

# Our Schools/Our Selves

**The Voice Of Progressive Education In Canada**

Canadian Centre For Policy Alternatives

Winter/Spring 2024

## GAMBLING ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

**WHO LOSES FROM  
A COMMODIFIED  
UNIVERSITY  
EDUCATION? /26**



**3**

From battleground to common ground  
**Erika Shaker**

**6**

Classrooms of acceptance  
*Upholding inclusivity in the face of change*  
**Julianna Marcel**

**7**

Six signs Moms for Liberty have come  
to your town  
*A perspective from South Carolina*  
**Paul Bowers**

**11**

Austerity hurts public education  
*The view from Manitoba*  
**Ee-Seul Yoon**

**13**

Despite the overblown AI hype, we're  
not ready for what comes next  
**Hadrian Mertins-Kirkwood**

**16**

The higher costs of higher education  
*Will Saskatchewan fund  
the future of its universities?*  
**Simon Enoch**

**21**

Whack-a-moles and hydra  
*Searching for a new privatization metaphor  
in education*  
**Nichole Grant and Pamela Rogers**

**24**

Connect the dots  
*School boards, democracy,  
and human rights*  
**Molly Hurd**

**28**

Costly gambles  
*Who loses from a commodified  
university education?*  
**Matthew Kurtz, PhD**

**32**

School grounds turned battlegrounds  
*War, conflict and peace education*  
**Steven Staples**

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# Editorial

## From battleground to common ground

Erika Shaker

In the seemingly never-ending right-wing-led campaigns against social progress, public schools are frequently targeted. And there's a reason: while battered and underfunded, these institutions are still symbolic of the actualization that we are more than just individual agents or even the sum of our parts; that differences needn't divide; that a fairer, kinder future for all of us, starting with our kids, is always worth committing to, investing in and being collectively responsible for.

Compassion. Collaboration. Respect. Empathy. Responsibility.

To some, these principles are, apparently, terrifying.

And that fear is what fuels the regressive tide that public education advocates and progressives continue to hold off, while fighting for a more just and a fairer world for all of us. Yes, for all of us — even for those who actively undermine the idea that we can do better for each other.

No one is saying this work is easy. But the difference between progress and change is intentionality. Otherwise, we could rely on gravity — or maybe the seasons — to bring us public pharmacare. Or \$10/day child care. Or public schools that meet the pedagogical and social needs of kids and communities right across the country; that treat educators and education workers like the experts that they are; that give kids the tools to push back against

oppression; and — most importantly — that recognize that we must continue to do better for kids and communities who have traditionally been underserved by the same public systems we still must fight to protect.

Public education provides remarkable opportunities to bring people together to mobilize in pursuit of a common goal — both on the left and right of the political spectrum. And no wonder — we're talking about what we want for our kids, for our communities, and for the future.

We're also talking about our own recollections (good and bad) of our own experiences with the education system. And for those of us who are parents, it can be a triple whammy: our kids' experiences, our own experiences, and how the two come together in the ever-evolving relationships we build with our children as they mature.

Perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise that the "parental rights" debates resonate, even among some people who ordinarily would be able to spot a right wing dog whistle at 100 metres. We are much more susceptible to fear-based arguments — no matter how ridiculous or racist or transphobic or misogynistic, it seems — when they centre our children.

As a graduate of the Ontario public education system who, like many parents, is constantly navigating the process of watching and encouraging my kids as they develop into adults, take risks, make mistakes, and amaze me with their self-awareness while driving me around the



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twist with their inability to find the dishwasher....I've been doing a lot of self-reflection in the wake of the so-called parental rights' debates.

These days, thanks to technology, we are more connected than ever — and that comes with a number of unintended consequences. “I’ll call when I get there” is now obsolete. For many of us, working and learning from home reinforced and extended normal parental oversight. For many families, for the duration of the pandemic-related shutdown, the response to “It’s 9:00 — do you know where your children are?” was likely to be “where they’ve been for the past 14 months — in the next room.”

This had huge implications for basic expectations of people, boundaries between individuals, and that elusive work-life balance. Getting ahold of someone “anytime, anywhere” may mean convenience for the getter — but something very different for the gotten.

