

BACKGROUNDER



Excellence in Education

BY DAVID SEYMOUR

Executive Summary

- Educational excellence is something virtually every educator and school claim to aspire to.
- In Canada, there are many signs of this focus on educational excellence.
- At a time when the importance of spelling and grammar appears to be minimized in Canadian public schools, spelling bees have become increasingly popular.
- The recent CanWest CanSpell National Spelling Bee received a significant amount of media publicity.
- Science fairs are a long-standing tradition that gives students with a scientific bent the opportunity to explore a topic at a deeper level and present their findings to others.
- The Canadian Mathematical Society and the Centre for Education in Mathematics and Computing sponsor several challenging mathematics competitions for junior high and high school students.
- Debate associations across the country hold provincial tournaments, and the top debaters have the opportunity to compete at the National Debate Seminar.
- Because these types of competitions encourage educational excellence, it is surprising public schools do not place a greater emphasis on the merits of competition in education.
- Our province's apparent acceptance of mediocrity needs to change and to be replaced by a willingness to take risks and to challenge students to perform to the very best of their abilities.



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INTRODUCTION

Educational excellence is something virtually every educator and school claim to seek. It even appears as a goal in many mission statements, and school divisions are quick to point out the areas in which their students have their strongest achievements. As one would expect, parents are eager to enrol their children in schools that provide the best education to their students.

In Canada, there are many signs of this focus on educational excellence. Spelling bees, science fairs, mathematics competitions and debate tournaments all provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their skills in these important areas. It is not surprising that schools are eager to publicize the successes of their students when they participate in these events.

However, an important aspect of these proceedings is often overlooked. They are all competitions that reward the participants with the greatest skill in the area being evaluated. Competition often brings out the best in students and gives them the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to excel.


Unfortunately, despite these encouraging trends, our educational system still discourages competition in favour of co-operative methods of learning. We hope the re-emergence of excellence in the competitions detailed in this backgrounder will motivate school divisions to consider whether it is possible to achieve excellence without at least a moderate level of competition.

Spelling Bees



At a time when the importance of spelling and grammar appears to be minimized in schools, spelling bees have become increasingly popular. The best-known Canadian spelling competition is the CanWest CanSpell National Spelling Bee.¹ With 83,000 grades 5 to 8 competitors across the country, the CanSpell has approximately 900 schools participating.

In April 2005, 22 regional finalists converged on Ottawa for the Canadian finals. Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson was the patron of the event, and she hosted a reception for them at Rideau Hall. The winner, Finola Hackett of Edmonton, Alberta, received a \$10,000 scholarship from CanWest MediaWorks. To win the competition, Hackett spelled words such as "cytokinesis," "glissade" and "icosahedron."² Hackett made it to the final round at the Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington D.C., and she came in 11th out of 273 contestants from around the world.³


It is interesting to note that 2005 was the first year Canada began sending competitors to the Scripps National Spelling Bee. While the CanSpell competition is a relatively recent innovation, the Scripps National Spelling Bee has taken place every year since 1925 with the exceptions of 1943-1945.⁴ Thus, it is evident that a significant number of Canadians felt that the annual spelling bee competition in the United States was worth emulating in this country as well.



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Canada Wide Science Fair... another example of how educational excellence is prized in Canada.

Science Fairs

Science fairs are a long-standing tradition in many schools. They provide an opportunity for students to conduct research and perform experiments in an area they are particularly interested in. Once the research and experimentation are complete, students write up their results and display them in an attractive fashion at a booth at a science fair. While most science fairs take place at the local school level, it is possible to advance to provincial or even national science fair competitions.

Sponsored by the Youth Science Foundation, the Canada Wide Science Fair is the largest annual science event that takes place in Canada.⁵ More than 100 regional fairs are held across the country with about 25,000 competitors. The top 450 entrants have the opportunity to compete at the Canada Wide Science Fair for \$360,000 in prizes.⁶ Since its inception in 1962, the Canada Wide Science Fair has taken place in every region of the country, as the competition is held in a different location every year.⁷

The most recent Canada Wide Science Fair took place at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver from May 15-22, 2005. As in previous years, competition was stiff and only entrants with high-quality exhibits could expect to make it to the top. This fair is certainly another example of how educational excellence is prized in Canada. Judging by the number of high-profile sponsors for this event, it is evident this emphasis on excellence is widespread across the country.⁸

Mathematics Competitions

Canadian students also have the opportunity to display their talents in mathematics. The Canadian Mathematical Society was founded in 1945 and, as part of its mandate, desires to promote mathematics education for K-12 students. One of the key ways of achieving this is by organizing several high-profile national mathematics competitions for high school students.⁹

The Canadian Open Mathematics Challenge (COMC) takes place annually, and students across the country have the opportunity to attempt a series of challenging math problems in their home communities.¹⁰ Based upon their results in the COMC, 75 out of approximately 5,800 entrants are invited to participate in the Canadian Mathematical Olympiad (CMO). The CMO has been held annually since 1969 and is a three-hour examination in which contestants attempt to answer five difficult math questions. Considering the large number of universities that sponsor the CMO, it is clear that institutions of higher learning see the value of this and similar competitions.¹¹

The Centre for Education in Mathematics and Computing (CEMC), located at the University of Waterloo, sponsors a number of national mathematics competitions:

Grades 7 & 8 – Gauss Contest	Grade 11 – Fermat Contest, Hypatia Contest
Grade 9 – Pascal Contest, Fryer Contest	
Grade 10 – Cayley Contest, Galois Contest	Grade 12 – Euclid Contest ¹²

By the large number of schools that participate... it is obvious these competitions motivate students.


Clearly, there is no shortage of opportunities for students to display their talents in mathematics. Judging by the large number of schools (both public and private) that participate in these competitions, it is obvious these contests motivate students. It is a positive development to see competition encouraged at the top academic levels in this area.

