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**Intergenerational Progress in Educational
Attainment When Institutional Change Really
Matters: A Case Study of Franco-Americans vs.
French-Speaking Quebeckers**

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Intergenerational Progress in Educational Attainment When
Institutional Change Really Matters: A Case Study of
Franco-Americans vs. French-Speaking Quebeckers¹

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"Laissez-les partir, c'est la racaille qui s'en va" (Let them leave: It's the rabble who are leaving) George-Etienne Cartier (Co-Father of Confederation commenting on the exodus of French-Canadians to New England in 19th Century)

¹I would like to thank Mary MacKinnon for her early involvement in the project and for many fruitful discussions on the topic.

Abstract

Using U.S. and Canadian census data I exploit the massive out migration of approximately 1 million French-Canadians who moved mainly to New England between 1865 and 1930 to look at how the educational attainment and enrollment patterns of their descendants compare with those of same aged French-speaking Quebecers. Data from the 1971 (1970) Canadian (U.S.) censuses reveal that New England born residents who had French as their mother tongue enjoyed a considerable advantage in terms of educational attainment. I attribute this large discrepancy to their exposure to the U.S. public school system which had no equivalent in Quebec until the late sixties. This result is even more remarkable given the alleged negative selection out of Quebec and the fact that Franco-Americans were fairly successful in replicating the same educational institutions as the ones existing in Quebec. Turning to the 2001 (2000) Canadian (U.S.) censuses, I find strong signs that the gap has subsided for the younger aged individuals. In fact, contrary to 30 years earlier, young Quebecers in 2001 had roughly the same number of years of schooling and were at least as likely to have some post-secondary education. However, they still trail when it comes to having at least a B.A. degree. This partial reversal reflects the impact of the "reverse treatment" by which Quebec made profound changes to its educational institutions, particularly in the post-secondary system, in the mid-to-late 60's. Given the speed at which this partial catch-up occurred, it would appear that the magnitude of the intergenerational externalities that can be associated with education is at best fairly modest.

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Executive Summary

A positive correlation between the educational attainment of parents and that of their children is a well known empirical regularity: children of more educated parents will tend to be more educated themselves. However, such a correlation, while pervasive across countries and time, is not straightforward to interpret. On the one hand, it could truly reflect the causal effect of education in the sense that parents with more education change as a result of having received more education. They then transmit values to their children that make them more likely to become more educated themselves. On the other hand, the correlation in the educational attainment of the parent and the child could be spurious: parents who push their children to have more education simply happen to have more education themselves. In the former case, education would generate substantial intergenerational externalities while in the latter case it generates no such externalities. Determining which case is most accurate will have implications for the magnitude of the social benefits of education.

In this paper I exploit the massive out migration of approximately 1 million French-Canadians who moved mainly to New England between 1865 and 1930 to look at how the educational attainment and enrolment patterns of their descendants compare with those of same aged French-speaking Quebecers. Data from the 1971 (1970) Canadian (U.S.) censuses reveal that New England born residents who had French as their mother tongue enjoyed a considerable advantage in terms of educational attainment. I attribute this large discrepancy to their exposure to the U.S. public school system which had no equivalent in Quebec until the late sixties. This result is even more remarkable given the alleged negative selection out of Quebec and the fact that Franco-Americans were fairly successful in replicating the same educational institutions as the ones existing in Quebec. Turning to the 2001 (2000) Canadian (U.S.) censuses, I find strong signs that the gap has subsided for the younger aged individuals. In fact, contrary to 30 years earlier, young Quebecers in 2001 had roughly the same number of years of schooling and were at least as likely to have some post-secondary education. However, they still trail when it comes to having at least a B.A. degree.

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I examine the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey to provide complementary evidence on the extent to which the parent-child correlation in education reflects either family background, educational externalities, or institutional effects. More particularly, I compute the correlation between the educational attainment of fathers and their sons by age group and for English-speaking Canadians living outside Quebec and French-Canadians in Quebec. The results are striking: while French-speaking Quebecers aged over 45 – those who would have faced the old elitist schooling system – have the largest correlation coefficient. This correlation is dramatically reduced for the

respondents aged 16-35, the cohort whose fathers would have been educated under the old system while they would have benefited from the schooling institutions we know today. Thus it would appear that the magnitude of the intergenerational externalities that can be associated with education is at best fairly modest. Instead, I view those results as supportive of the hypothesis that institutional constraints matter a great deal and that when those constraints are relaxed, people of fairly diverse backgrounds in terms of parental education derive large benefits.