As my eldest started university and my youngest started high school, I had to readjust my own parental expectation settings of concepts like freedom, independence and privacy, while reminding myself what it was like to grow up without “find my phone” doubling as a tracking device when I hadn’t checked in for a while, and that I too hid my diary and didn’t tell my parents absolutely everything that happened at school that day (including when I probably should have).

While frustrating and sometimes infuriating, it is normal and healthy for kids to push back, to make space for themselves, to challenge their parents, make choices that perhaps (sometimes based on personal experience) we wouldn’t want them to make and grapple with issues we want to support them on but that they need time to come to us with. Regardless of how parental feelings can be hurt, it should not be considered a personal slight for a child to want to establish boundaries and make their own choices about music or friendships or bodily autonomy or sexuality or gender identity.

And it certainly shouldn’t be seen as evidence of public education or government overreach or a queer or trans “agenda”.

As the rhetoric is weaponized by politicians and decisionmakers eager to capitalize on fear and ignorance (and the callous and dangerous disregard for scapegoating marginalized and vulnerable kids), I’m keeping three things in mind to try and help me maintain a sense of equilibrium.

- The friend who told me, as a very new mom, that he had learned through having kids of his own that “parenting is a long process of learning how to let go.”
- The daycare provider who, after giving me the Coles Notes version of something hilarious my eldest (then 2 years old) had done that day, reminded me that I should “let her tell [me] herself....she’s also entitled to her privacy.”
- The “Question Authority” bumper sticker on my parents’ fridge when we were growing up.

As I write, 2023 has concluded, 2024 has begun, and the work continues. All my thanks to the authors who gave so much of their time, expertise, and passion for public education in this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*.

And thank you to all of you for your work in defending and celebrating a public education system that better meets the needs of kids and communities from coast to coast to coast, and allows no one — particularly the most vulnerable — to be treated as collateral damage. ●

**Erika Shaker** is the editor of *Our Schools/Our Selves* and Director of the CCPA National Office.

## NOTE TO READERS

As we enter a new year, with new challenges, we will be making a change at *Our Schools/Our Selves* and we want you to understand our decision-making process. Charities across the sector are experiencing financial challenges and, unfortunately, the CCPA is no exception. We are facing a double whammy of inflation and the downturn in individual contributions after COVID-19 forced economic shutdowns across the country.

As you know, for the past few years *Our Schools/Our Selves* has been included with the January/February and July/August *Monitor*, and it’s been a wonderful partnership that has brought popular and accessible education content to all our readers and our online audiences.

However, production costs (postage, printing, paper etc.) have increased by 68 per cent since 2020 alone.

We have made the difficult decision to produce the *Monitor* on a quarterly basis in order to control costs, and to move to a fully digital model for *Our Schools/Our Selves*. We will be working with our partners across the country to ensure the widest possible audience for our educational content so that *Our Schools/Our Selves* remains the vibrant, accessible and engaging platform that you all appreciate. And we will continue to promote each issue on our blog and website, and through our social media channels and e-newsletters.

As always, we value your support, and your engagement, and we look forward to hearing from you.

For more information about how to subscribe to the *Monitor*, please call us at 844-563-1341 or visit [policyalternatives.ca/give](http://policyalternatives.ca/give)



# Classrooms of acceptance

## Upholding inclusivity in the face of change

Julianna Marcel

Schools have always been more than just buildings where students come to learn; they are the places where we forge our first friendships, grapple with complex emotions, and shape our very identities. With each passing day, these institutions have played a unique role in molding not just our academic knowledge, but our perspectives about ourselves and the world around us.

In the midst of this transformation, a concerning narrative has begun to emerge: the “parental rights” movement which has included a sharp curtailing of discussions around gender and sexuality within classrooms. The movement has gained considerable traction, causing multifaceted repercussions for students of all ages, affecting their social, emotional, and educational development.

Hearing their peers discuss limited perspectives on relationships and family structures, 2SLGBTQ+ students might feel invalidated and marginalized as a result. This can lead to feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem; without open dialogue in classrooms, bullying, harassment, and discrimination become normalized. This lack of inclusivity and acceptance stigmatizes 2SLGBTQ+ identities; it fosters alienation, whilst simultaneously damaging the overall school climate for all students.

