



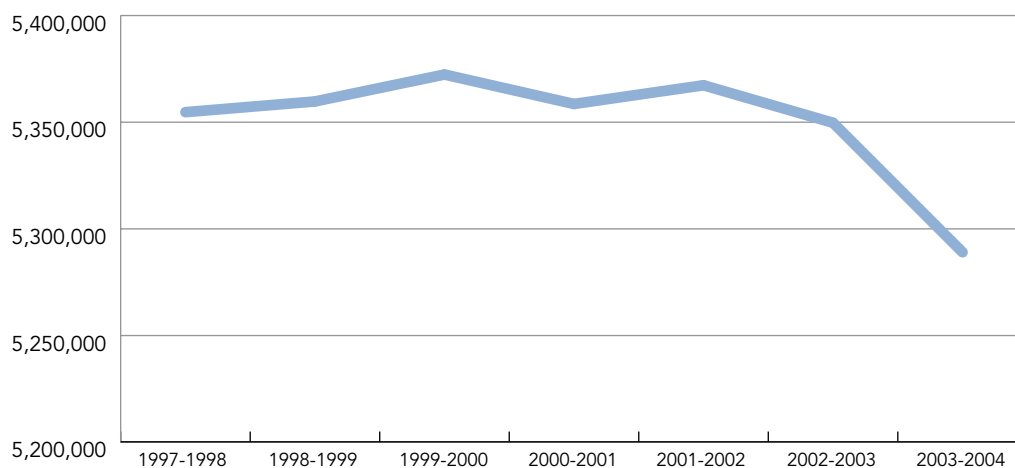
LESSONS IN LEARNING

School enrolment trends
in Canada

September 26, 2006

With the start of a new school year, school officials across Canada will soon be counting students. At the completion of their annual headcount, most will be forced to contend with decreasing student enrolments. According to Statistics Canada's most recent figures, Canada's elementary and secondary school enrolments fell by 1.2% between the 1997–1998 and 2003–2004 school years,¹ and further declines are anticipated over the next few years as the school-aged population shrinks.²

Figure 1:
Enrolment Trends within Canada



Source: Statistics Canada - Summary Public School Indicators for the Provinces and Territories, 1997–1998 to 2003–2004

Canada-wide data mask substantial interprovincial variation in the pattern and extent of change. Most provinces have experienced a steady reduction in kindergarten to Grade 12 enrolments over the last few years, but there are notable exceptions to this pattern. Ontario saw enrolment growth through the late 1990s and up until the 2002–2003 school year. Enrolment dropped sharply when Ontario's Grade 13 was eliminated and has subsequently levelled off. In Alberta, enrolment growth began to slow around the 2000–2001 school year, but so far there have been no real declines. In Quebec, there were steady declines during the late 1990s, followed by a more recent levelling off.

Newfoundland & Labrador has experienced sharper decreases in enrolment than any other province. Between 1997–1998 and 2003–2004, Newfoundland saw a 20% drop in enrolment. Over the same period, Alberta and Ontario saw slight increases in their kindergarten to Grade 12 enrolments and the remaining provinces saw decreases ranging from 1.5% to 9.6%. Newfoundland's trend points persistently downward. There has been another 6% drop over the past two years, and the projection over the next 10 years is for a further 24% decrease in K–12 enrolments.

Enrolment patterns within provinces can be markedly different from one school board to another. For example, Nova Scotia's Strait Regional School Board has seen a 14% drop in enrolments over the last five years. Over the same period, the Halifax Regional School Board saw only a 5% drop and the conseil scolaire Acadien provincial, the French-language school board, saw a 3% increase.³ In Alberta, the Peace River School Division experienced a 19% drop in kindergarten to Grade 12 enrolments between the 1995–1996 and 2005–2006 school years. Over the same period, the Lethbridge School District saw a 2% drop and the Calgary Roman Catholic School District saw a 17% increase.⁴

