

Casting a look at a 'federal' schooling system

By Jennifer Wallner, Assistant Professor at the University of Ottawa.

Over 2014, the Abbott Government made it clear that it intends to make major changes to the way federalism works in Australia and one of its primary targets is education. As it was released two days before Christmas, we would all be forgiven for missing the roles and responsibilities paper put out by the Commonwealth. But nevertheless, a core idea is made clear: The Commonwealth should reduce its role in the education game and leave schooling in the hands of the states and territories.

The Abbott Government is not alone in the desire for a revolution in the federation. Recently, the Secretary of Victoria's Department of Education and Early Childhood Richard Bolt publicly called for an end to the Commonwealth's domination of national education ministers' meetings. Other education experts, like Bronwyn Hinz of the University of Melbourne, similarly question the Commonwealth's influence in schools policy.

So, a question must be asked: What does a federalized education system look like? To answer this critical question, we can look to another federation that shares a comparable history as a union among former British colonies, has a similarly diverse population due to immigration, with the added factor of a significant Francophone population territorially concentrated in one of the provinces. That federation is Canada.

Under the terms of the constitution, like Australia, the power for education falls to the provinces. Unlike Australia, however, there is no federal department of education, no national secretary for education, nor any formal or direct role played by Ottawa in provincial schools' policy. Since enacting the earliest legislation for public schools in the mid 1800s, the Canadian provinces have jealously guarded their autonomy over education and have successfully prevented the federal government from entering the field.

Given that the provinces are so autonomous, do schools look very different from the Pacific to the Atlantic coasts? The short answer is no. In general, each province runs their elementary and secondary schools in the same way. There is a powerful minister of education supported by a highly professionalized staff of public servants. It is the province that sets the standards for curricula, assessments, and teaching. The provinces also determine all the funding arrangements for schools and have implemented a model of full-funding. Rather than schools or boards having the power to tax residents directly to cover schooling costs independently, thanks to the practice of full-funding, the overwhelming majority of funding is provided directly by each province. As such, local control and independence is sacrificed in the name of achieving financial equity among the schools within a given province. Some

autonomy is nevertheless afforded to local school boards overseen by provincially-appointed superintendents, as provinces have delegated the authority to implement provincial standards, hire teachers, and ensure that individual schools are adhering to the regulations. Through this, provincial ministries off-load some of the administrative responsibilities to units that are in more direct contact with the individual schools.

By this point, something should be clear. While Canada is federalized in terms of the relationship between the national and provincial governments, within each province the management and operation of public schooling is in fact quite centralized.

In saying that schools are similar, it does not mean that each system is an exact replica of the others. The French province of Quebec, for example, has a unique arrangement for secondary schools. Students end regular high school in Year 11 and then go to a different school that either prepares them for university or offers them an applied vocational program. In the meantime, Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan all have parochial schools administered by Roman Catholic authorities operating alongside of the secular public schools. In return for public funds, these schools are required to adhere to a variety of regulations, including teaching provincial curricula and hiring provincially-certified teachers. There are also differences in the programs for teacher education offered by the universities, differences in the types of mandatory assessments that are conducted each year, and differences in the range of course offerings provided by each province.

These differences, however, have not translated into major discrepancies in the outcomes achieved by students across the provinces. Take, for example, Canada's results on the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). With its sample of more than 30,000 students, Canada can get a picture of the degree of educational performance across the country. In all the rounds of PISA, Canada as a whole has performed well and some provinces – notably Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia – have produced results putting them on par with the highest performing countries overall. Until the latest round, all provinces performed at or above the OECD average and the between-school variance was extremely low, meaning that school location was not a significant determinant of success. Results from the latest round, however, have exposed some setbacks, with some provinces scoring below the OECD average.

Interprovincial comparability in education was gradually achieved thanks to a consistent and concerted willingness among provincial policymakers to learn from one another and cooperate with each other. Provincial ministers of education and their senior officials meet regularly under the auspices of the Council for Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). Created by the provinces in 1967, this intergovernmental organization provides a venue for information exchanges and collaborative action. In contrast to its Australian counterpart, however, decisions to

cooperate do not require consensus and initiatives can advance without the participation of all the jurisdictions. This in fact happened when the CMEC started to create a pan-Canadian assessment program in the 1990s.

It is important to remember that the power over schools does not exist in a vacuum. In any federation, the capacity for any government to act in its area of jurisdiction turns critically on other components of the federal machine. The most important in regards to education is the fiscal architecture of Canada's federation. In lieu of tied or conditional grants, Canada has crafted a fiscal architecture with few strings attached, relative to the regimes in place in other federations – like the United States and Australia. As such, this has increased the flexibility and autonomy of the provinces while simultaneously leveling the financial playing field among them. Absent these arrangements, it is safe to say that interprovincial comparability would remain a distant goal on the horizon.

So what lessons can be drawn from the Canadian case? First, situating them next to Canada, it is clear that the Australian states and territories are well positioned to take on a more exclusive role in managing their schooling systems. Like the Canadian provinces, each jurisdiction has a robust education system that is supported by strong public servants orchestrated by dedicated education professionals. Second, despite provincial efforts, Australia's machinery for intergovernmental relations is nevertheless significantly more effective than comparable organizations in Canada. Given that inter-state and territorial communication is vital to ensure comparability across the education systems, this formidable architecture for intergovernmental relations will serve state and territorial policymakers well as they potentially move forward without Commonwealth coordination. Finally, like Canada, Australia has impressive arrangements to transfer money throughout the federation and help assuage inter-state and territorial fiscal disparities. Consequently, federalizing Australian schooling is clearly a viable option.

**Jennifer Wallner was a Visiting Fellow at the School of Politics and International Relations at ANU in 2014. She is an Assistant Professor at the University of Ottawa
@wallprof
jennifer.wallner@uottawa.ca**

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