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THE OISE/UT SURVEY 1978–2004

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Executive Summary

The OISE/UT survey of educational issues in Ontario has been conducted biennially since 1980.

The highlights of the 2004 survey are as follows:

- General satisfaction with the school system and assessments of the quality of schooling have rebounded from the low levels they reached in the mid-1990s; despite this, public confidence in public schools has remained low.

- Support for government funding of all levels of public education, including K–12, post-secondary education, and adult education, is at historic highs and a clear majority now express willingness to pay more taxes for education.

- There is very strong majority support for a more co-ordinated system of early learning and child care, an area where Canada clearly trails most developed countries.

- There is mixed support for streaming students by grade 10 but strong support for a literacy test for high school graduation as well as majority support for a lower-level school leaving certificate.

- There is definite majority support for legislation for young people to stay in school until the age of 18.

- There are mixed views on provincial versus local control of schools but growing majority support for provincial caps on local education spending.

- Student behaviour, including discipline, bullying, drug use, vandalism, and low motivation, is quite widely perceived to be the most important problem faced by the schools, much as was the case in 1980.

- A majority recognize that students from low-income families are less likely to get a post-secondary education. Discrimination against aboriginal, black, and physically disabled students is not as well understood.

- A majority think that both government grants and tuition fees should share in the costs of post-secondary education but there is growing support for government grants to cover increasing costs and virtually no support for tuition fees to play an increased relative role.

- Support for greater funding for apprenticeship training in skilled trades is higher than support for increases in funding any other type of education.

- The level of knowledge about the schools is not significantly related to public attitudes about them, except among the small number who admit their lack of knowledge and are less supportive of education funding.
Introduction

Since 1978, the OISE/UT survey of educational issues has been the only regular, publicly disseminated survey of public attitudes towards educational policy options in Canada. The basic purpose is to provide regular representative readings of the public’s views on pertinent policy issues in order to enhance public self-awareness and informed participation in educational policy-making. A similar survey has been conducted annually in the United States since the 1960s. Accurate readings of the views of all citizens are a necessary first step for democratic policy-making in any large, modern society. Our published reports offer both trend data and current profiles of public support for educational policy options, drawing on the prior OISE/UT surveys and other available survey data.

CONTEXT
Some of the highlights of the public educational debate during the 2003–04 period should be noted:

• A new Liberal government took office in October 2003 with a commitment to increase education funding in response to needs documented in the Rozanski report commissioned by the prior government.
• The lack of an integrated system of early learning and care for younger children was emphasized by both Ontario and international reports and there were growing calls for the creation of such a system.
• Rising high school drop-out rates related to the mandatory grade 10 literacy test and tougher applied math courses became a major issue and led to proposals for further curricular reforms and alternative certificates as well as proposed legislation requiring young people to stay in school or job training until age 18.
• In the wake of the double cohort of 2003 high school graduates and the rising costs of university and college, the accessibility of post-secondary education was increasingly questioned. A government task force was appointed in May 2004 to explore solutions; the Rae Commission held hearings through the fall of 2004.
• Issues related to school discrimination on the basis of race and immigration status were also periodically raised.
SURVEY DESIGN
The 15th OISE/UT Survey involves a random sample of 1002 adults, 18 years of age and older, who were interviewed via telephone in their residences across Ontario in October and November of 2004.

The survey was administered by the Institute for Social Research, York University (ISR) and achieved a response rate of 50%. The sample has been weighted to better reflect age and sex distributions.

A more detailed description of the survey methodology and the composition of the survey sample can be found on the OISE/UT survey web site: www.oise.utoronto.ca/OISE-Survey. The full questionnaire is also available from the survey web site, as well as the findings on several other questions that space here does not permit, including:

• Willingness to participate in school councils
• Use of private tutoring
• Support for teachers’ right to strike.

Note: For ease of reading we have rounded percentages to whole numbers (e.g., 53.7 becomes 54). As a result, adding up percentages for some questions yields a total of 99% or 101% rather than 100%.

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While all of this assistance has been valuable, the authors remain solely responsible for the final design of items and for the interpretations of findings presented here.
Satisfaction, Confidence, and Changing Quality

About half (49%) of respondents to the 2004 OISE/UT survey indicate that they are satisfied with the school system in general while 32% are dissatisfied. As in past surveys, satisfaction with the job teachers are doing is notably higher (67%).

About a third (34%) think that the quality of elementary schooling has improved over the past 10 years but almost as many (32%) think quality has worsened. At the high school level, 28% see improvement but 30% think things are getting worse.

