
MODERN COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOLS IN QUEBEC

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This article examines the emergence of the polyvalent secondary schools in Quebec from the inadequate institutions of the past. The present system of education is the result of many years of research and planning, which was initiated by the Parent Commission Report of the 1960's, and Regulation 1 of the Department of Education. These reports and other subsequent recommendations will also be discussed.

Prior to the polyvalent schools, the program of education was rigid. The student, upon entering high school had to choose a specific program, (scientific, classical, etc.) and take only the subjects offered in that particular program. All of the subjects were compulsory, and no choice was offered. The pupil's field of education was therefore quite restricted. As teaching and industry progressed at an ever-increasing pace, it was becoming obvious that this form of education would soon be inadequate to meet the needs of the student in modern society.

The culture and identity of Quebec were also changing during the "Quiet Revolution" to keep pace with the evolving society of the rest of the world. Churches and convents which had once held the main influence in education were losing their hold because of the breakdown of classical education in Quebec. The French Canadian wanted to be spiritually apart, yet economically

integrated with the rest of North America.

The technical-vocational classes which did exist in some of the English schools were poorly equipped. They offered only a few hours of basic manual skills per week, which barely introduced the student to the subject. Moreover, they were looked upon as a "second class" form of education, suitable only for the less intelligent pupils, or for those who would not otherwise finish high school.

Educators began to see the need for a broader form of education which would prepare the student to be a responsible member of society. They realized that the future society would be able to integrate only those workers who are skilled and well trained.

The Polyvalent School

The Parent Commission which investigated the situation of education in Quebec suggested that polyvalent (comprehensive) schools be constructed to provide all students with an education suited to their different goals in life. The result would be to offer a balanced development to the child and to ensure at least a basic secondary education.

The report on the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education defines the polyvalent school as

an institution which welcomes all students — and gives them the basic

elements of a well-rounded education. It helps each individual to discover his own talent and preferences and in the last analysis offers each student courses enabling him not only to acquire a general education but also to select his own special field.¹

According to Regulation 1, the main objectives of the polyvalent schools are: 1) to provide pupils not going to college with a means of entering the working world. 2) to offer a basis for continuing education. 3) to enable all pupils to use their leisure time constructively and to contribute to society.²

Speaking at a convention of the Federation of CEGEPs on March 20, 1970, the Minister of Education, Mr. Cardinal said that vocational training is the junction point for developing both the education and the economy. He also stated that the economic power of Quebec depended on the quality of its labor force, and that the introduction of comprehensive schools is indicative of the government's intentions in this field. The government, however, must know the forecast of the demand for manpower so that education will grow with the economy, in the proper direction³.

In the polyvalent school each pupil chooses the courses which he feels are

best suited to his ambitions and abilities, as well as to his level of competence. This system eliminates the rigidity of the "class" where everyone takes the same compulsory subjects at the same rate of learning. Subjects offered in the polyvalent schools fall into four main categories: language, science, art, and technical courses. Upon entering the secondary school, the student must choose options from each of the above categories. From these initial courses, he will gradually narrow down the choices to his own interest area. However, unlike the counterpart of earlier years, he will have been exposed to a well-rounded, early basic training.

Education in Quebec in the 1970's is much more effective than it previously was. The holding power of the school has increased greatly since all students can now choose courses best suited to their personal needs. Additional money was also granted by the government to improve the schools' facilities, laboratories and equipment. The schools which once were teacher- and administration-centered are now pupil-centered.

Three Outstanding Polyvalents

Sir Alexander Galt Regional High School in Lennoxville is an example of a large polyvalent secondary school in Quebec. A wide range of courses is

offered and some pupils come from quite a distance to attend.

LaSalle High School is the first fully comprehensive school designed and built by the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal. Here the student spends several weeks working in real jobs under actual working conditions for employers in the community. His interest in classroom work is stimulated by applying his academic work to job situations. As a part-time worker, he will develop appreciation and respect for his work.

Chateauguay Valley Regional High School, 30 miles south of Montreal, is another comprehensive school which has a "work-study" program for the students. It has large, modern, well-equipped shops in the areas of wood-working, automotive, electronics, machining, small engines, and drafting, as well as offering a complete spectrum of academic courses.

The educational administrators in Quebec are responding to changes in the social, economic, and technological areas. The result is increased expenditures, but also increased student interest. School districts are now being enlarged, and schools consolidated to maximize their efficiency.

Education in Quebec is evolving from a system which once attracted only a few, to one which will be available to all.

Les écoles polyvalentes au Québec, instituées d'après les recommandations de la Commission Parent, représentent un départ radical du système traditionnel d'éducation dans cette province. Auparavant, l'éducation avancée était restreinte à une petite élite. Les matières enseignées suivaient le modèle classique; les programmes d'étude étaient rigides, et l'étudiant n'avait aucune possibilité de choisir entre les sujets offerts.

Aujourd'hui les écoles polyvalentes offrent une éducation technique et professionnelle à tous ceux qui ont envie d'en profiter. Elles sont en effet un lien entre l'économie et le système d'éducation. L'étudiant peut choisir entre 4 grands domaines d'étude: langues, sciences, art, et cours techniques. En plus, à certaines écoles il peut combiner ses études avec un emploi à temps partiel.

1. "Program for the Polyvalent Secondary School," Preliminary Edition, 1967 Working Document, Department of Education, Quebec.
2. Ibid.
3. J.-G. Cardinal, speech reprinted in "Education Weekly," March 20, 1970, Number 32. ●