the decision making, putting your eye on the goals, and allowing more local decision making. Give the school districts true authority.

I want to go back to the issue of teacher professionalization. I was a professor of education and a certified teacher faculty of education for eight years. I am very interested in the professionalization of the profession of teaching, and what I would say about that though is that we have to be again very open in how we understand what it is to be a qualified teacher. If someone's very certified in their area of expertise, and very able to work with children, they should be able to teach in our schools. The barrier shouldn't be, "Oh, but are you an Alberta-certified teacher? Are you an Ontario-certified teacher?" There should be some space for excellent musicians, excellent artists, you name it. You fill in the blank. Excellent mathematicians should be able to come in and work in our schools as well.

SPURRING INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

DANIELLE SMITH: **One of the reasons that independent schooling has a hard time growing is because they can't get the capital to be able to grow. There's a charter school called Foundations for the Future. They have four campuses. They have I think a fifteen-thousand-kid waiting list, and they're in leaky old buildings that none of the school boards want. The procurement process to try to get the new school to grow doesn't even exist.**

And so we've created this system, maybe because of the constitutional requirement, where if you're a public school you can get

in the queue and you can get your capital needs met. If you're in a private school or in a Catholic school system, you can too. If you're an independent school, forget it. How do you solve that problem? It's a huge cost to create a school, especially if you're talking about all the modern amenities for a high school. How do you even do it if you're not part of the decision-making process?

DEANI VAN PELT: So what are the barriers to choice? is what I hear you saying, Danielle. You're talking about larger barriers, some of them financial. Let's talk about that for a moment in Canada. We've actually come up with a lot of solutions. British Columbia says we'll fund non-government schools. We'll have more of a straightforward public school system. It's not going to be diluted with publicly funded Catholic. It's straightforward English or French public. If you want anything else, you go to the independent school sector. We'll fund it at 50 percent, and we'll fund you. If you want to charge a lot more tuition, well then you're only going to get 35 percent from us. So that's an interesting solution. There's still the barrier of lack of access to capital, lack of access to space in the lower mainland in British Columbia, so that's a barrier there.

Let's talk about charter schools for a moment. Charter schools are fully funded public schools that are not responsible to the local school district. They're responsible more directly to the minister of education, and they're responsible to deliver their charter, but they're still public schools, and they can't charge tuition, and they can't be religious.

We have a conversation right now about class size in Ontario. That is actually a nineteenth- or twentieth-century concept, and we're stuck in talking about something that's tethering us to the past.

– Deani Van Pelt

So when we expand public schooling, we're removing a barrier to choice, but we're not expanding the non-government sector. Michael Van Pelt wrote a paper recently for Cardus called *Better Is Possible* arguing that a larger non-government school sector provides all the competitive benefits that the market provides. It provides more autonomy. Schools can charge what they want et cetera, et cetera. So when we have a very robust public school sector with an enormous amount of choice in it, we end up actually diminishing the non-government sector. That's what's going on in the United States. As charter schools grow, the independent school sector shrinks.

So what does that do to freedom and innovation in education? We have to be really

Read *Better is Possible* by Michael Van Pelt online:
cardus.ca/better-is-possible

careful when we talk about expanding the charter sector. As we move across the country we look at Saskatchewan. They fund at 50 percent; Manitoba, 50 percent. Quebec will fund the non-government schools at 60 percent. Does that help with capital? No, they're just funding the operational expense. Ontario funds at zero, so that's the largest barrier. But what Ontario does really well for the non-government sector and has done for decades (and our last Liberal government did not touch this) is that it has very minimal regulation for the non-government school sector. As a result, we have enormous diversity across the non-government school sector in terms of independent schools. About half of them are religious; the other half, a wide variety of pedagogical and philosophical orientations. So with very small amount of regulation, there's enormous diversity in Ontario.

DANIELLE SMITH: **Okay, so if I was going to be charitable to bureaucrats I would say, "It's just busing and capital requirements that are causing them to restrict the growth in the independent school movement." Because as central planners, they like to centrally plan. It's just easier if you have one school system. But I think it's ideological, and I think in the legislation you were talking about in Alberta with charter schools, you can't be religious. And you can't be offering a type of program that the bureaucrats determine is already being offered in the public system. Now, I think that that's capitulation right off the top, and I'm wondering if you have some thoughts. I'll ask both of you: Do you have some thoughts about why a conservative government coming in with this new reform legislation would have made those two significant restrictions right off the bat?**

RAY PENNINGS: Well I think there are many in the country, in the mainstream, both the left and the right of the political spectrum, who say we live in a country with diversity but we need some institution to be the institution that brings us together, that teaches civic values and everything else, and that institution is the public school system.

That line of thought has been accepted across the board, so there is a sense now in which the competition is over who gets to control the levers as to whether that's going to be a more conservative-oriented indoctrination course or a more left-wing one. But we have accepted the fact de facto without articulating it that that's the institution in which Canadian values are going to be taught. Consequently, even the concept of independent education challenges that whole framework.

The default reaction the minute you talk about independent education even among conservatives is, "Well, we have to make sure the extremes are taken care of," and right away they move to the worst possible cases. And

those are legitimate concerns. Obviously there are issues that have to be dealt with. The irony is these issues happen in public school systems too. It's interesting, if we want to talk about radicalization, you know the Toronto 18?

DANIELLE SMITH: **Mm-hmm.**

RAY PENNINGS: That happened within a public school. It wasn't an Islamic school. So there are definitely challenging issues that we have to face no matter where we fit on the political spectrum. But I think there is a default presumption about the role of the public, government-run school system in that. Now let's not be misinterpreted. We need a strong, robust public school system, and my argument is that conservative principles would see us achieve that by actually allowing some market forces of choices and innovation of the sort of diversity that Deani is talking about here in the province of Ontario.

Let's look at outcomes. Let's look at what works. Let's allow a healthy and robust conversation. Rather than thinking of the ministry of education as the ministry for *public* education, government education, and everything else is miscellaneous and on the fringe, let's think about education for the common good regardless of how it's delivered. Let's learn with and from each other, and let's grow the whole system and let a rising tide lift all boats.

DANIELLE SMITH: **Deani?**

Let's think about education for the common good regardless of how it's delivered. Let's learn with and from each other, and let's grow the whole system and let a rising tide lift all boats.

– Ray Pennings

DEANI VAN PELT: I think that that's one of the more profound contributions that Cardus has brought to this conversation about education reform. Putting the eye on the common good, the public. All education contributes to the public. In fact, we should be thinking about *all* education as public education. Then we have government schools and non-government schools. We have homeschooling as another form of non-government education. So I think we have to shift this dominant love that we have for our public schools, or change the language we use.

It's excellent. It's good education. Good education for the public good across all delivery mechanisms, and until we get a sense that good education can be developed and delivered, designed regardless of whether it's government delivering it or not, I think that's going to be one of the barriers to education reform, certainly in this province. ^

Coverage of this event can be found online at Convivium Magazine: **www.convivium.ca/educationreform**

CARDUS EDUCATION exists to provide reliable, credible data for non-government types of education.

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