About a third (35%) indicate they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in public schools; 44% have some confidence.

The views of parents are generally similar to the opinions of those who do not have children in the school system. Parents are somewhat more satisfied with the school system than non-parents (53% versus 62%). But as surveys in the U.S. and Canada have long shown, what is distinct about parents’ views is the very high level of satisfaction with the schools their children attend compared to either local schools or schools in the province or nation (see our 2000 Report). Parents and non-parents have similar opinions about whether or not elementary and high school education is improving. Levels of confidence in the school system are also similar.

Figure 1 shows trends in public satisfaction, views of quality, and confidence in the public schools over time. In the case of satisfaction and quality, the public is less critical of the public school system than in previous years. In contrast, public confidence may be at an all time low. (Unfortunately we lack information for the last years of the Conservative government.)

Public satisfaction with the public school system has fluctuated over the past 25 years. Satisfaction increased in the early 1980s peaking at 55% in 1984 but afterward declined, reaching a low point of 36% in 1988. However, two years later, public views had become more favourable and by 1996, half were satisfied with the school system. During the years of extensive reforms that followed under the new Conservative government, satisfaction levels again declined and remained fixed at about 44%. Satisfaction levels have now somewhat improved.

Public perceptions of quality have followed a different pattern over time. Our long-time series for high school education shows a slow, steady decline in the proportion of Ontarians who think high school education is improving, reaching a low point of 18% in 1998. Beginning in 2002 and again this year, we have seen more favourable public views. At the elementary level, opinion has also become more favourable. In 2004, just over a third (34%) see improving quality compared to 27% in 2002. At the same time, the proportion who think quality is worsening has declined from 41% to 32%.

This year, the OISE/UT survey included a question on respect and confidence in public schools in order to continue a time series built up by the Canadian Gallup Poll, which also asked about confidence in other institutions. Confidence in public schools appears to be substantially lower in the 2004 OISE/UT survey than recorded by the last Gallup poll on this issue in 2001. Current confidence levels are, in fact, lower now than in 1993, when a finding that only 40% (down from 64% in 1989) had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence was widely reported as a “crisis of confidence” in the public schools.

These ratings are a warning that the public is not yet convinced that a sustained recovery of the school system is underway.

Figure 1
Satisfaction, Confidence, and Changing Quality

These ratings are a warning that the public is not yet convinced that a sustained recovery of the school system is underway.
Almost three-quarters (73%) now favour increased government spending on elementary and secondary schools over the next year. Over half (57%) would be willing to pay higher taxes in support of education.

Parents are considerably more likely than non-parents to support increased spending on elementary and secondary schools (82% versus 69%). However, age differences in support for spending on schools, once substantial, have narrowed. In 2004, only those age 65 and over are significantly less likely to favour more spending on schools. However, even among this oldest age group more than half (55%) are supportive. We find a similar pattern regarding political party preference. Those self-identifying as Conservatives are less likely than Liberal and NDP supporters to favour more spending on schools, yet even among Conservatives a substantial majority (64%) favour a funding increase.

As Figure 2 shows, since 1980, we have experienced two periods of rapid growth in support for higher spending on K–12 schooling: 1980–1988 and 1996–2000. In the first period, support peaked at about 60%; in the second period, support levels reached 70%. Each peak has been followed by a period of consolidation. Since 2000, the proportion of the public favouring higher school spending has remained at about the 70% level, the highest levels ever recorded in the OISE/UT survey.

While public support for higher spending on schools grew between 1996 and 2000, willingness to pay higher taxes in support of education hardly changed over the period, remaining stuck at about 50%. Only in the current consolidation phase do we see some increase in tolerance for higher education taxes, consistent with preferences for higher spending on schools. Parents are no more
likely than non-parents to be willing to pay higher taxes. Across age groups, only those 65 and older are significantly less likely (45%) to be willing to pay higher taxes in support of education. As with spending increases, Conservatives are less likely than others to be willing to pay higher taxes for education; however, 50% are prepared to do so.

Support for government funding of different types of schools remains quite stable and mixed, with about 40% preferring the funding of public and Catholic schools as now, while less than 30% want to extend funding to all religious and private schools, and a similar number would prefer to see only a single public system funded (for details: www.oise.utoronto.ca/OISE-Survey).

Integrating Daycare and Education

Both Ontario and most other Canadian provincial child care systems came under sustained criticism in 2004 as underfunded and fragmented in comparison with most other developed countries. There were calls for a new universal system of early learning and care, with much greater co-ordination between daycare and public kindergarten programs. The current survey assessed the extent of support for such greater co-ordination. As Figure 3 shows, three-quarters of respondents agree with this proposition and there is very little definite opposition.