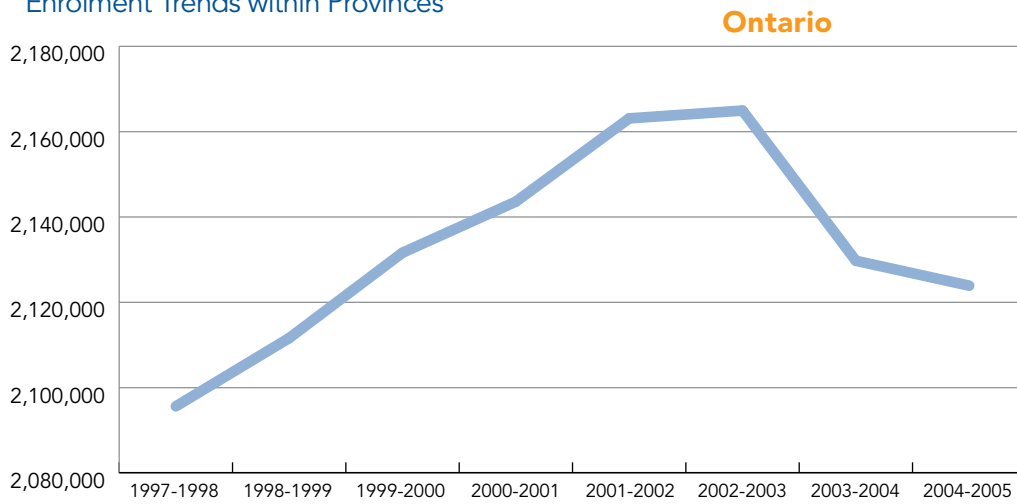
The enrolment trends reported here are based solely on public school enrolments. While private school enrolments have been increasing in recent years—for example, British Columbia has seen a 10% increase in private school enrolments over the last five years—this trend cannot account for declining enrolments in the public system. For example, in British Columbia between 2001–2002 and 2005–2006 public school enrolments fell by approximately 24,000 students. Over the same period, private school enrolments increased by only 6,200 students.

The steepest declines tend to occur in small, rural and remote school districts. For example, in British Columbia, ten school districts have seen their enrolments fall by at least 15% since the 2001–2002 school year. Seven of those rapidly shrinking districts also fall among the 10 districts with the smallest numbers of students in the province—all of which are located in rural areas.

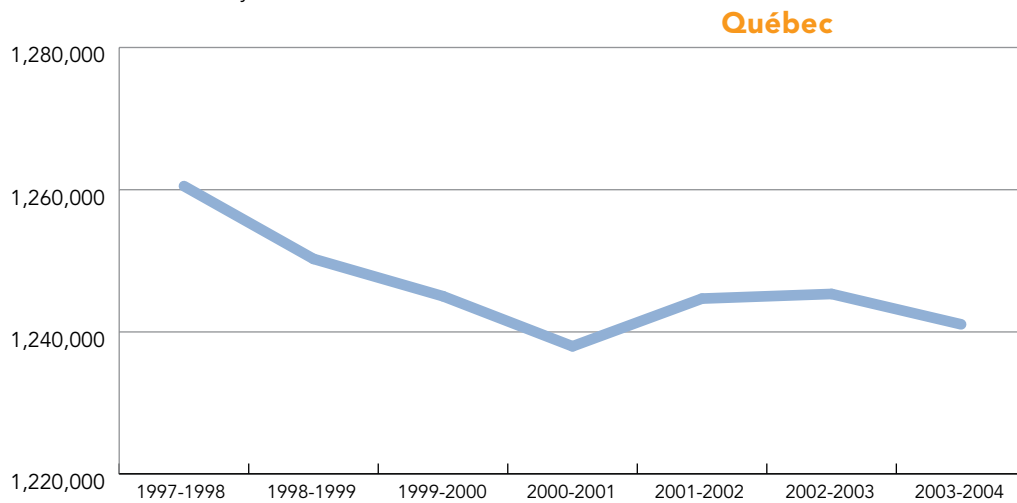
Fluctuations in enrolment numbers are partly the result of international and interprovincial migration patterns. Ontario saw continued enrolment growth while other provinces were experiencing decline because a large proportion (over 50% every year since 1986) of Canada's immigrants choose to settle in Ontario. Although relatively few international migrants settle in Alberta, Alberta's enrolment growth has been sustained by interprovincial migration. Alberta consistently registers the largest interprovincial migration gains of all the provinces, averaging a net gain of over 20,000 migrants every year since 1996. Newfoundland & Labrador's declining enrolments largely result from the flip side of interprovincial migration. Newfoundland & Labrador has consistently experienced the largest per capita out-migration losses of all the provinces, averaging a net loss of 4,800 migrants every year since 1996.⁵

