

Educational Discourse and the Making of Educational Legislation in Early Upper Canada

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In 1787, a group of American refugee settlers in the western portion of Quebec, which would become the colony of Upper Canada in 1791, collectively petitioned the Governor General, Lord Dorchester, for schools.¹ They insisted, in fact, on a relatively comprehensive network of schools funded directly through the government purse. Dorchester responded by appointing William Smith, the former Chief Justice of New York State with whom he had formed a political friendship during the American War of Independence, to head a special committee to report on the state of education throughout the entire province. Several hundred copies of the report were printed and released in 1789. The report recommended a government-supported tripartite elementary, secondary, and university school system. The recommendations were not acted upon, but the report's ideas lingered in public discourse for years to come. In the writing of the origins of schooling in Upper Canada, this report has not received considerable attention.² Moreover, the intentions and goals of these early settlers advocating for government-aided schooling are characteristically overlooked. In the dominant view, the building of Upper Canada's school system was motivated by the bureaucratization and institutionalization concerns of major school advocates and politicians in the mid-nineteenth century.

What do we really know about the drive for schooling in Upper Canada and when this drive came about? The educational history of Upper Canada is commonly written as the succession of an elite group of

¹"Petition of the Western Loyalists," 15 April 1787, in *Documents Relating to the Constitutional History of Canada, 1759–1791*, ed. Arthur G. Doughty and Adam Shortt (Ottawa: J. de L. Taché, 1918), 949–51. Upper Canada would be renamed Canada West after union with Lower Canada in 1841, and would subsequently become the province of Ontario after the Confederation of Canada in 1867.

²On the other hand, the report has received relatively considerable attention in Quebec educational history. See, for example: Louis-Philippe Audet, *Histoire de l'enseignement au Québec, 1608–1971*, 2 vols. (Montreal: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971); Andrée Dufour, *Histoire de l'éducation au Québec* (Montreal: Boréal, 1997); Roger Magnuson, *The Two Worlds of Quebec Education During the Traditional Era, 1760–1940* (London, Ontario: Althouse Press, 2005).

educational reformers who advocated a centralized system of mass schooling. The earliest generation of scholars of Upper Canada typically represented educational history as the triumph of great men, such as John Strachan and Egerton Ryerson, who designed a universal system of education aimed at providing equality of opportunity.³ Benevolent school promoters, in this whig interpretation, advocated a state-supported school system with a common curriculum aimed to place the children of the rich and poor on equal footing.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the whig interpretation was challenged by revisionist scholars who portrayed the “great men” as socially conservative “school promoters” involved in the construction of a school system that taught the values of an emerging urban and middle class.⁴ Further revisionist history and neo-Marxist theory in the 1980s and 1990s held that prominent school promoters, in an effort to secure political hegemony for a social and political elite, built a large and powerful system of schooling centralized in the office of education.⁵

Certain scholars have addressed the concerns of parents, children, and other ordinary inhabitants concerned about schooling.⁶ Their

³See A. N. Bethune, *Memoir of the Right Reverend John Strachan, First Bishop of Toronto* (Toronto: Henry Rowsell, 1870); Nathanael Burwash, *Egerton Ryerson* (Toronto: G. N. Morang, 1903); J. Harold Putnam, *Egerton Ryerson and Education in Upper Canada* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1912); C. B. Sissons, *Egerton Ryerson: His Life and Letters*, 2 vols. (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, and Company, 1937–47); George W. Spragge, “John Strachan’s Contribution to Education, 1800–1823,” *Canadian Historical Review* 22 (1941): 147–58; C. E. Phillips, *The Development of Education in Canada* (Toronto: W. J. Gage Limited, 1957); Silvia Boorman, *John Toronto: A Biography of Bishop Strachan* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, and Company, 1969); J. L. H. Henderson, *John Strachan, 1778–1867* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969); David Flint, *John Strachan, Pastor and Politician* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁴See J. Donald Wilson, Robert M. Stamp, and Louis-Philippe Audet, ed., *Canadian Education: A History* (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 1970); Susan Houston, “Politics, Schools, and Social Change in Upper Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 53 (1972): 249–71; Michael B. Katz and Paul H. Mattingly, ed., *Education and Social Change: Themes from Ontario’s Past* (New York: New York University Press, 1975); Alison Prentice, *The School Promoters: Education and Social Class in Mid-Nineteenth Century Upper Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977); Neil McDonald and Alf Chaiton, ed., *Egerton Ryerson and His Times* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1978).

⁵See Bruce Curtis, “The Political Economy of Elementary Educational Development: Comparative Perspectives on State Schooling in Upper Canada” (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1980); Susan Houston and Alison Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); Bruce Curtis, *Building the Educational State: Canada West, 1836–1871* (London, Ontario: Althouse Press, 1988); Bruce Curtis, *True Government By Choice Men? Inspection, Education, and State Formation in Canada West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

⁶See R. D. Gidney, “Centralization and Education: The Origins of an Ontario Tradition,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 7, no. 4 (1972): 33–48; R. D. Gidney, “Elementary Education in Upper Canada: A Reassessment,” *Ontario History* 65, no. 3 (1973): 169–85; R. D. Gidney and D. A. Lawr, “Egerton Ryerson and the Origins of the Ontario Secondary School,” *Canadian Historical Review* 60, no. 4 (1979): 442–465; R. D. Gidney

research is valuable in demonstrating that parents, teachers, and other local school advocates had agency in the creation of a school system, and that central authorities themselves often reacted to local decisions. This research, however, tends to emphasize the ways in which individuals reacted to schooling after educational legislation had already been put into place. As such, research into the origins of schooling has tended to privilege official government records and correspondence among the political elite from the middle to late nineteenth century. The initial educational legislation formulated in early Upper Canada is dismissed as largely irrelevant to the school movement of the mid-nineteenth century.⁷

Moreover, by focusing on official government records historians have concentrated on a top-down process toward the development of schooling, and questions remain about the role that actors outside of government circles played in the official process toward mass universal schooling. Our understanding of how government-aided schooling came to be accepted and used by ordinary inhabitants, to the point that it became the advocated norm in the nineteenth century, requires more attention in order to untangle the complexity of school formation and its intellectual underpinnings. Was schooling in fact imposed from above, for good or bad, on those without any political authority or influence? Or, was there broader participation in the formation of a school system in the nineteenth century? If so, what was the role of political outsiders, and what were their goals?

