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## What Were the Top Ten Education Events of the 2000s?

January 6, 2010 by [Paul W. Bennett](#)

The initial post-mortems on the “Oh-Ohs” have now appeared. Celebrity couples, rogues, fraudsters, technology, pop culture, and even the new lexicon dominated those conventional end-of-decade features. Yet curiously absent from such rather cheeky appraisals was any direct mention of the world of education, one inhabited by millions of Canadian families.

Although the state of education consistently ranks high in opinion polls on Canadians’ list of public concerns, especially among the young adult (19 to 35) age group, it still flies largely below the radar screen. Personal and family concerns, it seems, do not always find their way onto the public agenda.

A major reason for this scant national attention is, as pollster Nik Nanos recently pointed out, the fact that education in Canada remains the preserve of the provinces. And it’s not easy to take the pulse of a system spread over 10 provinces with some 5 million students, 375 different school boards and about 15,000 schools.

Throwing caution to the wind, here are my choices for the top ten “tipping-point” events over the past ten years, in no particular order:

- **Advent of Google and Wikipedia**

**Google** provided finger-tip access to all types of information and online “Open Source” resources like *Wikipedia* replaced library encyclopedias and revolutionized the whole concept of student research.

- **9/11 and School Security**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 brought the “War on Terrorism” home and the schools responded with stricter security policies, entrance door buzzers, and cameras – and parents armed their children with cellphones, citing personal security concerns.

- **Public Acceptance of School Rankings**

Public education authorities gave ground in the ongoing struggle over standardized student testing and the ranking of schools, responding to the Provincial Report Cards, initiated by the Vancouver-based Fraser Institute and extended, in 2003, by the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) ranking all public high schools in Atlantic Canada.

- **The Harry Potter Phenomenon**

Schoolchildren were captivated by J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter seven-book series, culminating with *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007) and the series may not only have created a new generation of readers, but given the printed word a second chance with our children.

- **The SMART Board Craze**

Schools and school districts experimented with “one-to-one” laptop systems, pioneered in New England , Ontario’s Peel Region Board, and ritzy private schools, but, with the introduction of SMART Boards in the early 2000s, many more jumped on the latest bandwagon, attracted by the snazzy “interactive whiteboard” technology and the much more affordable one-per-classroom model.

- **Addiction to Social Networking**

The 2000s saw the emergence of “digital teens” armed with smartphones and living a so-called “online adolescence,” best exemplified by a virtual addiction to sites like *Facebook*, which enjoyed its highest penetration rates in Canadian cities like Toronto.

- **The Opening of Toronto’s Africentric School**

Less than two years after a fierce public debate, the Toronto District School Board opened Canada’s first Africentric Alternative School in September 2009, aimed at reducing the alarming 40 per cent dropout rate among black students and modelled after earlier projects in the United States and North Preston, NS.

- **The Revival of All-Boys Schools**

Single sex boys’ education was long considered quite unusual (and limited to a group of traditional Canadian private schools supported by a small worldwide Boys’ Schools Coalition), but in late October 2009, Toronto District School Board director Chris Spence unveiled a proposal for the first all-boy school in Canada’s elementary public school system.

- **The Homework Backlash**

Piling on the homework became more popular in the 1990s and educational progressives, sparked by Alfie Kohn’s *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (1999) and an influential 2008 OISE/Toronto research report, convinced many school boards to back off on homework demands, particularly in the early grades.

- **The Spectre of School Closures**

The most recent wave of school closures was the hottest local education issue, spawning major province-wide “Save our Schools” resistance movements in Ontario, British Columbia, and English Quebec and provoking intense local skirmishes in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Vancouver, Halifax, and Bass River, NS.

Education remains too often an afterthought in the mainstream media. Even though a 2007 Canadian Education Association survey reported that Canadian’s level of confidence in education had fallen dramatically since 1994, that alarm bell has gone largely unheeded. *The Globe and Mail’s* decade review provided yet another classic example of this blindspot. Although revered by a whole generation of Canadian kids and their parents, the September 2001 passing of CBC-TV’s Mr. Dressup, Ernie Coombs, received no mention whatsoever.

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