There were calls for a new universal system of early learning and care... there is very little definite opposition.
A key objective of educational reform under the recent Conservative government was to raise standards through a more rigorous curriculum, and to enforce standards through testing. In the past two years, Ontario high schools have had to confront negative consequences of these measures, particularly for students in the applied stream. The new mathematics curriculum has emerged as a serious problem for these students. Similarly, applied students have high failure rates on the mandatory grade 10 literacy and numeracy test. The result is that many students in this stream may not be able to earn a high school diploma under the current curriculum.

Does the public support higher standards even if this means that fewer students graduate? Is streaming high school students into academic and applied streams accepted? Would the public go beyond this and support a return to differentiated school leaving certificates reflecting different standards of achievement? To each of these questions, the OISE/UT surveys suggest the answer, currently, is yes.

Past OISE/UT surveys (see www.oise.utoronto.ca/OISE-Survey for reports for 1998 and 2000) showed overwhelming public support for higher standards for high school graduation even if this leads to fewer graduates. There was similar support for province-wide testing to support standards. However, at that time, most people also believed that almost all students could meet higher standards.

The high failure rates of applied students on the grade 10 literacy and numeracy test have been well-publicized in the media. This provides an opportunity to test whether the public really will support standards when this carries a demonstrably high risk that very many applied students will not graduate.

As Figure 4 shows, popular support for the grade 10 literacy and numeracy test has eroded only modestly (from 78% to 69%) in the face of evidence that the test will significantly increase the number of academically weaker students leaving high school without a diploma. The public apparently means what it says about standards—at least in basic areas.

Streaming students by destination (as the current academic/applied system purports to do) is broadly accepted. Since we first asked about streaming in 1980, only a small minority has rejected the system outright. In most years, about two-thirds support streaming at or before grade 11. Figure 4 shows changes in support for streaming at grade 10, as is presently done. After a period of growing resistance to early streaming in the late 1990s, support has returned to levels seen a decade ago.

But should streaming lead to credentials of different levels or value? In both 2002 and 2004, a majority support differentiated credentials. However, the idea is somewhat less popular currently than two years ago.

The intensification of the Ontario high school curriculum partially reflects the move from a five-year to a four-year program. Weaker students faced not only higher standards but less time in which to master the material. A possible alternative to differentiated standards is to lengthen the time a student can take to learn the curriculum. This is one possibility held out by the proposal to raise the school-leaving age (including enrolment in job training) from 16 to 18. As shown in Figure 5, this proposal is supported by over two-thirds of respondents in both 2002 and 2004.
There is no more basic question in school governance than the appropriate balance between provincial and local control over what happens in schools. The often acrimonious public debate on this issue has left little mark on public opinion.

In 2004, 46% think that the province has too much control while 39% feel the province has the right amount or too little influence. This division is little changed from 1998.

Findings from our 1998 survey suggest that views on government control are sensitive to perceived effects of government policies. In that year, views on centralization were heavily influenced by perceptions of the impact of the new Conservative government’s policies. Seventy percent of those who thought changes made by the Conservatives had improved education also thought the provincial government had the right amount or should have more control over schools. This compares to 49% support for the right amount or more control among those who saw little real impact and just 20% support for the right amount or more control among respondents who thought the Conservatives had, in fact, made the situation worse.

Partisanship also plays a role in shaping views on centralization. In 2002, with the Conservative government still in power, 62% of self-identified Conservatives thought the province had the right amount or should have more control over schools, compared to 43% of Liberals. In 2004, with the new Liberal government in power, Conservative support for current or greater centralization has dropped to 43%, virtually identical to views of self-identified Liberals.
Evidence on this matter seems quite conclusive. That said, just which forms of participation matter most remains something of a puzzle for both parents and schools. Even the most conscientious parent can’t do it all. The real life conditions faced by a great many parents include long work days, significant commuting distances, early departures for work and very short evenings for household chores, helping kids with homework, and relaxation.

Evidence from the last few surveys, this year’s included, seems to reflect the ambivalence that comes with these real life conditions. Respondents believe that recent changes in policy have given the provincial government too much control. Nonetheless, there is only a small increase in the numbers preferring more control for school councils. Furthermore, only about a tenth of respondents are definitely prepared to serve on such councils and local school boards remain a popular alternative for gaining back more local control. This should not be viewed as a bad thing.

