

WITH MARK HOLMES, AUTHOR AND EDUCATION REFORMER



Mark Holmes has written for numerous academic journals and newspaper as well as three books, "Making the school an effective community", "Educational policy for the pluralist democracy", and "The reformation of Canada's schools" which respectively cover policy: within the school, for the democratic West, and within the Canadian provinces. He began his teaching career in 1958 and served as principal in elementary, junior and senior high schools in Saint John, New Brunswick. He obtained his education degree from the University of New Brunswick and a doctoral degree from the University of Chicago. In 1971 he moved to Montreal and became the Director of Program for the North Island Regional School Board and Director of Education in 1973. He was appointed as a senior administration and associate professor in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto in 1975, a position he held for eight years. His next ten years at OISE were spent in full-time graduate teaching, research and field development. He retired with the rank of full professor in 1993. He presently advises the Organization for Quality Education, an Ontario-based group which promotes education reform. Mark Holmes was interviewed after his lecture to the Frontier Centre in Winnipeg on November 4th at the University of Manitoba. His talk was the first speaking event presented through the Centre's new Education Frontiers project.

Frontier Centre: You believe in school choice. Why?

Mark Holmes: Essentially, there are two reasons. One is that parents want different things, and they want to be able to have different things. That's legitimate. Secondly, it is quite impossible to find a "one size fits all" program, except at a very low level of academic commitment.

FC: What kind of choice would emerge if all school districts were open to parents?

MH: It's obvious what the two major types of school would be. The first is religious schools. A tremendous number of parents want some form of religion taught. Second, a larger proportion of people want improved discipline, improved manners and stronger academic demands.

FC: What should be high priorities for provinces in developing more choice?

MH: The first thing, obviously, is that we should directly provide more choice by allowing parents to send their children to any public school. The second thing they should do is increase funding to independent schools, I think 75 percent would be a good amount, and at the same time provide bursaries so that those parents who can't afford even 25 percent of the fee would be able to send their children to independent schools.

FC: Why not give them 100 percent?

MH: There is a lot to be said for giving them 100 percent. That would, in effect, turn them into public schools and they would be subject to the same regulations as the public schools. It happens in the Netherlands, and it's a pretty good system. But I think with us, we are a very differentiated, pluralistic society. I think we need a little bit more freedom, and freedom doesn't go with 100 percent funding.

FC: What can school districts do to provide choice?

MH: It's much harder for school districts to do something, because the moment they provide choice in a school it can mean closing a local school, and that's very difficult. The best thing they can do is to look at schools that are likely to be closed anyway because of declining enrolment and then put in a program such as a Christian program, which happened in Edmonton, or, even easier than that, to put in a sound, academically intensive program with good discipline and perhaps dare I mention it? uniforms.

FC: What is the case for uniforms?

MH: The case for uniforms is that the competition in terms of clothing disappears, that's the obvious thing. The less obvious thing is that everybody knows who you are, so that when you are misbehaving outside school then you are representing that school. When you are behaving well outside that school, you are representing that school. It's very obvious to teachers, to other students and to the administration when you've got strangers in that school, particularly when the school gets to 800, 900, or larger than that. The uniforms can be highly variable, but they have to be mandatory.

FC: Wouldn't we be better off just concentrating on improving public schools? What would you suggest to improve public schools?

MH: The problem with putting all one's efforts into improving public schools is that provinces have been doing that with the best of intentions for many years and the effect in most cases has been zero. It's very difficult or impossible to improve them. If that were my mandate, the first thing I would do is to increase the public accountability of individual schools. This means a full range of tests, particularly exit tests, so that students don't leave high school without reaching an appropriate standard. Some provinces do this, Québec is the only one with a comprehensive exit program. Some have nothing at all, and that is a real disgrace.

FC: Does Québec score higher than Manitoba?

MH: Québec achieves higher than Manitoba, generally speaking, on test results nationally and internationally. Also, if you control for the wealth of the province, which I have done by running a regression on the wealth of the provinces with the achievement, one finds that Québec is the only province that consistently comes above the line. In other words, the Québec schools achieve considerably better than you would predict from the level of wealth in the province. Ontario is the one province that consistently scores below that line, in other words the achievement is much less than you would predict from the wealth of that province.

FC: Canada came out well in the PISA international study of achievement. Do we really have a problem?