While migration patterns influence local trends in enrolment, the overall Canada-wide decline in enrolments is the result of demographic changes. In particular, the last of the echo boomers (the large cohort of children born to the baby boomers between 1980 and 1994) are currently making their way through their final years in the kindergarten to Grade 12 system. The children taking their places are part of a much smaller cohort. The fact that there simply are not as many school aged children in Canada as there were just a few years ago presents both challenges and opportunities for Canada's elementary and secondary schools.

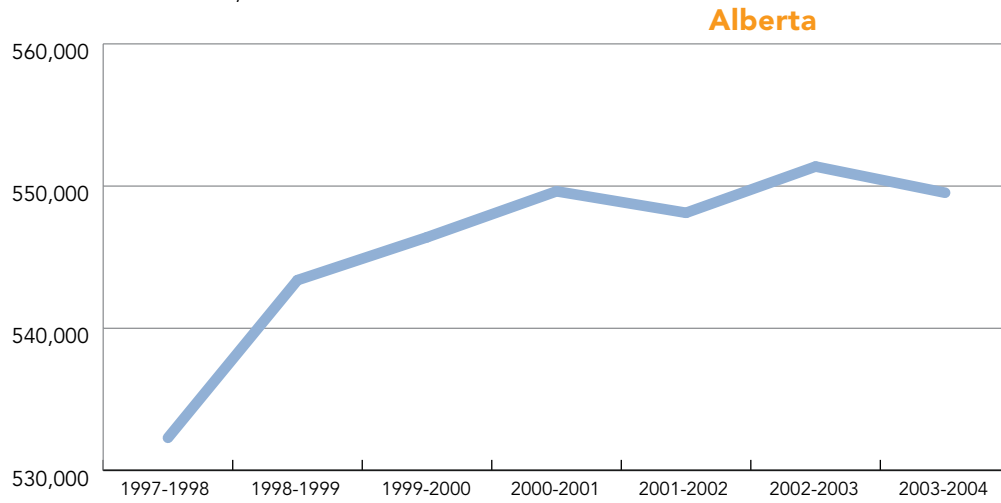
Figure 2:
Enrolment Trends within Provinces



Source: Ontario Ministry of Education



Source: Statistics Canada - Summary Public School Indicators for the Provinces and Territories, 1997-1998 to 2003-2004



Source: Ontario Ministry of Education

The challenge of declining enrolments

The potential challenges of declining enrolments are clear: when the baby boomers (the large cohort of post-war children born between 1947 and 1966) left the kindergarten to Grade 12 system during the 1970s and 1980s, they left steeply declining enrolments in their wake that resulted in large numbers of school closures, teacher layoffs, hiring freezes, and service reductions.^{6,7} Can we expect the same during the current episode of declining enrolments?

There is some evidence that school closures are occurring in increasing numbers. According to data compiled by People for Education, the rate of school closures in Ontario has effectively doubled in recent years. Between 1986 and 1995, an average of 24 schools were closed every year. Between 1999 and 2005, that figure rose to 52 schools per year.⁸ However, the current episode of declining enrolments is occurring under conditions different from the post-boomer retrenchment of the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, the particular challenges posed by declining enrolment are somewhat different this time around.

Schools are encountering three types of challenges as a result of declining enrolments: funding, program delivery, and staffing.

Funding. As headcounts decrease, per-student costs increase. Although funding formulas differ across the provinces, kindergarten to Grade 12 funding is typically allocated on a dollars-per-student basis. When fewer students enrol, schools receive less funding but they do not incur proportionately lower costs. Rideout and his colleagues⁹ calculated that the cost of running a school with fewer than 100 students is 29% higher on a per student basis than the cost of running a school with more than 300 students. This often occurs because school boards are unable to reduce their costs in proportion to the decline in student numbers. For example, the cost of heating and lighting a school with fewer students remains the same as it was when there were more students. Instructional and administrative costs can also remain constant or even increase in the face of declining enrolment because the reductions in student numbers may not be sufficient to justify cancelling classes or eliminating the need for administrative or support staff.

