

Webster's Dictionary (2003) defines education as "the act or process of being educated." However, when we speak of education, we are often referring to the formal education that takes place in our schools. Elementary and Secondary education in Canada is, for the most part, provided publicly, funded and overseen by the government. In Canada, the responsibility of Education falls to our provincial governments, as laid out in Section 92 of the *Canada Act*. As such, each province has its own specific Ministry of Education. In Ontario, the Ontario Ministry of Education "administers the system of publicly funded elementary and secondary school education in Ontario. This means that they direct government policy, funding, curriculum planning and direction in all levels of public education (Ontario Ministry of Education). The history of Education in Ontario actually predates Confederation, beginning in the colony of Upper Canada. Although there have been many changes and updates, the current education system in Ontario still bears some resemblance to the system of early days. Despite the consistency in some aspects, in other ways, the regulations, policies, curriculum and other legal aspects of education continue to change, in an attempt to adapt to modern Canadian society and the needs of our youth. By focusing on only a few aspects of Education in Ontario, we can see many of the ways it has changed, and continues to change.

Early education Edgerton Ryerson, who was the Superintendent of Education for Upper Canada, starting in 1844 (Richter, 2006). Ryerson realized the need for a common education for the masses; he famously explained that education "is as necessary as light; it should be common as water, and as free as air" (Richter, 2006). It was this philosophy that led to the creation of the *Common School Act* of 1846 (Richter, 2006). Shortly after Canada became a country, the Ontario Ministry of Education was formed, with Ryerson still at its head (Dictionary of Canadian Biography). Things changed in 1877 when Adam Crooks became the first Ontario Minister of

Education. This signalled a significant shift, as now the minister of education directly responsible to the legislature (Dictionary of Canadian Biography). This meant that the provincial government now had a more direct relationship with the policy, funding, and curriculum planning in Ontario schools. Although the specifics were not fully codified, the structure in these early years would form the foundation of the Education Act. *The Education Act* is the main piece of legislation, or “statute”, governing public education in Ontario. This legislation provides authority for the creation of all of the main features of the education system. The Education Act sets in law the powers and responsibilities of the Minister of Education and School Boards, the authority of principals and teachers, and the rights and responsibilities of parents and students (Education Law and Policy). Despite the obvious similarities in the structure and function of the Ministry of Education, social changes have resulted in changes in the way education is conducted and administered in Ontario.

In the 1980s, there was an increased awareness of the needs of some pupils to have access to special education services, in order to have their learning needs met. In 1980, an act to amend the *Education Act*, known as Bill 82, was passed, which outlined that exceptional pupils receive special education programs and services (Weber, 2004). Before this exceptional pupils, pupils are those students “whose behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special education program” (Education Act). Another shift in education occurred throughout the 1980s, with the increase demand for accountability. This lead the Ministry to further formalize its standardized curriculum and implement standardized testing. As Dr. Lorna Earl (1995) explained, these tests started to immerge in the early 1990s. Education has also had to adapt to the changing nature of Ontario, as it becomes a more multi-cultural province. This has lead to the development of

strategies to diversify instructions to meet the needs of the diverse classroom (Earl, 1995). All of these changes throughout the 1980s and 1990s have lead to the current educational system in Ontario.

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