I remember the days when classroom discussions went beyond the textbook, addressing diverse identities, experiences, and orientations. Such open dialogues helped many of my peers understand and accept who they truly were. However, in an environment where these discussions are suppressed, it's not hard to imagine the cloud of doubt and fear looming over those who are still grappling with their identity.

Parents undoubtedly play a monumental role in guiding their children's beliefs and values. Their involvement in their child's education is imperative and cherished. It is also imperative that this

The Ontario Student Trustees Association (OSTA-AECO) is the largest official student stakeholder group in Ontario, advocating for over two million students. For over 20 years, OSTA-AECO has been a strong, effective, and positive voice for students. Our organization strives to empower students and work to improve public education across the province. In addition to our advocacy work, OSTA-AECO provides rich professional development for Ontario student trustees. OSTA-AECO hosts three annual conferences, as well as a variety of other events.

involvement does not encroach upon the rights of each student to receive a broad and balanced education. The goal is to ensure that both home and school work in tandem to foster an educational atmosphere that embraces and respects every student, irrespective of their background, identity, and orientation.

The Ontario Student Trustees' Association (OSTA-AECO) is committed to supporting our fellow Ontario students. In doing so, we champion an inclusive, understanding, and a diverse educational setting; we envision schools where every student can safely celebrate the diversity of our world because a key piece of education is preparing young individuals to navigate a pluralistic society; it is only then that we can work to foster empathy, understanding, and respect for all human beings.

Education is a right and a journey; one that should enable students to understand and respect the myriad of identities and experiences that form the very tapestry of our society. It is not just an educational imperative; it is a societal one. And it starts with each one of us. ●

**Julianna Marcel** is a student trustee in grade 12, serving as the Vice President of Policy & Research with the Ontario Student Trustees' Association (OSTA-AECO). With a passion for policy, research, inclusivity, and continuous learning, she consistently emphasizes the central role of students' voices in shaping Ontario's educational reforms and initiatives.



# Six signs Moms for Liberty have come to your town

## **A perspective from South Carolina**

**Paul Bowers**

Unexplained firings? Contrived panics over ‘critical race theory’ and children’s books? Have your local school board meetings turned into incoherent shouting matches? Are grown adults snooping around in the children’s section of the library looking for hidden propaganda?

Sorry to say it: You might have a Moms for Liberty chapter in your town.

Moms for Liberty is an extremist antigovernment organization that launched in Florida in 2021 and has established chapters from coast to coast. They aren't always moms, they don't always have kids, and they definitely don't care about "liberty" for everyone else.

I'm a civil liberties advocate and parent of public school kids in South Carolina, a Moms for Liberty stronghold. After observing these folks and their chosen political candidates across the state, I want to share a few words of warning.

Here are some signs to watch out for:

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## One: They're trying to make your community into Florida.

Like a bad hurricane season, the past few years have brought bad news up the coast from Florida. Moms for Liberty started in Ron DeSantis' viciously anti-LGBTQ and anti-Black policymaking playground, and they're constantly trying to copy and paste that state's most harmful policies elsewhere.

In Charleston County this year, a Moms for Liberty-backed school board member allegedly made threatening comments about a transgender teacher at a Moms for Liberty meeting. He then tried to pass a local version of Florida's infamous "Don't Say Gay" law, which would have prohibited teachers from talking about sexual orientation and gender. He has so far refused public pressure to resign.

## Two: School district administrators are getting fired without explanation.

One of the most common Moms for Liberty tactics nationwide is to oust the superintendents of school districts when they take power. I saw this happen firsthand in November 2022 in Berkeley County, where six school board members endorsed by Moms for Liberty took power and immediately fired the district's first Black superintendent without a word of explanation.

As *The 74* recently reported, Moms for Liberty-controlled school boards have removed the superintendents in nine of the 17 school districts they flipped nationwide in 2022.

That number rose to 10 in October, when Moms for Liberty-backed school board members — some of whom campaigned on a platform of transparency — pushed out the district's Black superintendent after four months on the job, without public debate or explanation.