MH: Yes, we do have a problem, although it's very gratifying that we came out well in those tests. But there are a couple of things we have to take into account. First, Canada is not one system. Québec and Alberta do extremely well. British Columbia generally does quite well, it didn't do fantastically well on PISA, but generally it does well. To an extent, they carry some of the other provinces. Then we have to take into account that PISA was a very different kind of test. It was a new kind of test and it was much more based on what you might call general knowledge. We have a very affluent population in Canada, one which has had a lot of education. A lot of parents have gone to university, so that children have a very highly cultured background compared to many countries. This shows up a lot, particularly when it's not closely connected to the curriculum. So whether we'll find that, when you have more curriculum-based tests that test basic skills, the children will turn out as well remains to be seen.

FC: Where does Manitoba rate, and what would you suggest specifically for Manitoba?

MH: You rate very much in the middle on achievement tests, consistently poorly compared with the best provinces but better generally speaking than the Atlantic provinces, which usually come close to the bottom. What should you do? As I've said, you should increase the amount of funding for independent schools. You should provide bursaries for poor children to attend independent schools. You should make it possible for children to attend any local school within their own school board or in another school board, any public

school. Just open things up. The other major thing that you lack, in fact you've been just moving backwards on testing, is the testing of basic skills, a fairly good system that's been cut back. You never had, at least until recently, a proper exit test program, which is the most vital thing of all. It shows employers, it shows universities, it shows colleges on a single assessment level how children have advanced and whether they've achieved the standards that various employers and universities like.

FC: The standard criticism of testing, often from the teachers union, is that people will teach to the test. What do you think of those arguments?

MH: I think they are really quite absurd. I would like teachers to teach to the test because the tests should reflect the program. If teachers are going off into all sorts of loopy things on environmentalism and sexism and all sorts of other things, then if they came back and taught the curriculum, that would be enormous improvement. As for the teachers who teach "the test", if the union is saying teachers will teach actual answers to tests, all I can say is the union has a very low opinion of the professionalism of their members, because it would be totally unprofessional to cheat and memorize the answers to particular questions. Teachers who do that should be disciplined or fired.

FC: What do you think of the future of school boards?

MH: I think that the future is going to be that they continue to lose power and influence and that they should do. They're typically elected with a very small proportion of the electorate and it's for good reason. People have apparently balanced it out because they realize that their vote has almost no effect in most cases. Gradually what will happen and what should happen is that real accountability of schools should be laid at the provincial level, in terms of testing and assessment and also in terms of inspection with respect to coming up to essential standards. The vast majority of day-to-day decisions should be made at the school level, rather than at the school board level. So there's not a great deal lost.

FC: You mentioned that, in England and Wales, schools have the option of opting out. Can you describe why that might increase accountability?

MH: In England and Wales schools may, with a majority vote of parents, receive money directly from the government instead of being a part of a school board. This has been cut back a bit by the Labour government, but essentially the principle remains. Schools do that because they think they can run things better than the school board can, and they don't like paying all the cost of the kind of things that school boards do which they don't want.

FC: Like what? Consultants?

MH: Consultants particularly, because they're very expensive. They would be a major thing. But even services like buying materials, buying textbooks, they think that they can do that better than the school boards.

FC: School board amalgamations are talked about here as a way to save money. Your view?

MH: I would be very dubious that it would save money. I'm absolutely certain that people would be spending an enormous amount of time worrying about who's going to get what job, and who's going to get what office. The first thing that my local school board did when two level school boards were amalgamated was to refurbish a single luxury palace to replace the two perfectly good school board buildings and offices that they had beforehand. So I'm very skeptical about these organizational trends that have nothing to do with what happens in the classroom.

FC: What are the largest problems in Canadian education?

MH: The largest problem in Canadian education, in one word, is mediocrity. We don't have that many really lousy schools. But we also don't have very many good schools, particularly in the public system. So there's a kind of cult of getting by, and a lot of the good work that's being done is by tradition, because the school has a reputation. Reputations can be lost. Another thing is that we have very limited accountability in many provinces in the way of assessment. There's no serious assessment of schools, there's no

serious assessment of teachers, it's all run as a sort of establishment club. One thing that bothers me is that we have a terrible record in terms of getting young people physically fit, and that deserves a fitness program for those aged five to sixteen, compulsory for everyone. To abolish physical education, maybe that would be a good thing, because physical education doesn't seem to be what it isn't producing, physical fitness.