Statistics Canada reports that between the 1997–1998 and 2003–2004 school years, per-student expenditures across Canada increased by 24% while inflation increased by 14%.¹⁰ Thus, for schools with moderately declining enrolments, increased per student costs will be at least partially alleviated by increased per student funding. However, for schools with rapidly-falling numbers, rising per student costs are more severe and present additional challenges.

Program delivery. As noted above, schools with the most rapidly declining enrolments tend to be in rural districts that have small student populations to begin with. For these small rural schools, prohibitive per-student costs can interfere with the delivery of a broad range of courses and programs. When student numbers decline, there are often too few students to justify the expense of offering courses with low enrolments. Furthermore, small schools typically cannot afford to employ enough specialist teachers to offer the same range of courses offered by larger schools.

Staffing. Unlike the post-boomer period of retrenchment when teacher layoffs were a serious concern, the current episode of declining enrolments is contributing to teacher shortages for many schools, particularly small rural schools. Because of the small numbers of students in these schools, teachers are burdened with particularly heavy workloads, teaching several different subjects (many of which are outside of their teaching specialties) and often contending with classrooms split between two or more grade levels. These small schools also offer fewer opportunities for professional development and for mentoring from senior staff, making it more challenging to recruit and retain teachers. Declining enrolments can exacerbate the challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers in small rural schools.

The opportunities presented by declining enrolments

In addition to the challenges outlined above, declining enrolments can also present opportunities. A smaller number of students can be an opportunity in and of itself, and can also stimulate the development of innovative solutions.

Advantages of smaller numbers. In recent years, teachers and parents have been calling for smaller class sizes. Across Canada, governments and politicians have responded with commitments and promises to hire extra teachers in order to reduce class sizes. Class sizes naturally grow smaller when enrolment declines. As long as schools receive funding to cover their increased per student costs, declining enrolments can provide an opportunity to move toward smaller class sizes. Lower enrolment numbers may also alleviate some of the pressure of the anticipated teacher shortages when large numbers of teachers from the baby boom generation start moving into retirement.

Opportunities for innovation. School boards have typically sought to augment the resources received from provincial governments by such means as renting facilities and offering educational programs to adults for which they pay fees. More recently, school boards seeking to increase resources have recruited fee-paying international students whose parents seek the high quality of education provided by Canada’s public schools. International tuition fees exceed the value of the per-student grants that schools receive for each domestic student. These fees therefore subsidize a portion of the cost of program delivery and can alleviate some of the financial pressures imposed by declining enrolments.

Table 1:
British Columbia school districts with the most rapidly falling enrolments

District	% Decline in Enrolment	Provincial rank order by number of students
Vancouver Island North	28	10
Vancouver Island West	18	3
Coast Mountain	18	31
Arrow Lakes	17	5
Haida Gwaii-Queen Charlotte	17	5
Prince Rupert	16	16
Central Coast	16	2
Revelstoke	15	8
Stikine	15	1
Cariboo-Chilcotin	15	35

In some areas, particularly the larger urban areas in British Columbia, international student fees generate considerable amounts of revenue. Based on their analysis of district audited financial statements, the British Columbia Teachers Federation reports that the annual province-wide revenue generated by international student fees has grown four-fold in less than ten years and is estimated at \$100 million for the 2004–2005 school year.¹¹ The BC Progress Board has noted that “the development of the international education sector has considerable potential to assist in the general economic development of the province” and that “enhancing efforts to market, promote and sell our education services abroad will further increase the international profile of the province.”¹²

Recent Provincial Announcements Concerning Class Size:

- In British Columbia, the government committed to hiring 875 additional staff in order to reduce class sizes.
- In Ontario, a real cap of 20 or fewer students per class has been introduced for Kindergarten through Grade 3.
- As part of their Class Size Initiative, Alberta committed \$220 million to reduce class sizes.
- In New Brunswick, the Conservative government recently made an election promise to hire an additional 500 teachers in order to reduce class sizes by 4 students in all grades over four years.

