

GETTING BACK ON COURSE



The looming Ontario election means that, once again, education will be a key topic of debate. This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* focuses on a number of key issues that education workers, parents, students and public education advocates are confronting in schools and communities, and offers on-the-ground commentary and analysis of what needs to be done for us to get this right.

Hugh Mackenzie and Trish Hennessy put the current funding formula into the context of 20 years of Conservative and Liberal governments to better understand the financial inadequacies of their approach, and the fallout from it. This is particularly significant as the province shifts into election mode where, once again, education funding and our perceptions of how schools are “doing” will no doubt play a key role.

The fallout takes many different forms and manifestations. Dan Crow examines the way education workers have been impacted by inadequate funding, and the physical toll this has taken on schools as physical entities, and on families who are less well-served through insufficient staffing ratios, and longer commute times. Elizabeth Mitchell and Thomas Widstrand have collaborated on a thoughtful piece that draws on their years of experience working in the field of special education; the chasm between policy in theory and in practice, the hard work of all those who advocate for kids with special needs, the lip service paid to inclusion — without adequate funding. And Laurie Menard has explored the ways in which standardized testing through the EQAO, by its very design, disadvantages special needs kids:

One key method of making positive changes in our classrooms is through collective bargaining, which “provides a powerful forum for the expressions of the collective insights and wishes of frontline workers in a place where that collective action can be harnessed to win improvements that have a direct impact on student well-being in the classroom.” Seth Bernstein looks at the oft-used slogan “teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions” and identifies key bargaining wins that have improved classrooms and resources that enhance the educational opportunities of students.

The relationship between schools and their surroundings is examined in the results of a study by Civicplan which worked with four different schools (two urban, two suburban) to help create walkable school communities. It’s also an interesting example of the shared wants, that to some extent transcend the oft-touted urban/suburban divide. The desires (walkability, safety, community connections) are similar, although the solutions may vary based on location and population need.

Another tangible result of a failed funding formula is school closures that have impacted rural and urban communities across the province. The impact, particularly on vulnerable communities, or on communities where the only school may have just been declared under capacity and therefore at risk of closure, can be

devastating. As Hamilton city councilor Matthew Green explores in his commentary, a school is often — metaphorically and geographically — the heart of a neighbourhood; from which “moving on” post-graduation is an organic rite of passage and evidence of one’s world expanding. So when Parkview, a school in his ward, was targeted for closure along with three others, the community sprang into action, (although they were sadly unsuccessful).

Benjamin Doxtator pushes back against the omnipresent “skills gap” rhetoric, and the ongoing insistence that the school is somehow required to respond to the “currently undetermined because the future is so fickle” needs of the marketplace. “The ‘skills gap’” he explains, “is a zombie idea that chases education, though it keeps being debunked...a quantifiable uncertainty, a cliché designed to explain increasing precarity, an ultimatum from Capital.” It’s a particularly timely reminder.

None of this is limited to Ontario, of course, and other jurisdictions are often several steps ahead or behind this current political moment. This provides powerful opportunities to learn from our neighbours, and to predict what’s coming. For example, the Ontario government’s back-to-work legislation that ended the college faculty strike (for more information, please see JP Hornick’s powerful comments from the November 16, 2017 press conference) takes on a different significance in the context of successful challenges to similar legislation limiting the collective bargaining process, in Ontario (Bill 115) and elsewhere (BC, Saskatchewan). More recently, the Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union (NSTU) filed a charter challenge against Bill 75 (see OS/OS spring/summer 2017 for background).

So much of what Ontario is grappling with is playing out in BC with a new government that is beginning to address the damage done to an education system under a much more adversarial Liberal government. Patti Bacchus has written a detailed and thoughtful piece that puts current policy changes and funding commitments into both historical and political perspective. And Carolyn Blasetti and Barbara Silva from Save our Students (SOS) Alberta lay out how many of these same concerns — privatization, fundraising, anti-public education rhetoric — have evolved and are playing out in their province. It’s a fascinating read.

Finally, Sheelah McLean has contributed a discussion and lesson plan she uses to challenge issues of privilege, meritocracy, and “white settler ingenuity” with her students.

Readers will recall that this is the second issue of the new format of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, and we appreciate your support and patience as we evolve so that we can better continue to and contribute to the education debates as they play out in our schools, communities, provinces, and beyond. Thanks for standing with us. ●

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