FC: A unique problem in Manitoba is the education of aboriginal students. In this province, about 21 percent of children fourteen and younger, one in five, are aboriginal. What can we do for these children?

MH: This problem goes well beyond the school and arises outside the school. The essential problem is that schools are trying to do two totally incompatible things. They're trying to preserve the culture of the native peoples and they're trying to fit them to work in contemporary society. The two things are impossible. Parents have to be given the freedom to choose just as parents in society at large have the freedom to choose. Do they want their kids to be prepared for work in the greater society? In that case, they should be prepared and be held to exactly the same standards as others, without accommodation. Usually the accommodation means lower levels of achievement. If they do not want that, they should have schools in their own traditions, reaching their own goals, and it should be accepted that they're not going to graduate from high school and move on and become a lawyer or a doctor or move into most kinds of technical jobs or even other jobs.

FC: How can we have other poor children educated better? In middle-class areas, because the parents are more supportive, we'll get better results. But what about the people who are falling through the cracks?

MH: There are always going to be young people who will not do as well as others. We'll never get all groups achieving at the same level for the simple reason that the parental background is the major factor that predicts achievement in all countries. This included Soviet Russia under the communist system, Poland under the communist system, it's the same everywhere. On the other hand, I do think that we in Canada do a particularly bad job of encouraging kids from poor homes to achieve at the highest levels. In part we can do that by teaching in very effective and efficient ways. They're the ones who suffer most from progressive, child-centred teaching instead of having direct instruction. They also suffer most from not having access to as many choices. Their parents can't afford independent schools. They should be provided choices to go to independent schools. That we can do.

FC: What's the difference between child-centred instruction and direct instruction?

MH: Child-centred instruction is based on the principle that children should be able to learn at their own rate and follow their own interests. So they choose whether they want to go to a mathematics centre or to a reading centre, and if they're reading they're encouraged to read to themselves or to listen to other children read. If they don't learn to read until they're eight or nine, that's okay. Direct instruction says that all children by the age of seven, apart from the severely disabled, can be taught to learn to read by direct teaching, by the use of phonics and by direct development. That doesn't mean to say that all that they're going to do is phonics and reading, of course they're going to read on their own, of course they're going to be led to. But the actual reading instruction is direct for all children, and they all should learn to read, at least most of them, by the second half of Grade One.

FC: What's your view of special needs children in classrooms?

MH: It is generally true that children with various kinds of disabilities do better in the regular classroom than in a special classroom. But that research is based on the old days, going back 20 or 30 years, when enormous numbers, up to a third of the children, were designated as having special needs. The vast majority of these special needs are relatively minor and the children are much better off in the regular classroom where there's strong competition. Those with severe disabilities should not be in the regular classroom. You have to take into account the interests of the other children as well as those children themselves. Clearly they can't learn at the same rate as other children and we have to take into account, "Does their presence

interfere with the level of the other children?" If they interfere to such an extent that the other children cannot learn because of the noise and commotion created by the special needs children, then I'm afraid, in my view, the parents should not have the right to keep their special need children in that classroom.

FC: About a thousand children in Manitoba are receiving home schooling. Is this a good idea?

MH: It's a good idea in the sense that we certainly should allow it and encourage it by providing some kind of financial support for it.

FC: How should we fund it?

MH: We should provide through general taxation. They should get not a huge amount, but several hundred dollars to provide the textbooks and other kinds of materials. On the other hand, I think that many of these parents are doing it out of frustration with the public school system. Remember, the parents who choose home schooling will go down considerably if we provide a wide range of options in the public schools. There are roughly two kinds of home-schoolers, those who do it for religious reasons and who feel that the secular schools are going completely against their beliefs. I think that those people should have access to public schools that support their beliefs, or at least are considered reasonably consistent with them. The other group are people who are much more progressive, more freedom-loving people, who just find that the public school is too stultifying. Well, we should also have those progressive, child-centred schools for the small minority that wants that. But generally speaking, I think those parents are probably going to want home schooling anyway, because all schools have to have limits and rules and those parents frequently don't like schedules and that kind of thing.

FC: In this province, about 15 percent of the provincial budget goes to education, down from 19 percent eight years ago. The Canadian system is either the most, or one of the most expensive in the world. Do schools in general cost too much?