To be sure, a number of studies have explored these questions. Jane Errington, for example, in her study of school teachers and female labor in early nineteenth-century Upper Canada, finds that parents were often seeking educational opportunities for their children, and were often

and D. A. Lawr, "Bureaucracy vs. Community? The Origins of Bureaucratic Procedure in the Upper Canadian School System," *Journal of Social History* 13, no. 3 (1980): 438–457; D. A. Lawr and R. D. Gidney, "Who Ran the Schools? Local Influence on Education Policy in Nineteenth-Century Ontario," *Ontario History* 72, no. 3 (1980): 131–43; R. D. Gidney, "Making Nineteenth-Century School Systems: The Upper Canadian Experience and Its Relevance to English Historiography," *History of Education* 9, no. 2 (1980): 101–16; R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar, "From Voluntarism to State Schooling: The Creation of the Public School System in Ontario," *Canadian Historical Review* 66, no. 4 (1985): 443–73; R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Miller, *Inventing Secondary Education: The Rise of the High School in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); Harry Smaller, "Teachers and Schools in Early Ontario," *Ontario History* 85, no. 4 (1993): 291–308.

⁷Two major exceptions in the historiography are J. D. Purdy's 1962 doctoral thesis, "John Strachan and Education in Canada, 1800–1851" (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1962) and J. Donald Wilson's 1971 doctoral thesis, "Foreign and Local Influences on Popular Education in Upper Canada, 1815–1844" (PhD dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 1971). These scholars, however, overwhelmingly concentrate on educational decisions made at the level of the political elite.

remorseful that they could not afford one due to the constraints and demands of a frontier society.⁸ By looking at family economies, Chad Gaffield finds that, as limited land inheritance made out-migration common in Ontario, families sought to provide for sons and daughters who would not inherit land. The provision of schooling, in this sense, became a form of inheritance.⁹ In studies such as these, scholars find that private individuals were often leading the way in the provision of schooling, but their findings have not been linked to the legislative movement for mass schooling.

Paul Axelrod builds the central argument of his survey of nineteenth-century educational histories by contemplating the variety of possible motivations that made both major school promoters and parents seek the construction of a formal system of schooling. He suggests that both groups had their own reasons for advocating a school system, and that we might better conclude that a mix of circumstances accounted for its growth. "Compulsory-school legislation," he argues, "tended to follow, not precede, large-scale participation in public schooling."¹⁰ Axelrod's study raises a host of questions that offer new possibilities for further study. Indeed, both parents and major school promoters had their own reasons for advocating a system of schooling; but did the two operate in isolation? To what extent did their discourses overlap? Was one group leading the movement for schooling, while the other was following; or, can we speak in terms of a symbiotic relationship that contributed to the formation of a school system in Upper Canada? How can we connect the historiography concerning private educational initiatives to that which focuses on the ideas of prominent school advocates in the nineteenth century?

The recent shift in research on Upper Canada away from the narrative of prominent individuals who controlled the social, political, and economic development of the colony, and toward a "deliberative democracy" model of colonial development opens up new avenues of exploration in the history of Upper Canadian education. In his study of

⁸Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Wives and Mothers, Schoolmistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada, 1790-1840* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); "Ladies and Schoolmistresses: Educating Women in Early Nineteenth-Century Upper Canada," *Historical Studies in Education* 6, no. 1 (1994): 71-96. Similar themes are found in Alison Prentice and Marjorie Theobald, ed., *Women Who Taught: Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) and Ruby Heap and Alison Prentice, ed., *Gender and Education in Ontario* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1991).

⁹Chad Gaffield, "Children, Schooling, and Family Reproduction in Nineteenth-Century Ontario," *Canadian Historical Review* 72, no. 2 (1991): 157-91.

¹⁰Paul Axelrod, *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). See especially Chapter 2, "Building the Educational State."

public opinion and deliberative democracy in Upper Canada, Jeffrey McNairn argues that public opinion emerged as a new form of authority in Upper Canada. Through a meticulous and thorough review of colonial newspapers, McNairn suggests that the public was exposed to, and involved in, the theater of politics through the press.¹¹ He suggests that the increased publication of newspapers in Upper Canada resulted in public discourses that not only influenced but also shaped the political development of the province. Carol Wilton has examined popular political participation in a study of petitioning movements from 1800 to 1850.¹² Wilton suggests that “ordinary Canadians” were much more involved in the political process than previously believed. Political outsiders, she convincingly demonstrates, often challenged established patterns of paternalism and notions of hierarchy and promoted the development of an expanded public sphere in Upper Canada. This paper builds on the deliberative democracy model and explores how print culture during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries enabled the emergence of schooling as a central discourse in Upper Canada.

Terms such as “the public,” “the people,” and “public discourse” must be used carefully when examining Upper Canada. Race, gender, and class were major determinants of one’s social status and ability to participate in Upper Canadian print culture. While the evidence does indicate that the public sphere was broader than we might suppose, there were serious inequalities in Upper Canada that should serve to remind us that public discourse in Upper Canada was not a discourse among equals.¹³

¹¹Jeffrey L. McNairn. *The Capacity to Judge: Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy in Upper Canada, 1791–1854* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

¹²Carol Wilton, *Popular Politics and Political Culture in Upper Canada, 1800–1850* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000).

