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Summary

- Ontario's government schools have problems that are similar to those in the former Soviet Union.
- In both cases, the problems stem from the centrally-planned nature of the systems.
- The solution is to make schools more competitive, autonomous, and accessible.
- Central planning didn't work in Russia, and it doesn't work in education systems either.

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Quick Study

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The People's Schools of Ontario

by Malkin Dare

Twenty years ago when Moscow citizen Vasya Pupkin went to shop at the people's #7 department store, he was always disappointed by the shoddy goods and poor service. Vasya's complaints to staff and management fell on deaf ears however, and there was nothing else he could do. There was no point in going to a member of the local politburo, since few of them had any idea what the people's stores were really like. Most politicians shopped at special department stores off-limits to the masses. In any case, no one could have done anything for Vasya no matter how motivated, because the centrally-planned nature of the Soviet government made problems inevitable.

When Vasya moved to Ontario, his children were assigned to government-run schools with many of the same problems as the people's #7 department store. Vasya's complaints to teachers and principals fell on deaf ears however, and there was nothing else he could do. There was no point in going to the local school board, since few of them had any idea what the people's schools were like. Most education leaders either arrange to get their children into special programs or else send them to private schools. In any case, no one could have done anything for Vasya no matter how motivated, because the centrally-planned nature of the Ontario education system made problems inevitable.

It should not come as a surprise that the people's schools of Ontario have the same kinds of problems as Soviet government-run department stores. In fact, problems of this kind are the norm with central planning. In Ontario, the average school board is heroically struggling to micromanage dozens of schools. It's like an Ontario Ministry of Breakdown Services that is responsible for everyone's car troubles. Although their line would usually be busy, your call would be important to them, and of course you might have to wait a very long time for the tow-truck.

Clearly, there is no way for central planners to provide good service to every car driver in Ontario. The sheer volume of problems, coupled with the uniqueness of each situation, points to the desirability of small, local operators who can turn on a dime. Instead of creating a ministry of breakdown services, we should employ the CAA. However, instead of the Canadian Automobile Association, for school problems we should use Competition, Autonomy, and Accessibility.

Competition is needed because it provides the motivation to improve. At present in Ontario, government-run schools have a guaranteed supply of students (and the associated funding). It doesn't matter whether a school is doing a good job or a poor job – all schools receive the same amount of funding regardless of service. Even schools that are doing a horrible job can and do continue to fail their students indefinitely. They can do this because they have a monopoly. But things change dramatically when competition is introduced. Other countries, like Holland and Sweden, have more school competition than Ontario, and their students do better.

Autonomy is needed because it gives educators the freedom they need to improve their service. At present, the principals in Ontario's government schools have their hands tied by a lack of meaningful authority. For example, principals are not able to hire and fire their staff or set salaries. Head office decides all major policies on behalf of every school, and compliance is closely monitored. As a result, centrally-controlled schools are buried under a mountain of red tape, limiting their effectiveness. When educators are freed from this crushing regulatory burden, improvement becomes easier.

Accessibility is needed because it increases the probability of parents finding a school that matches their children's needs. As usual with centrally-planned systems, Ontario's government schools offer a uniform service which is an excellent fit for some children. However, one size does not fit all, and some children are not well-suited to the type of education provided by government schools. Ontario's two-tier education system means that only higher-income parents are in a position to choose schools other than the one assigned by the school board. This is clearly unfair to the parents without additional options. Tuition tax credits or school vouchers would allow all children to access more suitable schools if necessary, maximizing learning and putting pressure on the system to improve.

Of all the Canadian provinces, Alberta has the strongest CAA. Not coincidentally, Alberta students outperform the rest of Canada by a wide margin, as shown by dozens of tests of student achievement. It didn't take Vasya Pupkin long to realize he had made a big mistake in choosing Ontario. After a year of huge frustration with Ontario's government schools, Vasya pulled up stakes again and moved his family to Alberta – where his children are now thriving in the excellent schools chosen by the Pupkin family. So our story has a happy ending for the Pupkins – although not for the children still trapped in the people's schools of Ontario.

Although Vasya Pupkin is imaginary (the Russian equivalent of John Doe), he does illustrate an important point. Central planning didn't work in Russia, and it doesn't work in education systems either.