While the school council movement has created strong advocates in the province, the bulk of the research evidence suggests that the most productive role for parents is providing direct help with their child’s learning, not sitting in meetings during the evening at school.

The public is also divided over who should control what is taught in local schools (see Figure 7). In 2004, 43% favour provincial control over curriculum, 35% want local boards to decide what is taught, while 14% would lodge this responsibility with parents. The distribution is similar to what we found 20 years earlier in 1984. (However, in 1996, support for provincial control of curriculum declined briefly in favour of parental influence.)

The OISE/UT surveys have consistently found a strong consensus in favour of “high stakes” province-wide testing despite the division of opinion over whether provincial or local influences should predominate in determining the curriculum. It seems clear that much of the public does not associate high stakes provincial tests with provincial control over the curriculum. This was amply demonstrated by responses to our 1996 survey which included questions on who should have the greatest influence over curriculum and whether students should have to pass provincial examinations in compulsory subjects to graduate from high school. Eighty percent of those who thought the province should have the greatest influence on curriculum supported province-wide examinations; but so too did 77% of those who wanted local school boards to have the most influence and 73% who opted for local teachers.

43% favour provincial control over curriculum, 35% want local boards to decide what is taught, while 14% would lodge this responsibility with parents. The distribution is similar to what we found 20 years earlier.
Should the Province Set Spending Caps for Local School Boards?

In late 1997, the then Conservative government passed Bill 160 removing local school boards’ powers of taxation, effectively leaving the province the power to cap local expenditures on education. Local boards were prohibited from passing deficit budgets to circumvent provincial control. Three large urban boards defied the ban and subsequently found themselves placed under provincial supervisors. While the supervisors are gone, provincial caps on local spending remain.

In 2004, provincial spending caps are supported by 58% of respondents to the OISE/UT survey while 36% want local authorities to decide how much to spend on community schools (see Figure 8a). This represents a significant gain in support for caps since 2002, mainly as the previously undecided have opted to support spending caps, as well as in comparison with the pre-cap era.

In 1984, when we first asked this question, the public was evenly divided on the issue. It is also interesting to note that even in the Metro Toronto area, the largest board put under provincial supervision, there is now majority support for provincial caps.

Spending Caps and Salary Negotiations with Teachers

Provincial spending caps left local school boards with relatively little room to maneuver in salary negotiations with teachers. The teachers’ federations, on the other hand, felt themselves to be negotiating with the provincial government at one remove. These strains continue. The Liberal government has recently interjected itself almost directly into current negotiations by offering a provincially guaranteed minimum schedule of salary increases for those signing four-year contracts.

As shown in Figure 8b, the public favours local over province-wide bargaining with teachers’ federations. While a third want the provincial government to conduct salary negotiations with teachers directly, 40% want local school boards to take on this role, and 17% would push negotiations down to the level of individual schools (principals and school councils). Views on this issue have changed little since 1996.
Those who want the province to set caps on local school board spending are only slightly more likely (39%) to support province-wide bargaining. Thus, the public is either indifferent to or is not willing to tolerate the tensions created by leaving local school boards to negotiate with teachers while severely limiting the resources at their disposal to reach a settlement.

The 2004 OISE/UT survey asked a general question about what people thought was the biggest problem facing elementary and secondary schools. A similar question was asked in the early OISE/UT surveys and also asked in all U.S. Gallup Surveys of attitudes toward public schools since 1969. Results of the 1980 and 2004 Ontario surveys are summarized in Figure 9.

Comparisons can only be approximate because the 1980 survey used an open-ended question and referred to Ontario in general, while the 2004 question relied mostly on pre-coded options and referred to respondents’ community. The most common problems identified in both surveys, mentioned by over a third of respondents, focused on student behaviour, including discipline, bullying, drug use, vandalism, and low motivation. Teacher limitations, including...
low morale and lack of preparation, were cited by around 15% in both surveys. Various concerns about the lack of relevant curriculum were also mentioned by similar proportions of respondents in both surveys.

The other main issue identified in both surveys was lack of money for the schools; primary concern about this problem may have increased during this period. But student behaviour problems remain the uppermost perceived problem. About 20% in both surveys insisted on the importance of combinations of these problems and small numbers mention other specific problems, such as declining enrolment in 1980, and family support problems and race problems in both years. It is also interesting to note that U.S. Gallup Surveys in recent years have found lack of funding to be a growing perceived problem, now equaling the long-dominate concern with student behaviour problems, including discipline, drugs, and violence.1

The majority perception of unequal chances for lower-income students has been consistent in several surveys since 1996.