¹³The circulation statistics of the colonial newspapers and their readership information is limited; however, it is safe to assume that participation in print culture discourse was probably limited to those who were the most likely to be literate and able to purchase print media material. Determining who such people were, however, raises more challenging questions. The evidence indicates that print culture in Upper Canada was not a parochial one, and that a range of groups had access to print media. Jeffrey McNairn has demonstrated that women, for example, often managed newspapers during the absence of their editor-husbands; others retained ownership of newspapers as widows. Moreover, William Lyon Mackenzie, editor and proprietor of the *Colonial Advocate*, reported Mississauga Aboriginals at Credit River among his subscribers. Literacy levels in Upper Canada furthermore indicate that social class did not necessarily serve as a barrier for participation in print culture discourse. In his study of English-speaking Canada, Harvey Graff has indicated that literacy and illiteracy rates among the poor and wealthy in Upper Canada were relatively the same. See McNairn, *The Capacity to Judge*, 131; William Lyon Mackenzie, *Sketches of Canada and the United States* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1833), 133; Harvey Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991).

Moreover, in the period to 1816, the number of newspapers in print was not overwhelming.¹⁴ Five newspapers were established in this period, whereas, by the 1830s, there were approximately thirty newspapers in the colony. Pamphlets were relatively limited in production as well, and the extent to which we can speak of a reading culture is surely also limited. Nevertheless, Upper Canadian print media at this time, however limited, was not a forum of monolithic discourse. The educational ideas expressed in early Upper Canadian print media were as multifaceted as they were complex and contentious. Juxtaposing the print media with official records in this earlier period allows us to compare the ideas of the elite with those of individuals outside of official government circles. We can tap into a broader discourse on education in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that has been overlooked. An analysis of print media will not enumerate the educational ideas of the entire population. What it does offer, however, is an important step toward a more complete contextualization of the intellectual underpinnings of the school movement in Upper Canada from a vantage point broader than that of the major school promoters.

Articles concerning education and advertisements for schools appeared regularly in the 1790s. On November 2, 1796, a notification regarding a shipment of books, “including school material and prayer books,” was important enough to be printed on the front page of the *Upper Canada Gazette*.¹⁵ This is significant because the front page was usually reserved for government proclamations and other important

¹⁴There was only one newspaper for most of the 1790s, the government-sponsored *Upper Canada Gazette*, which began publication in the city of York (later Toronto) in 1793. While the newspaper was government sponsored, its editors did not always see eye-to-eye with the colonial government. Its first editor, Louis Roy, was criticized for being “indifferent about his work,” and dismissed after only one year, while the newspaper’s second editor, Gideon Tiffany, “aroused official displeasure” for failing to toe the official line and was eventually dismissed himself. Two additional newspapers began publication at the turn of the century, the short-lived *Canada Constellation* in 1799, and the only slightly longer-lived *Niagara Herald* in 1800. Both newspapers, published by Gideon and Silvester Tiffany, were independent and can be considered “moderate” newspapers in that they neither toed nor defied government lines. Upper Canada’s first anti-government newspaper, the *Upper Canada Guardian*, edited by Joseph Willcocks, appeared in 1807. The conservative and widely successful pro-government *Kingston Gazette*, edited by Stephen Miles, and funded by prominent Upper Canadians such as Member of the Legislative Council Richard Cartwright, appeared in 1810. While the *Kingston Gazette* was certainly a pro-establishment publication, this did not mean that it was closed to ideas that were not supported by the colonial government. It printed contributions, often from conservatives themselves, which diverged from the interests of the colonial government. For a more detailed discussion on Upper Canadian newspapers in this period, see Carl Benn, “The Upper Canadian Press, 1793–1815,” *Ontario History* 70 (1978): 93–102.

¹⁵*Upper Canada Gazette*, 2 November 1796. A similar announcement was made a year later in the 25 November 1797 issue.

legal notices. Moreover, the inhabitants of Upper Canada increasingly talked about, and provided themselves with, formal organized schooling. In what was perhaps the first advertisement for schooling in Upper Canada, Mr. Rich Cockrel announced in 1796 that he would be opening an evening school with the basic curriculum of writing, arithmetic, and bookkeeping.¹⁶ In March of 1797, Mr. Arthur offered a further option for parents with the creation of a boarding school in Newark (present day Niagara).¹⁷ These early schools, as advertised, emphasized the practical utility of education for the growing literary and commercial life of the province, and were geared toward the needs of more ordinary inhabitants seeking financial independence for their children in an unpredictable frontier society.

A practical curriculum and the indoctrination of proper morals and values were the two necessary ingredients believed to prepare oneself for frontier life in Upper Canada. On March 10, 1798, an article entitled "Education. Instructions from a Parent to the Tutor of his Son. A Scrap," was printed in the *Upper Canada Gazette*. The article, written by an anonymous parent, outlined the type of education that he believed was desired by most inhabitants. According to this parent, a practical education was favored over a classical one: "I would not have you, through any zeal or attachment to me, think of pushing my boy into learning of the languages, beyond his own pleasure." Above all, this parent wanted his child to learn what "is necessary or useful to man."¹⁸ Preparing the child for a "useful station" in life was a common theme in the philosophy of education espoused in late eighteenth-century Upper Canada.

Ordinary inhabitants also formed networks to further promote their educational goals. Charitable organizations were instrumental in strengthening the discourse concerning the need for education, and especially for those who could not afford it through their own means. On June 28, 1797, the *Upper Canada Gazette* reported that Philanthropy Lodge No. 4, at a meeting in Newark, had resolved to establish a fund for, among other things, "*the education of orphans & indigent brethren's children.*"¹⁹ Education, according to this network of individuals, was a right that should be extended to all classes. This article is important as it suggests a growing concern for school expansion and the belief that schooling should be made available to a broader population of children, and not only those few with the resources to pay for it.

¹⁶*Upper Canada Gazette*, 20 November 1796. That some previous issues of the *Upper Canada Gazette* are missing makes it impossible to say with certainty that this was the first school advertisement in the history of the province.

¹⁷*Upper Canada Gazette*, 8 March 1797.

¹⁸*Upper Canada Gazette*, 10 March 1798.

¹⁹*Upper Canada Gazette*, 28 June 1797.

