

Falling short of an A

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Canadians want excellent public schools, not average ones, yet an opinion survey that makes this point has some education observers scratching their heads. Just 6 per cent of Canadians polled gave the public schools an A grade, even though Canadian teens rank in the top five on international tests in reading, science and math. "There's a disconnect," says Penny Milton, the chief executive officer of the Canadian Education Association, a non-profit group that conducted the survey. No, Ms. Milton. There is no disconnect. Canadians are saying that their public schools are not excellent, but merely adequate. And adequate is not good enough.

The marks illuminate the widely held perception that, in spite of major changes such as the introduction of annual literacy tests, the public schools could and should be better than they are. In 1979, 19 per cent of Canadians gave their schools an A. By 1990, the last time the survey was done, the score was down to 6 per cent, where it sits still.

Here's a second bit of illumination: In 1979, 59 per cent gave the system an A or a B, and just 35 per cent ranked it anywhere from a C to a failure. Today, 48 per cent rank the system as an A or a B, while 45 per cent give it a C to a failure. A third source of illumination: Only in Quebec do a majority of people express confidence in the public schools. That's a stunning loss of faith since 1984, when 76 per cent of the entire country was confident in the schools.

The cause of the public's dissatisfaction is well expressed in a brief commentary accompanying the survey from Ben Levin, a professor of education at the University of Toronto. "Many sources inform public judgments about the education system, but the most important are personal experience or the experience of others whom we value." He adds that, as people become more educated, they insist on better education systems, and won't just accept at face value what they're told.

But what about those top-five finishes in reading, math and science? First, there are often more than five countries in the so-called top five, because of ties. Second, Canada is wealthier than the average of the countries against which it competes; it should do better than average. Third, Alberta and to some extent Quebec pull up the Canadian average; the rest of the country, especially the Atlantic provinces, is nothing to write home about.

Anyway, the strong international results are just one measure. Another is to be found in the gut reaction of parents who send their children off each morning and take them back in again each afternoon. The public schools need to accept the importance of that measure.