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Public Discourse on Public Education

This is the first paper in a series entitled *communities and schools*. The series will consist of a set of commentaries and stories on various aspects of public education. It will explore the role that schools play not only as a means of educating students but, equally important, as a hub of community life.

The series will include stories from across the country in which communities have embraced their school as a centre of learning and as a 'community place' that acts as the focal point for a range of activity such as recreation, social services, lifelong learning and discussion of social concerns. The stories also include profiles of groups that have come together to encourage public discussion on the value of education, improve the quality of education,

*The **communities and schools** series was launched by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy with support from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. The case for education as a public good in Canada is compelling. Strong public schools and healthy communities that share responsibility for the well-being of youth are crucial to our country's future. Through stories and commentaries that link theory and practice, we hope to help inform citizens' understanding of education issues and engage them more deeply in their communities and schools.*

engage parents in decision-making and 'save' their community schools. They are passionate and committed and their work embodies important lessons about the fundamentals of democracy.

Why this series? In defence of public education and in support of public education. To protect a precious public good and to promote its profound importance in society. To question the spate of school closures on the grounds of 'efficiency' and to argue the need for schools as a public place. To explore how communities and schools can work together for mutual benefit.

The series also is intended to tell stories that recognize achievement and that seek to inspire. There is no intent to create a franchise model or a 'cookie-cutter approach' to school as 'hub' or parent engagement in public education. The goal is not replication but application. Application of lessons. Application of successes. Application of good ideas. Ensuring a strong democracy involves the expression, debate and application of good ideas.

This is a tall order for a small series. But the commentaries and stories that comprise the series are not intended, by any means, to be the last word. If anything, the series can be seen as an early word – an attempt to encourage open, informed public debate on public education.

The debate must be dispassionate in that it builds on solid, factual information and well-conducted research. But it also must be passionate in that it reflects a profoundly important public issue that lies at the heart of democracy.

The debate that this series seeks to engender is not about curriculum, pedagogical approaches, learning styles or teacher training. It moves well beyond the mechanics of method to ask why we value our public schools. The purpose of the series is to enhance the understanding of public education and the function of schools, more specifically, as a crucial public place. Its goal is to encourage discourse more broadly on the concept of the 'public good' and its meaning in our lives.

An early commentary in the *communities and schools* series will explore the role of public education in society. It will place education within an overall context of learning and the notion of the learning society. The paper will look at the various dimensions of education from the perspective of human development, moral and cultural development, and social and economic development. It will cover the wide-ranging expectations upon education – including learning to be, learning to know, learning to do and learning to live together.¹ The paper will examine the role of education as a public good and explore the ways in which it constitutes the foundations of democracy.

Another commentary will focus on the constitutional status of education. The series will consider public education as a national concern – as an area of interest to all Canadians – despite its jurisdictional placement as a provincial matter. It will present trends and outline key issues on the financing of public education.

Other commentaries and stories in the series will explore the concept of school as community hub. The school can act as focal point for the community in many different ways. It can provide information about and make referrals to various services. It can incorporate programs and services within its very walls. The school can furnish the meeting ground for bringing together members of the broader community to discuss educational, social or political issues;

engage in social action; learn new skills; participate in recreational and cultural activities; and celebrate holidays and other events.

The stories also examine the engagement of groups of parents in public education. Their participation can range from involvement in decisions about curriculum and school management to issues related to the purpose and quality of public education.

Finally, the *communities and schools* series will explore concerns related to the privatization of public education – from the growing reliance on user fees to the increased interest in private education and charter schools. The implications for the quality of public education and its future health will be considered.

In short, the purpose of the series can be summed up simply: to encourage a public for public education.²

Sherri Torjman

Endnotes

1. Delors, Jacques. (1998). *Learning: The Treasure Within*. Report to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, pp. 85-98.
2. Mathews, David. (1996). *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.

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