In a pamphlet that was printed in 1799, an anonymous American traveler, reflecting on a copy of the aforementioned 1789 Report on Education he had acquired on his trip, lamented the inactions of government officials in the development of schooling. Remarking on the recommendations laid out in the report, he concluded that, as a result of their dismissal, education in the colony was in a deplorable state. Professionals and “Men of distinguished talents and acquirements,” he said, were imported from abroad and were not being cultivated within the colony, to the detriment of those born in Upper Canada who would have otherwise received the type of training they needed to advance to positions of leadership.²⁰ The American traveler’s observations reflected a central theme in the history of education in late eighteenth-century Upper Canada: providing education to a broader public was increasingly considered central to the colony’s development and ability to survive on its own.

Print media discourse on education from the founding of the colony reflected what was an increasingly public dialogue concerning the need for collective efforts at school expansion. By the end of the decade, government initiatives reflected the dialogue. In July 1797, the Legislative Council (Upper Canada’s appointed upper house of parliament) and the House of Assembly (Upper Canada’s elected lower house of parliament), although disagreeing on the scope and form of government-aided schooling, adopted a joint address to the king requesting him to set apart land for the establishment of schools and a university in Upper Canada. Within their request was a proposal for a system of free grammar schools in each district (or, the “district schools”), and also for a college or university.²¹ The response from Britain arrived several months later, and was favorable to the cause, requesting only a report from the Executive Council outlining the costs and measures of the proposed system of education.²² As a result, funds and land were set aside in 1797 for a government-aided system of education. The shape and form of the school system, however, was yet to be determined and was open for debate.

²⁰Anonymous, *A Tour Through Upper and Lower Canada. By a Citizen of the United States. Containing, A View of the present State of Religion, Learning, Commerce, Agriculture, Colonization, Customs and Manners, among the English, French, and Indian Settlements* (Litchfield: 1799).

²¹“Address from the Upper Canada Legislature to the King’s Most Excellent Majesty,” in *Documentary History of Education in Upper Canada, from the Passing of the Constitutional Act of 1791 to the Close of the Reverend Doctor Ryerson’s Administration of the Education Department in 1876*, comp., J. George Hodgins, 2 vols. (Toronto: L. K. Cameron, 1894–1910), vol. 1, 16. Hereafter cited as *DHE*.

²²*DHE*, vol. 1, 17.

David McGregor Rogers, a member of the House of Assembly, sensed that, whatever the case, the atmosphere was conducive to school legislation, and so he brought in an additional bill aimed at providing technical education to orphaned children.²³ On June 29, 1799, “An Act to Provide for the Education and Support of Orphan Children” was passed.²⁴ The bill provided for the first publicly funded and regulated form of educational oversight in Upper Canada. Later in 1799, the *Upper Canada Gazette* reported that the legislature solidified its commitment to government-regulated education by introducing the certification of teachers. The *Upper Canada Gazette* applauded government efforts in regulating teaching, and relayed the news: “We are happy in being informed that no person will be [illegible], or permitted, by the government, to teach school in any part of this province, unless he shall have passed an examination before one of our missionaries, and receive a certificate from under his hand specifying, that he is adequate to the important task of a tutor.”²⁵ Such a measure was seen as essential as it acted as a check on “itinerant characters,” who preferred the sedentary life of a teacher “to a more laborious way of getting thro’ life,” and also, and more importantly, it acted as a check on the potential influence of foreign morals and values into the schools of Upper Canada: “the rising generation will reap infinite benefit from it,” the *Upper Canada Gazette* read, “as it will tend to stimulate and encouraged men of literary character to make permanent residence among us.” Finally, in order to support and promote the law, the *Upper Canada Gazette* encouraged its readers to “patronize so laudable an institution” as that of Mr. William Cooper, who was the first “certified” teacher in the history of Upper Canada.²⁶ Before the dawn of the nineteenth century, then, the wheels of government-regulated schooling were already in motion.

On May 16, 1801, the *Niagara Herald*, in announcing the opening of the provincial legislature, pointed out that school legislation was among the subjects that were to be discussed in the upcoming year, thus making the upcoming session, in its opinion, one of the “more interesting sessions than that of any former.”²⁷ In fact, the legislative

²³ *Journals of the House of Assembly*, 15 June 1799, 104.

²⁴ *Journals of the Legislative Council*, 29 June 1799, 96.

²⁵ *Upper Canada Gazette*, 6 July 1799.

²⁶ Holding certification, however, was not an enforced requirement, and the lack of records dealing with this issue leads me to conclude that it was purely symbolic. Nevertheless, the idea that government could play a role in what was generally considered a private matter was alive.

²⁷ *Niagara Herald*, 16 May 1801. The *Niagara Herald* was published by the Tiffany brothers, Gideon and Silvester. Gideon had been the editor of the *Upper Canada Gazette* in the 1790s before being fired for failing to toe the official line.

developments of the late eighteenth century cooled down in the first few years of the nineteenth century. Public discourse, however, did not.

In a series of lectures appearing in 1801 on the necessity of education, a writer in the *Niagara Herald* espoused a curriculum in which civic education was at the core.²⁸ History, the study of statistics, and the politics of modern states were touted as the backbone of education, “for the first accounts of any country or people, make the strongest impressions on our minds.” Civic education was suggested as imperative to any curriculum that might be developed in the schools. Moreover, it provided a justification for school expansion.

Indeed, the connection between civic education and the successful development of Upper Canada was a key theme of the early nineteenth century. On July 24, 1802, an extensive article on education was printed in the *Upper Canada Gazette* outlining what the author believed to be a maturing philosophy of education. In it, the link between religion, education, and the advancement of civic loyalty was extolled. “The Romans,” the author claimed, “made it a primary object of attention to educate their children in the principles, ceremonies and practices of their religion; and some of their most distinguished statesmen having declared, that the strength and glory of the commonwealth was owing, in a great measure, to this important circumstance.”²⁹ The strength of the Roman Empire, according to this writer, was in its insistence on indoctrinating children at a young age with the values and culture of the society. Their children were “trained up” with the values of Rome, and in doing so the values and culture “took root and grew up with them.” The success of Roman education was contingent on the “religious” values promoted in that curriculum.