MH: Canada has certainly one of the most expensive school systems. The way I look at it is this. We get poor value for the money that we spend. With very high spending, we should have outstanding education and we don't get that. Whether we get too much, I can't answer that question because schools are run so inefficiently and so much money is wasted that I don't know whether, if the money were redirected to things that would be valuable, we'd end up actually spending the same. My feeling is that probably one could reduce spending a little bit and provide a much better service by redirecting the money, but I don't know that.

FC: Where do we waste money?

MH: We're wasting money, particularly school boards waste money. Not all school boards, small school boards are sometimes very efficient. But ironically the larger school boards build up bigger and bigger staff, they have layers of superintendents and assistant superintendents, they have tons of consultants, in other words very good teachers who don't do any teaching. Those are major areas of misspending. School buses is the other major area of spending; school busing is just very, very inefficient. It should be combined with public subsidized buses wherever possible, it should be really taken out of the hands of school boards and run centrally.

FC: How would that work?

MH: Once again, Québec has taken the lead in this, and Québec has a provincial school bus system. Now of course it's run from local centres, but every route is designed so that it will pick up kids from different schools rather than having one bus taking all these kids to this school and another bus taking them to the other school. It can serve a particular area and that one bus can distribute kids to all the schools. And it all goes out to contract.

FC: You say parents, who once had 100 percent control of education, should have about 60 percent control. What do we have today and why do you say 60 percent?

MH: It varies from province to province, but in Manitoba I would say that probably parental control would be around about 20 percent, and it would be even lower still if it weren't for the partial funding of the independent schools. I think that parents should have much more

control because, for one reason, the United Nations Charter of Rights says they should have a prior right to choose the kind of education for their children. But go beyond those words and rights, and the fundamental issue is that the schools today are low-level values, don't emphasize academics very highly, get into all kinds of questionable campaigns, the flavours of the day, environmentalism and sexism. They're still campaigning to give girls more rights when girls are outperforming boys and there are far more girls in universities than boys, and we're still on a campaign for promoting girls' education. Again, they go after all these ridiculous campaigns and avoid education. Parents should be able to choose not to have their kids subjected to that. There are a lot of very left-wing teachers who are teaching that kind of ideology in the higher grades. Some parents don't like that very much. They should be able to choose a school which sticks to its knitting.

FC: What kind of changes would we be likely to see if the private schools in Manitoba became accessible to all through tuition vouchers or tuition tax credits.

MH: In all likelihood, there would be a considerable increase in the enrolment there. Probably the biggest single change you would see would be a change in the public schools because the public schools would have to change to meet the competition. They have are no incentive to change at the moment, they do what they want to do. By they, I mean the ministry officials, the officials in the school boards and the teachers unions. These are the people who decide what happens in the schools, and their interests and their ideologies are not the same as the public at large. If they continued to do that, they would lose an enormous share of the market and they wouldn't want to do that because they don't want to lose their jobs. You would see a tremendous change there.

FC: Why are teachers so reluctant to use phonics in schools today?

MH: Teachers are reluctant to use phonics because they are told in the faculties of education that this is an old-fashioned kind of thing, and that phonics are useful only if the kid can't learn through other means and that's what they mean by a balanced program. Phonics if necessary and phonics doesn't work like that. Phonics has to be put in as a systematic program. Also, it sounds much nicer to say children will learn and do the kinds of things that they want to do, and follow their own interests and they all want to read, so they'll all learn to read anyway. It looks nicer in the classroom. You go into one of these classrooms and the kids are all chattering to each other in different centres. As long as you don't listen to what they are actually saying to each other and what they are actually doing very closely, it all looks very nice, whereas in a structured, direct instruction classroom the teacher is in charge and telling the kids what to do, the kids are all doing the same things. It looks like an army camp, so oh, no, it doesn't look very nice. Let's face it, it's much easier for the teacher who's not really responsible for what the children learn because the children learn what they want to do and the time when they want to do it. It's a much easier, squishier kind of life.

FC: What is your position on the certification of teachers without an education degree, but who are qualified in specific subject areas, for example, a person holding an engineering degree who could teach mathematics and physics.

MH: I think that the teacher-training programs provide very little in terms of helping teachers who want to become teachers teach better. So I strongly favour allowing superbly qualified people in their subject areas to go directly into the classroom and they should have some in-service training running parallel to that, which should be strongly relevant to the actual situations and problems they are meeting in the classroom. They should have help from a mentor and they should learn over the first two or three years of teaching some of the important things about education in terms of administration, in terms of law, in terms of the social structure in which we live and work. These kinds of things, but this should not be done as a primary to pre-service training.

