

*Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation*  
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Jennifer Wallner  
*Learning to School: Federalism and Public  
Schooling in Canada*

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Unlike many federations, Canada's education system is highly decentralized, with the constitution granting exclusive jurisdiction over education to the provinces, authority which has been fiercely defended. In 1976, a report of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development found wide inconsistencies and a lack of national goals and standards across Canada's provincial education systems. Yet by the 2010s, there was remarkable consistency across these systems in their structures, funding mechanisms, class sizes, and high outcomes on international tests. In *Learning to School*, political scientist Jennifer Wallner sets out to determine how the provinces managed to establish this overarching system of education. She reconsiders the processes that are traditionally believed to underpin the formulation of policy frameworks in federations. Central to her thesis is a challenge to the assumption that a consistent approach requires the intervention of a central authority with the power to compel action by sub-state governments. The book aims to demonstrate that a coherent and consistent provincial policy framework in Canada need not be the result of coercion or competition. Rather, it can be the outcome of cooperation and mutual learning, via the sharing of ideas through collaborative institutions and policy networks.

Wallner aims to determine what factors enable the diffusion of certain policies. She attempts to advance the "second movement" in institutionalist analysis, drawing on three different strains of institutionalist theory (methodological, sociological and historical). Moreover, she claims to be adding an "ideational turn" to the study of federalism by showing that ideas matter and can spread across policy networks, influencing the actors working within them. She states that her approach has "crafted a new analytical architecture for understanding the alternative dynamics of policy

framework formulation in federations ... treating policy actors as important agents who are nested in temporally and structurally bound contexts, simultaneously motivated by the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness, and influenced by ideas, norms and values" (256) in order to "demonstrate that context and timing matter in the dynamics of policy making in federations" (255). While one tries to tread carefully when reviewing work from another discipline, it is nevertheless somewhat aggravating to see a political scientist present the idea that timing and context matter as being innovative, rather than as standard historical practice.

*Learning to School* seems to be attempting to use lessons from history to prove its argument, with varying degrees of success. Wallner breaks down the main empirical sections of her analysis into four periods covering 1840 to 2007, which correspond to the "Founding and Consolidating," "Universalizing," "Individualizing," and "Standardizing" phases of provincial schooling policies. Focusing on elementary and secondary education, she traces the development of common provincial policies and convergence in governance structures and ministerial control, funding, curriculum, and teacher training. In each sector, she is able to identify common frameworks and structures in most provinces—although not all, and she ably qualifies why local contexts led to exceptions to these patterns. She also names some key mechanisms for "ideational" transmission and sharing of ideas and policies, including interprovincial bodies (such as the Canada and Newfoundland Education Association and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada) and provincial royal commissions on education. While noting that there have been cases when the federal government attempted to shape provincial policies (including post-war funding for vocational secondary schools), Wallner argues that this did not amount to compulsion, and that the provinces ultimately followed their own pathways. She argues that the non-compulsory nature of the post-war equalization payments system was key to provincial flexibility to meet their goals. The broad chronological approach is a strength of her work, and Wallner identifies a number of mechanisms that allowed ideas about educational change, reform, and policy to be shared between the provinces.

It is regrettable that Wallner did not engage further with either the relevant literature on the history of public policy in Canada, or more of history's methodological approaches. Although I agree that federal compulsion has not been the main reason for policy convergence, she understates its importance. For instance, as Dominique Marshall's work has shown, the linkage between federal family allowances and school attendance played a significant role, particularly in Quebec, in compelling longer-term school attendance. On the issue of minority language education, as my work demonstrates, while the *Charter* did lead to new school governance policies (which Wallner acknowledges), the federal role in language education extends back to 1970, when its Official Languages in Education Program funding mechanisms played a major role in convincing every province to create and expand minority (and second) language education programs. Indeed, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) played a long-running and ongoing role in negotiating this program with Ottawa. This relates to another weakness of the book. While Wallner identifies interprovincial organizations that promoted policy diffusion, she never really examines

how these organizations worked, what their structures were, how often they met, what they discussed, and what authority (if any) they had. The CMEC, for example, has substantial archival material held by provincial archives. It would have been useful to examine *how* this Council served as a vehicle for sharing ideas and policies. Overall, one is left wishing that Wallner had engaged more with the specifics of how policies and ideas were shared between provinces, and spent less time demonstrating her disciplinary bona fides with the dense theoretical jargon of the first four chapters. There is a tendency to over-theorize, over-explain, and over-emphasize the originality of key concepts, which presumably are artifacts of the dissertation upon which this book is based. At times, these elements detract from the genuinely important contributions that *Learning to School* makes to our understanding of Canadian federalism and to the history of education policies. Fortunately, Wallner points to important directions for scholars to explore, and hopefully is alerting readers to the value of historical perspectives on federalism and public policy.