By contrast, the author pointed to the contemporary French republic, under the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte, which he believed was neglecting religious values, and was, by extension, promoting atheism. France stood “as an awful beacon to warn the world.” Wherever religious values were neglected, the social order was destroyed. It was therefore necessary “to rear children for excellence and usefulness, as citizens, and in the various social and domestic departments.” In an age when the world was saturated with new political and religious ideas, this article suggested that children be indoctrinated with values supportive of monarchical government and Christianity. A good education, seen in this light, provided for good government.

Still, there were other reasons for promoting education. In an 1802 article in the *Upper Canada Gazette*, mothers were called on to be

²⁸ *Niagara Herald*, 21 February 1801; 28 February 1801; 7 March 1801.

²⁹ *Upper Canada Gazette*, 24 July 1802.

attentive to the “first impressions” they made on their children, which would last for their entire lives. The idea of educating children to be raised as respectable and properly mannered was touted.³⁰ Indeed, there were a number of such writings that tended to promote the educational function within the household. As Susan Houston and Alison Prentice argue, such writings “make it clear that education was not by any means equated with schooling in early British North America.”³¹ What these writings do suggest, however, is that ideas of child rearing and education were increasingly becoming a focus of public debate. While the rearing of children was considered to be mainly the responsibility of the family, by the early nineteenth century we begin to see that many individuals had much to say about what went on inside the homes of others.

Writings in the Upper Canadian press concerning such issues at the turn of the century overwhelmingly emphasized the public benefits of education. As such, education was increasingly advocated as a public concern. While child rearing was still considered largely a private matter, the idea that the community should be involved in the process was intensifying. There was also a growing belief that children should be reared not only for the benefit of the individual child, but also for the public good. To what extent did this burgeoning belief manifest itself within the public arena of official politics and colonial governance?

Government leaders could hardly ignore the growing discourse concerning the development of a school system within the broader public arena. While the progress of schooling was sluggish, the appetite for it was growing. On February 16, 1804, a petition from inhabitants of the county of Glengary was read in the House of Assembly. Notwithstanding “the wise exertions of the Legislature to promote public prosperity,” these inhabitants decried, “they still contemplate anxiety, the ill consequences that may result from the want of schools, both to the present generation and to posterity.” For this reason, they petitioned for publicly funded schools in “the most central places” in the colony, under the control and regulation of government.³² In 1804 and 1805, similar proposals were made in the Assembly to establish such schools in the province, but failed to pass.³³ In 1806 a bill for “the more general dissemination of learning throughout the Province,” initiated by the political dissenter William Weekes, went through the Assembly, but the

³⁰*Upper Canada Gazette*, 21 August 1802.

³¹Alison L. Prentice and Susan E. Houston, *Family, School, and Society in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), 6.

³²*Journals of the House of Assembly*, 16 February 1804, 429–30; see also, *DHE*, vol. 1, 48–49.

³³*Journals of the House of Assembly, 1804*, 16, 17, 20 February 1804, 430–32, 435, 438; 19, 25, 27 February 1805, 34, 43, 46.

legislature was prorogued before the Legislative Council was ready to vote on it and the bill was dropped.³⁴

Official action toward government-aided schooling was finally taken in 1807. The District School Act, when it was drawn up, provided for one school in each district that would also require parents to pay some form of tuition.³⁵ Almost immediately, however, certain inhabitants expressed their dissatisfaction with the District School Act, which, they believed, provided funding to a colonial elite that could afford to pay for their children's education without the aid of government. On this point, the leading spokespeople against the colonial government were radicals such as Joseph Willcocks and Robert Thorpe. They emerged as anti-establishment leaders who opposed the executive government's policies and practices, and questioned its right to power. These radicals not only found their way into the political arena, but also they published some influential pamphlets and in 1807 established an anti-executive newspaper, the *Upper Canadian Guardian*. This newspaper provided a new platform for the dissemination of the ideas of political radicals in an effort to subvert the colonial government.

The educational ideas of these radicals were summarized best in an 1809 pamphlet that attacked the colonial administration, written by John Mills Jackson, an associate of the radical group. Among other abuses, he pointed toward the lack of common schooling as an attempt by the political elite to incapacitate the lower classes. What was worse, he thought, was that they had established eight district schools, modeled on the grammar schools of England, as preparatory academies for the children of the colony's prominent families. Although a "laudable attempt" was made in the House of Assembly in 1806 for a more general system of education, Jackson proposed, it faced resistance from the establishment, which instead "voted eight hundred a year for eight schools [the district schools], as an inducement for protestant clergymen to settle in Canada." While the students in these elite schools received a proper education, Jackson complained, the rest of the population was left with limited choices of private schools run by

³⁴*Journals of the House of Assembly*, 22–28 February 1806, 85–101; *Journals of the Legislative Council*, 28 February to 1 March 1806, 267–9.

³⁵"An Act to establish public schools in each and every District of this Province," *Journals of the House of Assembly* 10 March 1807, 185; *Journals of the Legislative Council*, 10 March 1807, 293. The Act provided a total of £800 for eight grammar schools which were to be centrally located in each of the colony's eight districts. Five trustees in each district, appointed by the lieutenant governor, were given powers to appropriate funds and appoint teachers. Teachers were to be natural born subjects, and could be unilaterally dismissed from their positions by the lieutenant governor. For a complete reproduction of the Act, see *DHE*, vol. 1, 60–61.

“unfit” teachers.³⁶ The district school system, according to this view, was an elite one, providing limited education for those with above average resources. That system, anti-establishment reformers like Jackson argued, should be abandoned and replaced with a system of common schooling.

