

# The Gem The Gem The Gem

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## Could Our Schools Make The Grade?

For two months or so I've been staring, from time to time, at a sentence uttered by Brian Mulroney in his speech on education in September. "I want to see," he said, "Canadian educational standards that match those of our toughest competitors." Why did the prime minister make a statement that anyone acquainted with the subject knew was absolutely outlandish? Perhaps Mulroney would indeed like to see our standards in math, languages, physics, etc. match those of competitors such as West Germany, Japan, and France. Who wouldn't? We'd also like to win more gold medals than anyone else at the Olympics, and create a wine industry that would put France's out of business. But Mulroney will never see either of those accomplishments. Nor will he see Canadian educational standards come anywhere near those of our toughest competitors. On the basis of our performance to date, it seems likelier that Mulroney will see our competitors pull farther away from us, indefinitely.

This is not to condemn our education system. The system has many fine qualities, like the society it reflects. Many teachers do valuable work. But Mulroney was talking about standards – and standards, in education, are what we lack.

We and the Americans (whose

educational ideology we have copied) don't believe in worrying about standards. If we did we would have uniform exams, administered across provinces and

across the country. That way, if small-town Quebec students were writing French less well than big-city students, or if Ontario students were falling behind Al-

berta students in math everyone would know about it and try to get it fixed. Similarly, we would regularly compare Canadian education with that of other countries. This is the way Japan, West Germany, etc..., manage things. This is what "standards" means.

We can't do that, largely because we believe that rigorous testing is emotionally unhealthy. Benjamin Spock, who hasn't yet done enough harm and is still at it, put the case clearly in October: "Parents should avoid comparisons between ... their children and others. To diminish the competitive atmosphere in schools I believe grades and examinations should be dropped. They mainly test docility and memory anyway."

Spock literally believes that encouraging rivalry for good grades is unwise on exactly the same grounds that encouraging sibling rivalry is unwise. This is nonsense, and has proven to be dangerous nonsense. Spock doesn't care to know that everyone's life is necessarily competitive in many ways – perhaps he even thinks there can be more than one pediatrician billed as "America's most trusted doctor." Worse, he classes memory with docility. Surely a good educational system trains memory, then tests its training.

Not America's though, and

not Canada's. Any fool understands that "rote learning" by itself is meaningless, but parents now also know from sad experience that when an educator comes out against "rote learning," it means there's trouble ahead. Speaking in code, the educator is announcing that the next generation won't be able to spell "receive," won't know what caused the Second World War, and won't be able to say whether the Renaissance came before the enlightenment. Americans have now abolished rote learning so successfully that in a survey conducted this year, 42% of college seniors couldn't identify the Koran as the sacred book of Islam and 44% couldn't say who wrote Moby Dick.

In Canada, as in the U.S., the educational bureaucracy tend to agree with Spock. The result is that public school is a crapshoot – it might be superb, it might be dreadful. George Radwanski, after conducting a survey for the Ontario government, reported that in reading and writing, the expectation place on a child "varies dramatically, not only from school to school and board to board, but from teacher

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## Basketball Flourishing in PEI

Island's charms help university lure outsiders.

Charlottetown

Dennis Smith knew Anne of Green Gables – at least he saw a bit of her on television, but no casual viewing of that tale could prepare him for this. His plane was dropping fast and he looked out the window below him he saw only an alien land.

"At first I thought the plane was landing for a refill, because I couldn't really believe it," he says. "When I was flying over, I

never saw no buildings or nothing. I just saw houses and red dirt and water. So I thought we were stopping for fuel and then they said we were in Charlottetown."

Smith had grown up in the Toronto area, in North York, in the neighborhood around Jane and Shepard, which is decidedly urban, highrise-laden and predominantly black. He had come to Prince Edward Island to play basketball, having been seduced by the words of a coach named George Morrison. The univer-

sity population was only 2000, the island's population was only 120,000, the black population was – well, there might be 10 families. And the gymnasium, two years after that rough landing, is still a bit tough to believe.

Soon, the University of Prince Edward Island will have a beautiful new field house, but for now, Smith and his teammates practice and play in a place that cries out for a Christmas pageant. The stage sits ready for such a drama, the basketball surface seems an

afterthought and a too aggressive charge to the hoop leaves the shooter headed into a wall at one end of the court and out a door at the other.

There are 14 players working our, nine of them are black and most are from Toronto and environs. In their midst, Morrison, who teaches high school during the day and has lived here all his life, barks out instructions.

That unlikely mixture has

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