FC: Basically, we don't need to certify teachers?

MH: I think it's probably not a bad idea to certify teachers when they are professional teachers. This would be, depending on the person,

perhaps after one, two or three years of practice. Give them a certificate at that time. Probably teachers who never attain that standard will have been dismissed along the way. But, yes, I think that teachers should have a certificate.

FC: Why should some teachers be paid more than those, for example, who are teaching a kindergarten class?

MH: I don't think that anywhere in the economy do people get paid the same when there's enormous difference in terms of the skills that are required, and enormous difference in terms of the availability of the supply of the sought-after person. Physics, chemistry, mathematics teachers at the senior high school level are quite hard to find and it requires a great deal of intensive training that only a limited number of people can take. Kindergarten teachers can be produced very quickly and in enormous numbers. It is really ridiculous to pay a kindergarten teacher \$50,000 a year and a high school physics teacher \$60,000 a year.

FC: How do you overcome the conflicts with the union on that one?

MH: The unions have enormous control of education in Canada, and you probably cannot overcome that unless you have direct confrontation, which may or may not be a good thing. One could decide, for example, that teachers don't have to be members of unions in order to teach and you could develop a provincial collective agreement which would set out more appropriate salary scales. However, you probably would be faced with some enormous provincial strike that could last six months or nine months. More realistically, one has to go and say, "What about helping new schools develop which aren't necessarily unionized?" And to let in the competition that way.

FC: You mentioned differentiating teachers much as we do in universities, with graduated status for associate, assistant and full professors. How would this work in the school system?

MH: It would work very much as it works in universities. But it would probably be easier to implement in the school system because, if one has regular testing, it's very easy to see how much add-on value teachers are providing, particularly in the lower grades, and, talk about the hard subjects in high school, that fits in there. You can see whether teachers are really making a contribution. If children have averaged, say, a .7 grade level over the first three years of school and then when they hit Grade Four they suddenly gain 1.2 grade levels, obviously that teacher is doing a very superior job. In that particular effort, that's just one aspect of the teacher's life, but it's a very important aspect. Therefore one has a committee, which has teachers, parents and administrators represented on it and the principal makes recommendations on the promotion of teachers, from assistant teacher, to teacher, to master teacher. I think it's less contentious in terms of the actual administration than in the university, where it is difficult to tell.

FC: But wouldn't we have a political problem within the profession and the union?

MH: Absolutely. A tremendous one, because the unions absolutely detest any kind of inequality. We are all equal, we are equally good, we are all the same because incompetent people are removed and all the rest of the people are qualified, and we're all equal. Which, of course, nobody believes, and I don't think any of their members believe it when they have their own children going to school. They'll send them to private schools, or they'll make darn sure their own child gets into Mrs. Crumbly's class instead of Mr. Bagel's class, because they know their reputations.

FC: Do you have any information on the phenomenon of public school teachers sending their children to independent schools or alternative schools?

MH: No, the only statistics I've seen have been American statistics, which are incredible. I don't remember the numbers, but the proportion of teachers sending their kids to independent school in the United States is much higher than that of the population at large.

FC: How do you see school choice evolving in the 21st century?

MH: I see it as being a major struggle because the educational establishment is incredibly powerful. There are going to be losses as well as gains, and the moment any government decides it wants to placate the unions it's not just the unions, it's the whole educational establishment they're going to go slow on choice. The establishment realizes that choice is a threat to them. You don't need these enormous bureaucracies. You don't need to have everybody paid the same. You don't need to have mile-long regulations to say what teachers can do and what principals aren't allowed to do, how much cultivation they have to go through before they decide somebody should have yard duty. We don't need those things in school and we're better off without them.

FC: Is the missing ingredient political leadership?

MH: I wouldn't use the word leadership so much as will, determination. In Ontario, we've had three successive governments, a Liberal government under David Peterson, an NDP government under Bob Rae and a Conservative government until recently under Mike Harris. All three, despite all the rhetoric, actually tried to do many of the same things in schools. Mike Harris has had some effect, but basically none of them has had very much effect. The reason is that, when push comes to shove, they are willing to regulate all kinds of things but when it comes to a fight with the educational establishment they are not prepared to stick it out as a major issue. You're not going to have enormous change without that. The only hope is to have competition outside the system. Change will come inside the system after it's come outside the system. And it will come very quickly if the change really becomes threatening, but it will be glacial until that time.

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