The extent to which anti-executive pamphleteers, the radical press, and political dissidents in the House of Assembly influenced the population is, of course, debatable. Nevertheless, evidence does suggest that their calls for common schooling were representative of a growing movement in favor of publicly aided common schooling. On February 11, 1812, for example, two petitions were read in the House of Assembly in which certain inhabitants complained about the inadequacy and unfairness of school funding in the province. Inhabitants of Hamilton petitioned that the grant for district schools be applied to common schools; they found the money for district schools to be “entirely useless.”³⁷ Inhabitants of the Midland District agreed, and called for the complete repeal of the District School Act. The act, they argued, “fails to provide for the educational wants of ‘the middling, or poorer class of His Majesty’s subjects.’”³⁸ In its place, they wanted provisions to be made “as may be conducive to public utility.” Because only one school was supported in the district, “most of the people are unable to avail themselves of the advantages contemplated by the institution. A few wealthy inhabitants, and those of the Town of Kingston, reap exclusively the benefit of it in this District.” The District School Act, “instead of aiding the middling and poorer class of His Majesty’s subjects,” they went on, “casts money into the lap of the rich, who are sufficiently able, without public assistance, to support a school in every respect equal to the one established by law.” That year, and again in 1814, the Assembly unsuccessfully continued its attempts to repeal the District School Act in favor of common schools.³⁹

It was not political dissenters alone, however, who advocated for common schooling. The pro-executive *Kingston Gazette*, established in 1810, took up the cause of promoting common schools in its very first issue. The importance of educating children, the newspaper suggested,

³⁶John Mills Jackson, *A View of the Political Situation of the Province of Upper Canada, in North America in which Her Physical Capacity is Stated; The Means of Diminishing Her Burden, Increasing Her Value, and Securing Her Connection to Great Britain are Fully Considered, with Notes and Appendix* (London: W. Earle, 1809), 18.

³⁷*Journals of the House of Assembly*, 11 February 1812, 15–16.

³⁸Petition of the Inhabitants of the Midland District, *Journals of the House of Assembly*, 11 February 1812, 16–17.

³⁹*Journals of the House of Assembly*, 26 February 1812, 54; *Journals of the Legislative Council*, 3 March 1812, 427; *Journals of the House of Assembly*, 4 March 1814, 132–33; *Journals of the Legislative Council*, 4 March 1814, 446–47.

had been admitted by many inhabitants in Upper Canada but was not yet fully realized by government.⁴⁰ Schooling, according to the *Kingston Gazette*, was required in order to indoctrinate common values from which a cohesive identity and stable society could foster, in which not only the intellectual, but also the moral, character was elevated. “Habits of subordination acquired in well disciplined schools essentially aid the administration of civil government,” the *Kingston Gazette* read. “They introduce a certain uniformity of manners, sentiments and characters, which is a desirable object in any state of society and under any form of government, and peculiarly important to this province, now in its youth, and not yet ripened into national manhood.” The idea of a young nation in need of a common identity was at the core of the system of education advocated here. “Our population is composed of persons born in different states and nations, under various governments and laws, and speaking several languages. To assimilate them, or rather their descendants, into one congenial people, by all practicable means, is an object of true policy. And the establishment of common schools is one of those means.”⁴¹

Moreover, the newspaper offered another justification for common schooling when it suggested, as political dissenters had been suggesting, that Upper Canada required trained and home-grown leaders in order to fill the influential offices in the colony. A democratic, elected Assembly, the administration of justice which “calls men in the common walks of life to act as jurors,” and the “various subordinate offices” requiring an informed mind gave rise, they believed, to an additional motive “to train up the rising generation in such a manner as to fit them for the performance of civil duties and the enjoyment of civil rights.” Upper Canada’s system of education theretofore failed to produce such an educated population, and so it was the intent of the newspaper “to awaken the public attention to this most interesting subject.” In sum, the *Kingston Gazette* entered into the public debate on education by promoting a common system of schooling intended to assimilate foreigners, indoctrinate children with the value of subordination to government, and to train a generation of locally born provincial leaders. For both different and similar reasons, this conservative newspaper found common ground with dissenters in promoting a common school system.

The conservative press proved to be a valuable forum for educational discourse. In an article on morality and education in the

⁴⁰*Kingston Gazette*, 25 September 1810. The newspaper’s editor, Stephen Miles, although a supporter of the official government line, was a Methodist and not a member of the Church of England clique that dominated Executive politics.

⁴¹*Kingston Gazette*, 25 September 1810.

Kingston Gazette, “A friend to improvement” suggested that “no subject, of so much importance, has been treated with so much neglect, as the proper education of children.”⁴² Once again, the call for school expansion was made. “A small part of the community,” this writer admitted, “need to prepare themselves for the learned professions, for a small proportion only can be useful, as *divines*, *lawyers*, or *physicians*; yet every person ought to be able to read and write his own language with propriety, and to have that knowledge of arithmetic, which will enable him to transact all necessary business with ease.” Moreover, it was the responsibility of government to provide this education because the demands of a frontier society offered very little time and resources for parents to attend to the education of their children. Were education to be expanded, “we should not see so many taverns and tippling houses crowded as we now do.” Moreover, “few broils or disturbances would exist; and the community at large would become enlightened, loyal, and happy.” Education was touted by this inhabitant as the panacea for peace, order, and loyalty.

On November 13, 1810, an inhabitant of Kingston provided his reasons for supporting a system of common schools. When the province was first settled, he argued, the demands of a frontier society were so great that the settlers “had not the means of giving much education to their children, or obtaining much information themselves from reading.”⁴³ In a course of more than twenty years, however, these difficulties were chiefly surmounted. Towns were populated and the physical labor of settling the province was relaxed. “Means of information, education and improvement in science, ought now to receive that attention, which the state of the country heretofore rendered impracticable. Common schools ought to be put upon a more liberal establishment.” This inhabitant called for an extensive system of education, including a network of libraries to be built where Upper Canadian families could not afford to purchase books on their own. He suggested that a voluntary tax should be collected for the school system. Schools were being built in many other places, he argued; it was a transnational phenomenon. This inhabitant feared that the “neglect necessarily introduced by the early state of this country” would operate to “retard the progress of improvement” and place Upper Canada behind other nations. He therefore called on every “patriot and philanthropist” to take up the cause of promoting schools and libraries for the good of the colony.

Between 1812 and 1815 the war with the United States preoccupied the colonial government, and other issues, for that time, received little

⁴² *Kingston Gazette*, 30 October 1810.