As Figure 10 shows, similar patterns have been found in prior OISE/UT surveys. The majority perception of unequal chances for lower-income students has been consistent in several surveys since 1996. There is some indication of growing recognition of educational discrimination on the basis of race and disability, forms of inequality that are now well-documented by research, but a majority of the public is still not inclined to see it. While the numbers of these minorities in the sample are too small for statistical significance tests, it is notable that a majority of black respondents do believe that black students have worse chances of getting a post-secondary education.

Figure 10
Equal Access to Post-secondary Education

The majority perception of unequal chances for lower-income students has been consistent in several surveys since 1996.

According to the current survey, two-thirds of respondents think that students from low-income families have less chance of getting a post-secondary education than do students from higher income families. However, students from low-income families, black and aboriginal minorities, the physically disabled, and some others continue to be under-represented in post-secondary admissions. To what extent does the general public perceive these inequities?

According to the current survey, two-thirds of respondents think that students from low-income families have less chance of getting a post-secondary education than do students from higher income families. But only minorities of the public believe that either aboriginal or black students have worse chances than white students or that the physically disabled have worse chances than able-bodied students to get a higher education.

General participation rates in Canadian colleges and universities have grown rapidly since the 1960s. Over two-thirds of the Ontario public now express support for increased government spending on both colleges and universities. As Figure 11a indicates, support for increased funding has basically doubled since 1980. Support for increased college funding increased more rapidly in the 1980s, dropping just below majority support at the outset of the Conservative government which was elected on a platform of general spending reductions and tax cuts. Since 1996 there have been significant further increases in support for increased post-secondary spending, most notably for universities. Support for increased government spending on universities and colleges is now at an historic high point.

In this context of significant continuing growth in enrolment levels and slower actual increases in government funding of post-secondary education (partly as a result of budget deficits), Ontario universities and colleges have increasingly relied on tuition fee increases (and some on private donors) to meet their own increasing costs. The question of how to meet these increasing costs is central to the mandate of the Rae Commission review of the costs and accessibility of post-secondary education. For most institutions the issue reduces to how much to rely on government grants versus student tuition fees.

The OISE/UT survey has asked about public preferences on this matter since 1998. The results are summarized in Figure 11b. The majority of Ontarians want to see both government grants and tuition fees contribute significantly to covering costs of post-secondary education. But there is growing support for increased government grants mainly to cover increasing costs, from about a

Support for increased government spending on universities and colleges is now at an historic high point.
third of the public in 1998 to over 40% in 2004. Support for increased tuition fees as the main source in covering increasing costs is very small.

Earlier OISE/UT surveys have found significant support for tuition fees sharing some of the cost burden but also strong support for subsidies to low-income students, students who now would be further disadvantaged by fee increases. In light of the majority recognition of the inequality of access for students from low-income families, universal tuition fee increases are likely to be strongly opposed as a major means of covering increasing post-secondary costs.

**Figure 12**
Participation in Adult Education and Preferences for Government Support

Support for increased government spending on apprenticeships is higher than for any other area of education.
responsibility for salary negotiations with teachers. Second, they were asked how well informed they thought they were about educational issues. The results are shown in Figures 13 and 14.

In 2004, less than half of respondents correctly identified school boards as the agency responsible for teacher negotiations (see Figure 13). We obtained a similar result in 1996. In 2004, a quarter thinks the provincial Ministry is the agency responsible; but 30% indicate that they do not know.

Respondents offer generally modest views of how well informed they are about educational issues. Only 10% claim that they are very well informed, and 43% somewhat well informed. Most others indicate they are not very well or not at all informed about issues facing the school system.

Very few respondents are unable to rate their own knowledge level, but how accurate are their self-assessments? Those who correctly identify school boards as the agency negotiating with teachers offer similar self-ratings to those who incorrectly identify the provincial Ministry of Education. Only those who know that they do not know who negotiates salaries, are substantially more conservative in rating how well informed they are (see Figure 14).

However, satisfaction with, assessments of, and support for funding the school system are not much different by levels of knowledge about the schools. For example, there is now strong majority support for increased education funding among those who rate themselves well informed, somewhat informed, and not very well informed. Only among the small minority who feel they are not at all informed about educational issues is there, understandably, less enthusiasm for increasing education funding.
The OISE/UT Survey 1978 – 2004

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A wide-ranging discussion of various forms of adult learning in Canada may be found in:

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www.oise.utoronto.ca/OISE-Survey
We again invite comments on this survey and suggestions for the next survey, scheduled for 2006, from interested readers:

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