While collecting international student fees is clearly a lucrative method of dealing with declining enrolments, some caution in pursuing this approach is warranted. Because some districts are well positioned to attract international students (e.g., those in large urban areas) while others are not (e.g., those in remote rural areas), this approach can create inequalities within the kindergarten to Grade 12 system that run counter to the egalitarian goals of public education. In addition, schools that grow dependent on international student fees face sudden budgetary complications when there are unexpected swings in international student enrolments.

On the other side of the country, Newfoundland & Labrador has developed its own innovative approaches to solving the staffing and program delivery problems posed by declining enrolments. Faced with persistent and sharp declines in enrolment, Newfoundland & Labrador has been forced to contend with the challenges of declining enrolment to a much greater extent than any of the other provinces. As the other provinces begin more belatedly to experience similar challenges, the solutions developed in Newfoundland & Labrador can provide valuable insights.

The Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation in Newfoundland & Labrador allows students in every corner of the province to share virtual classrooms and take courses that their small schools would be individually incapable of offering. Their e-teachers provide instruction via e-mail, videoconferencing, Internet, fax, and conference forums. Students also receive face-to-face assistance from mediating teams and from senior students through the Tutoring for Tuition program. These tutors assist other students with any e-learning difficulties they may encounter and receive post-secondary tuition vouchers in return. E-delivery

of programs allows 90 schools throughout the province to offer 27 high-school courses that they would otherwise be unable to offer on a regular basis.

The province has also adopted a number of strategies to assist small rural schools in recruiting teachers. For example, student teachers who have university degrees in specialty areas and are willing to work in remote areas can be issued interim teaching licences before they complete their teacher preparation. In addition, there are financial incentives for student teachers who are willing to undertake their internships in rural schools and for teachers who are willing to work in these schools. Student teachers who specialize in high-demand disciplines can also participate in paid co-op experiences in rural and remote schools. As well, retired teachers can resume teaching while still collecting their pensions if they are willing to teach in remote areas.¹³

These innovative approaches have allowed Newfoundland and Labrador to maintain a quality educational system even while sustaining a 50% drop in kindergarten to Grade 12 enrolments within a 20-year period.

The challenges posed by declining enrolments are clearly daunting. Given that enrolments in many jurisdictions are unlikely to increase in the short run, it seems inevitable that Canada's elementary and secondary schools must be prepared to embrace opportunities for innovation that declining enrolments present.

References

- ¹ Blouin, P., Courchesne, M.-J. & Thony, I. (2006). Summary Public School Indicators for the Provinces and Territories, 1997–1998 to 2003–2004. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 81-595-MIE2006044.
- ² Population Projections for Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2005-2031. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 91-520-XIE00105.
- ³ Source: data provided by the Nova Scotia Ministry of Education.
- ⁴ Source: Alberta Ministry of Education website.
- ⁵ Report on the Demographic Situation in Canada 2003 and 2004. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 91-209-XIE2003000.
- ⁶ Burstall, C. (1980). Falling rolls: A Canadian response. *Educational Research*, 23(1), 3-13.
- ⁷ Crespo, M. & Haché, J. (1982). The management of decline in education: The case of Quebec. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 18(1), 75-99.
- ⁸ Annual Review of Ontario Schools Closing and Opening – 2005. People for Education.
- ⁹ Rideout, E.B., Murray, J., Sylvester, C., Harris, M. & Shanahan, L. (1977). Educational, social, and financial implications to school boards of declining enrolments. Report to the Ontario Ministry of Education.
- ¹⁰ Blouin, P., Courchesne, M.-J. & Thony, I. (2006). Summary Public School Indicators for the Provinces and Territories, 1997–1998 to 2003–2004. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 81-595-MIE2006044.
- ¹¹ BCTF Annual Report on Privatization and Commercialization of Education.
- ¹² The Role of International Education: Expanding Student Opportunity and Economic Development in British Columbia. BC Progress Board Discussion Paper.
- ¹³ Press, H., Galway, G. & Collins, A. (2003). Maintaining quality programming in rural Newfoundland and Labrador: A case study in policy and structural change. *Education Canada*, 43(3), 20.