⁴³ *Kingston Gazette*, 13 November 1810.

political discussion. The evidence found in print media and public discourse prior to war, however, suggests that the idea of common schooling was nothing new in the public arena when John Strachan, the most prominent member of the lieutenant governor's inner circle, prepared his educational report to the colonial government in 1815. Evidence from the print media demonstrates that, for their own reasons, both conservatives and reformers in the early years of the nineteenth century were advocating educational expansion. Some advocated the diffusion of common schooling to all classes in Upper Canada as a means toward expanding civic political participation and practical economic opportunities, while others argued for the need to create a common identity and obedience to the colonial government and British constitution. They were doing this well before the threat of war with the United States. Strachan's educational report of 1815, and the subsequent Common School Act of 1816, must be evaluated in the context of the lively public discourse surrounding the idea of common schooling prior to the war.

Indeed, the popular movement for common schooling was a point not lost on Strachan himself, who acknowledged in his 1815 report that "the people have shown among themselves a most laudable zeal in this particular[.]"⁴⁴ We have to take this into consideration when looking at the making of the Common School Act of 1816. A rereading of Strachan's report of 1815 raises certain key questions. What do we make of his insistence that "the people themselves" had shown "a most laudable zeal" for educational expansion? The Common School Act of 1816 has been characterized as a political reaction to the War of 1812, in which animosity felt toward the United States and the desire to ensure that Upper Canadian children be educated within the province, if they were to remain attached to the parent state and British heritage, were central driving forces to enact school legislation.⁴⁵ As Bruce Curtis points out, the Common School Act of 1816 is seen as an early attempt by the colonial elite to secure "centralized regulation of popular elementary education[.]"⁴⁶ Strachan's acknowledgment that "the people" had been pushing for common schooling, however, requires further attention. Common schooling, he suggested, had successfully been promoted in Upper Canada outside of government circles. Can the elite's involvement in 1815, in this sense, be better characterized as a response to popular pressures from within the colony?

⁴⁴Library and Archives Canada (LAC), MG24-J1, John Strachan Fonds, Letterbooks and Miscellaneous papers, "Report on Education," 1815.

⁴⁵See especially the work of J. D. Purdy "John Strachan and Education in Canada, 1800–1851" and J. Donald Wilson, "Foreign and Local Influences on Popular Education in Upper Canada, 1815–1844" cited above.

⁴⁶Bruce Curtis, *Building the Educational State*, 22.

Indeed, we have to rethink the intentions of the political elite in drawing up the Common School Act of 1816. The Common School Act provided a fixed annual grant of £6,000 to each of the ten districts, in which “Inhabitants of any Town, Township, Village or place,” could meet together to create a common school for twenty or more children. Elected trustees were given power to make rules and regulations for the government of the schools, the selection of teachers, and the purchasing of books, while school boards in each district, appointed by the lieutenant governor, would oversee matters and allocate the legislative grant among the common schools of each respective district.⁴⁷

Why did colonial officials grant such a degree of autonomy to the locality in the running of the schools? If the Common School Act of 1816 was intended to secure centralized regulation of popular elementary education, then why was the act democratic? That is, why was control placed in the hands of elected trustees at the local level, without a centralized board of education established until much later in the century? Was the colonial elite in fact indifferent to common schooling? Did they fail to assess its potential popularity?

In addition to the analysis of educational discourse prior to the writing of the 1815 report, official reactions to the popularity of common schooling after the passing of the act can further help contextualize the intentions of colonial leaders in 1816 that an analysis of the act and report alone cannot. After 1816, the idea of common schooling seems to have grown in popularity. Robert Gourlay’s *Statistical Account of Upper Canada* certainly demonstrates that a good number of inhabitants were utilizing the funding for common schools. Gourlay had traveled to Upper Canada in 1817 and quickly made his mark on the political scene with the publication of an open letter “To the Resident Land Owners of Upper-Canada” that appeared in several newspapers of the day. Gourlay, a political agitator from Scotland, drew up his survey with the intention of collecting statistics that could be used to promote emigration to the colony. His survey gave rise to a number of gatherings throughout the province in which inhabitants came together to respond to his queries. From a total of 34,259 inhabitants that responded to his survey, representing about one-third of the total population, the numbers indicate nearly 200 common schools and approximately 3,500 students attending school.⁴⁸ Gourlay’s findings are supported by comparable figures that James Strachan, John’s brother, offered in his

⁴⁷For a complete reproduction of the act, see “An Act Granting to His Majesty a Sum of Money, to be Applied to the use of Common Schools Throughout this Province, and to Provide for the Regulations of Said Common Schools,” in *DHE*, vol. 1, 102.

⁴⁸Robert Gourlay, *Statistical Account of Upper Canada*, 2 vols. (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1822).

visit to Upper Canada in 1819.⁴⁹ Gourlay's report pointed out that common schools were in abundance, and that the Common School Act of 1816 provided a growing number of common schools with government aid, making the idea of sending children to school a reality for a number of inhabitants.

Still, inhabitants complained that what was offered was not enough. While Gourlay claimed that "the spirit of improvement was spreading and the value of education felt," certain inhabitants also reported to Gourlay that most of the schools remained in unsatisfactory conditions. Although "the liberality of the Legislature has been great in support of the District Grammar Schools," the residents of Grimsby reported, the liberality did not extend to the bulk of the people because they were "looked upon as seminaries exclusively instituted for the education of the children of the more wealthy classes of society, and to which the poor man's child is considered as unfit to be admitted."⁵⁰ The evidence from the newspapers shows insistent calls for increased funding to common schools for all classes. Certain inhabitants pointed to neighboring New York State as a model for what was possible in Upper Canada. The state of New York, one inhabitant pointed out in the *Upper Canada Gazette* in 1820, reported that, not including the city and county of New York and the city of Albany, there were 2,621 common and primary schools with 140,106 scholars, and all of this achieved with a modest expense of only \$55,720.⁵¹

While inhabitants might have lamented the slow development of common schooling in Upper Canada, the popularity of the school grants, and the seemingly unforeseen number of requests for government-aided schools, were enough to convince the colonial government that the colony's financial resources could not keep pace with the appetite for school expansion.⁵² So, in 1820, after appeals from Lieutenant Governor Maitland, the colonial legislature took its first official measure in regards to the common schools since 1816 when it approved a bill that would, in effect, curb the growth of the common schools, and, ultimately, dismantle the system.⁵³

Although the executive insisted on scaling back common school funding as a matter of fiscal necessity, it also began plans to put funds toward a different type of mass educational system that it hoped would replace the common schools. Indeed, events in the early 1820s illustrate

⁴⁹James Strachan, *A Visit to the Province of Upper Canada, in 1819* (Aberdeen: D. Chalmers & Co., 1820), 132.

