

News

Schools failing to teach Canadian history: Students don't know meaning of D-Day

Richard Foot

CanWest News Service

766 words

11 November 2005

National Post

All but Toronto

A3

English

(c) 2005 National Post . All Rights Reserved.

Canadian students are finishing high school without a basic understanding of their country's history, and schools are ignoring the subject in favour of a new fixation with math and science, the Dominion Institute says.

The private, Toronto-based advocacy group says provincial governments could help solve the problem by making Canadian history a mandatory requirement of high school graduation.

The institute's annual Remembrance Day poll -- a national survey conducted last month of more than 1,000 Canadians -- suggests the public would go even further. Eighty per cent of those surveyed said high schools should impose compulsory courses in 20th-century Canadian history, including a study of the First and Second World Wars.

Currently only three provinces require high school students to study some Canadian history.

"Incredible as it seems, there are provinces where you can go through school and not be required to take a single course in Canadian history," says Rudyard Griffiths, executive director of the institute.

"I think it's having a pernicious effect on Canadians' knowledge of history. For one thing, we have high school graduates not being able to associate D-Day with the invasion of Normandy. That begs the question, are we living up to our solemn pledge not to forget our veterans?"

In Manitoba, Grade 11 students must take a general history course that includes a 20th-century Canadian component. Ontario has a compulsory Grade 10 Canadian history course that includes some study of the two world wars, and Quebec has a mandatory Grade 11 course focused on the history of Quebec.

In all other provinces, Canadian history is either optional in high school, or included piecemeal in broader social studies programs.

Mr. Griffiths says two recent trends in education are partly to blame for the sidelining of Canadian history.

School systems have become far more focused on "employability" -- giving students skills that can lead to jobs -- which has meant a heavy focus on math and science at the expense of subjects like history, he says.

Another new educational trend is the wrapping of history into more general courses on social studies, which include myriad other topics from civics to geography.

And in Ontario, where Canadian history is compulsory in Grade 10, the curriculum covers a large period -- from 1900 to the present.

According to the Dominion Institute's past surveys, a majority of Canadians don't realize that Remembrance Day, Nov. 11., marks the anniversary of the end of the First World War.

Only 50% of those surveyed last month said they planned to attend a Remembrance Day ceremony today, down from 58% in 2001. Planned attendance is highest in Atlantic Canada (68%) and lowest in Quebec (34%), according to the current survey.

The institute's survey of 1,041 Canadians, conducted last month by the **Innovative** Research Group, is considered accurate within 3.1 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

"A lot of teachers have a hard time teaching that whole course, because it covers so much ground," says Greg Pearson, a teacher in Mississauga, Ont., and an executive member of the Ontario History and Social Sciences Teachers Association.

"The subject is extremely important, it's integral to understanding what's happening in the world today. For many kids leaving high school, that one Grade 10 course is the last Canadian history they get -- they just don't have the background they need about this country."

Mr. Griffiths says a majority of Canadians have never heard of some of the country's most significant historical moments.

According to the Dominion Institute's past surveys, a majority of Canadians don't realize that Remembrance Day, Nov. 11., marks the anniversary of the end of the First World War.

Only 50% of those surveyed last month said they planned to attend a Remembrance Day ceremony today, down from 58% in 2001. Planned attendance is highest in Atlantic Canada (68%) and lowest in Quebec (34%), according to the current survey.

Twenty-four per cent of people surveyed said they couldn't attend a ceremony this year because they had to work. That, says Mr. Griffiths, shows why the federal government should declare Remembrance Day a national statutory holiday, through an act of Parliament.

Currently, Remembrance Day is not recognized as a statutory holiday in Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Newfoundland.

The institute's survey of 1,041 Canadians, conducted last month by the **Innovative** Research Group, is considered accurate within 3.1 percentage points 19 times out of 20.