Debate Tournaments


Learning to debate is an excellent way for students to gain experience in forcefully presenting well-thought-out arguments and responding to the arguments made by others. Students who wish to develop their public speaking and debating skills have the opportunity to do so by participating in local, provincial and national debate tournaments. The Manitoba Speech and Debate Association (MSDA) sponsors provincial tournaments, and the Canadian Student Debating Federation (CSDF)¹³ runs the National Debate Seminar.

Most provinces have debate associations, and tournaments are held throughout the year to give students the chance to gain experience. In Manitoba, the final tournament for high school students takes place in March. The top debaters are eligible to go to the National Debate Seminar later in the year and compete with other debaters from across the country.¹⁴ Winners at the National Debate Seminar qualify for the World Championships.¹⁵

Canadian debate tournaments provide another example of how students are encouraged to compete in order to achieve excellence. In fact, debate would be impossible if competition were not involved.



Students are encouraged to compete in order to achieve excellence.



Conclusion

Competition is often discouraged... seen as damaging to the self-esteem of students.

The pursuit of educational excellence is something that all educators hope their students engage in. Some of the best indicators of excellence are the provincial and national competitions that take place in several key subject areas. It is interesting to note that it is through competition that these students are encouraged to excel in these areas.

The CanWest CanSpell National Spelling Bee is a relatively recent competition, and judging by the large number of students who participate, it has filled a void. Science fairs are a long-standing tradition that gives students with a special interest in science the opportunity to explore a scientific topic in depth and present their findings to others. The Canadian Mathematical Society, and the Centre for Education in Mathematics and Computing, both sponsor several challenging mathematics competitions for junior high, and high school students. Finally, debate associations across the country hold provincial tournaments, and the top debaters have the opportunity to compete at the National Debate Seminar. All these competitions provide examples of excellence.

Given that these types of competitions encourage educational excellence, it is surprising public schools do not place a greater emphasis on the merits of competition in education. Instead, competition is often discouraged, because it is seen as damaging to the self-esteem of students.

This mentality of mediocrity needs to change, and it should be replaced by a willingness to take risks and to challenge students to perform to the very best of their abilities. It is only by instilling a competitive drive to succeed in all students that this goal will finally be met.

Footnotes

1. www.canada.com, CanWest CanSpell, <http://www.canada.com/national/features/canspell/index.html>
2. www.canada.com, *13-year-old wins first bee*, April 18, 2005, <http://www.canada.com/national/features/canspell/story.html?id=ea92ef0b-1f0a-4788-b294-ef72c42bd78a>
3. www.canada.com, *Canadian knocked out of spelling bee*, June 2, 2005, <http://www.canada.com/national/features/canspell/story.html?id=ca098672-8908-4bff-9b6b-d3c86b456c6d>
4. CBC News, *The Scripps National Spelling Bee: One letter at a time*, June 2, 2005, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/spelling>
5. Wikipedia, *Canada-Wide Science Fair*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada-Wide_Science_Fair
6. Youth Science Foundation Canada, <http://www.yzf.ca>
7. Canada Wide Science Fair, <http://www.cwsf.info>
8. Canada Wide Science Fair 2005, *Sponsors*, <http://www.cwsf2005.ca/CWSF2005vJLL30/English/home.htm>
9. Canadian Mathematical Society, <http://www.cms.math.ca>
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Centre for Education in Mathematics and Computing, <http://cemc.uwaterloo.ca/english/contests/index.shtml>
13. Canadian Student Debating Federation, <http://www.csd-fcde.ca>
14. Manitoba Speech and Debating Association, *op. cit.*
15. World Debating web site, <http://www.debating.net/Flynn/Colmmain.htm>

Cover photo courtesy the CanWest Canspell National Spelling Bee homepage at: <http://www.canada.com/national/features/canspell/cities/index.html>

Grade 5 student Tegan Odland, 10, of Enchant School, Lethbridge Alberta, is all smiles as she wins the Lethbridge Regional Spelling Bee with the word, "decrement". Photo by The Lethbridge Herald.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Seymour joins the Centre from New Zealand as a policy analyst working out of the Centre's Regina office. He holds degrees in Electrical Engineering and Philosophy from the University of Auckland, where he also taught Economics. After working as an electrical engineer in New Zealand he is applying his passion for high performance government to policy issues on the Prairies.

In his first year working for the Frontier centre David has carried out extensive media work, presenting policy analysis through local and national television, Newspapers, and Radio. His policy columns have been published in the Winnipeg Free Press, Saskatoon Star Phoenix, Calgary Herald, Regina Leader Post, and the National Post. David has produced policy research papers in the areas of Telecommunications Privatization, Education, Environmental Science and Fiscal Policy. However his major project with the Frontier Centre is the Local Government Performance Index (LGPI). The inaugural LGPI was released in November 2007 and comes at a time when Municipal accounting standards in Canada must improve if the Municipal government sector is to reach its potential as an economic growth engine for Canada. David also volunteers as a rugby coach in the Regina community and has built a sports car entirely from scratch.

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The author of this study has worked independently and the opinions expressed are therefore his own, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Board of the Frontier Centre for Public Policy.

Frontier Centre for Public Policy

MB: Suite 25 Lombard Concourse, One Lombard Place,
Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada R3B 0X3
Tel: 204 957-1567 Fax: 204 957-1570

SK: 2353 McIntyre Street,
Regina, Saskatchewan Canada S4P 2S3
Tel: 306 352-2915 Fax: 306 352-2938

AB: Ste. 2000 - 444, 5th Avenue SW
Calgary, Alberta Canada T2P 278
Tel: (403) 230-2435

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Online at www.fcpp.org Email: newideas@fcpp.org