⁵⁰Gourlay, *Statistical Account*, 225.

⁵¹*Upper Canada Gazette*, 13 January 1820.

⁵²*Journals of the House of Assembly*, 21 February 1820, 205–8.

⁵³*Journals of the House of Assembly*, 4, 6, 7 March 1820, 247, 253–4, 261–62.

a desire by the elite to redesign the system of education in Upper Canada. In 1820, John Strachan, without seeking the approval of the House of Assembly, insisted that Lieutenant Governor Maitland send to England for a British National School teacher who could conduct a Lancastrian school. Joseph Spragg was selected, and was appointed to the York Central School, where the common school teacher, Thomas Appleton, was fired. Appleton appealed to the lieutenant governor and his local board of education, but was given no help.⁵⁴ The elected trustees, however, came to Appleton's aid, via a letter to the lieutenant governor, in which they stressed that Appleton enjoyed the confidence of the parents and students, and his "expectations have been increased and strengthened by the great increase of scholars, and the approval of all." They saw no need to dismiss Appleton, and suggested that his call for redress was "too reasonable and just to be disappointed."⁵⁵ Maitland replied through his secretary George Hillier, who informed the trustees that upon the matter of their petition, the lieutenant governor "sees no occasion for any reference to it."⁵⁶ Instead, Maitland transferred control of the common school to a special board of trustees, and renamed the school the "Central School of York." While it was to officially remain a common school, it was by all means a British National School conducted on the Lancastrian system.⁵⁷ Four years after the passing of the Common School Act, it was the executive's first attempt to introduce a British school system, under the sanction of the Church of England.

Why did the executive take this unilateral measure to create a British National School? Did they fear that the elected House of Assembly might resist a Church of England system of instruction in the colony? Did they fear that there was not enough popular support to make the issue a matter of public debate in their favor? Do the efforts on the part of the executive elite to introduce this system without any public debate illustrate fears that the general will of the province was not in line with their own conception of a British colony? And, why did it not take this measure in 1816?

⁵⁴The Assembly took up the matter eight years later in 1828, and it became, as historian J. George Hodgins calls it, a "*cause celebre*," evoking a great deal of feeling, as well as a politico-religious discussion, both acrimonious and bitter, throughout the province. It developed into a prolonged struggle against the alleged attempt to introduce a quasi state-church system into Upper Canada, pitting the public in direct opposition to the ruling executive elite.

⁵⁵"York Trustees to Lieutenant Governor Maitland," 28 August 1820, *DHE*, vol. 1, 175.

⁵⁶"George Hillier to the Trustees of the Common School of the Township of York," 31 August 1820, *DHE*, vol. 1, 176.

⁵⁷*DHE*, vol. 1, 175.

A rereading of the era forces us to rethink the intellectual underpinnings behind the making of the Common School Act of 1816. If the colonial executive wanted to create a British school system after the War of 1812, then why did it not take a more active role in shaping the curriculum and running the schools? The colonial executive, the historical trend in fact indicates, were happy to keep the mass of the population without schools prior to 1816. It granted district grammar schools for the children of the colonial elite in 1807, and only after sufficient pressure from both radicals and conservatives in the public sphere, demanding a common school system, did they acquiesce. Once the “public” request was bequeathed, however, it encouraged that “public” to demand more. At that point, members of the colonial elite took measures to curb the growth of the common school system, as they were not prepared to meet such demands.

If we can draw any conclusions from the historical trend, it is that the colonial executive wanted little to do with the expansion of popular elementary education in 1816. They were quite happy with a hierarchical school system in which the grammar schools were the training ground of the future colonial elite. The 1816 Common School Act was a measure, perhaps it can be best understood a makeshift measure, to appease the demands of “the people.” But the colonial elite underestimated both the magnitude of the Common School Act and the impetus that it would give to common schooling thereafter. The Act had provided the roots of a system that was proving to be expansive and uncontrollable, rather than contained and manageable. Once the colonial elite concluded this, they hastily took measures to create a system of education in line with their own ideas for the colony. These measures, however, never received the popular support required in the colony for their success, and the plans eventually died out. Indeed, most inhabitants were initially unaware of the existence of the British National schools. But when they did become aware of them, after Appleton’s appeals to the House of Assembly finally made headlines in 1828, the colonial elite felt a public backlash that began its demise.⁵⁸

The 1820s were a contentious period of politics in Upper Canada, and education was central to the political debates of the decade. The rise of the radical press in that decade changed the tone of educational debate, and the idea of free, universal schooling began to dominate educational discourse. By the 1830s, both radicals and conservatives were discussing the shape and form of free, universal

⁵⁸The 1830s would witness the rise of reformers in official politics and their increased influence in designing future educational legislation. See Bruce Curtis, *Building the Educational State*, for a review of reform educational initiatives in the 1830s.

schooling.⁵⁹ An analysis of print media and public discourse offers a new lens through which to examine the development of schooling in Upper Canada. It challenges us to rethink the intellectual discourse surrounding the origins of schooling, and, more importantly perhaps, it offers to broaden our understanding of who was involved in that discourse. The example from early Upper Canada suggests that ordinary inhabitants participated in the making of educational legislation in an unofficial capacity that nevertheless influenced the official making of the school system. The making of educational legislation in Upper Canada was a deliberative process in which many inhabitants, both inside and outside of government, participated. It was this deliberative process, rooted in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, that framed the policy debates of the mid-nineteenth century.

⁵⁹For a discussion on the public debates of the 1830s, see R. D. Gidney's classic article, "Upper Canadian Public Opinion and Common School Improvement in the 1830's," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 5, no. 9 (1972): 48–60.