## **Three: White parents are mad about “critical race theory” but they can’t articulate why.**

Critical race theory is a graduate-level concept that isn’t taught in K-12 schools, but it frequently serves as shorthand in public discourse for “ideas that bother white people.” Moms for Liberty are terrified of critical race theory, and they see it everywhere — in books with Black characters, in classrooms led by Black teachers, and in districts that consider diversity and equity as values worth pursuing.

Case in point: When book banners successfully removed the book *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* from Pickens County Schools last year, one of their chief complaints was that the book contained “critical race theory.”

In Berkeley County, a new Moms for Liberty majority on the school board took a vote at their first meeting to ban critical race theory. When pressed for a definition, the new board chairman quoted verbatim from a false definition written by the right-wing Goldwater Institute.

Allies of Moms for Liberty aren’t just at the school board level; they also have friends at the State House. The South Carolina chapter of the right-wing State Freedom Caucus Network has sued multiple school districts in the past year for using a popular and effective literacy curriculum from EL Education, using doctored recordings to allege that it teaches “critical race theory” to elementary students. Moms for Liberty school boards were all too happy to stoke the panic.

## **Four: Religious liberty is going out the window.**

It’s still legal for students to pray in American schools no matter what the fearmongers tell you. But that’s not enough for Moms for Liberty.

In early 2023, the Charleston County School Board’s 5-4 Moms for Liberty majority wasted hours of everyone’s time debating a proposal to instate prayer at the start of their meetings. Up the road in Berkeley County, supporters of the M4L board members shouted the Lord’s Prayer during the moment of silence at several school board meetings. In Columbia, Superintendent Weaver asked Department of Education staff to reflect on how they can help all children reach “their God-given potential.”

This erosion of the separation of church and state is a hallmark of the Moms for Liberty agenda.

## Five: They're calling the cops on librarians.

Moms for Liberty activists keep pushing a bogus legal theory: that teachers and librarians with books about LGBTQ people on their shelves can be arrested for distributing “obscene material to minors.”

This may have escaped their team of legal scholars, but the law these wannabe speech police keep citing (S.C. Code of Laws Section 16-15-385) only applies to materials that lack “literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.” The law also *specifically excludes* teachers and librarians from enforcement.

That didn't stop Moms for Liberty copycats in Beaufort County from filing a complaint with the sheriff's office against district employees. Thankfully, the sheriff's office declined to investigate. Unfortunately, in Travelers Rest, police did show up at a local library with a Pride display.

The point of these tactics is to intimidate public employees and stifle free speech. As the *Greenville News* recently reported, the Greenville County Library lost five employees per month in 2022 amid a climate of rising censorship.

## Six: One person is assigning educators a lot of pointless homework.

A common tactic we're seeing with Moms for Liberty and copycat organizations around South Carolina is that a small group, or even a single person, will spam the school district office with a list of books they're scared of and want taken out of schools. These book banners don't want to trust trained librarians to cultivate collections; they want to decide what all students — not just their own kids — can access.

They'll quibble about the definition of “ban,” but the point is to take books off library shelves and out of classrooms. This creates chaos for students when the self-appointed censors target frequently assigned books (like *The Kite Runner* in Beaufort County or *The Handmaid's Tale* in Anderson County), and it also creates a lot of unpaid work for teachers and librarians.

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**We didn't start the recent wave of censorship and attacks on educators, but we're sticking around until it's over. Moms for Liberty are relative newcomers to political power, and people of good conscience will outlast them.**

This article has been edited for length, and focuses on South Carolina's experience with Moms for Liberty. In 2022 the Southern Poverty Law Center included Moms for Liberty, along with other so-called “parental rights” groups, in its 2022 report “The Year in Hate and Extremism.”

**Paul Bowers** is the Communications Director for the American Civil Liberties Union of South Carolina. He previously covered education during his 8 years as a news reporter. An earlier version of this article originally appeared on the ACLU-SC website October 28, 2023.



# Austerity hurts public education

## The view from Manitoba

Ee-Seul Yoon

It's worth reviewing what children and educators returned to in the fall of 2023, after seven years of funding shortfalls and cuts. Teachers are doing their best with the resources they have, but it's not enough.

What happens to a public school system when top-down funding cuts are imposed with little to no consultation or assessment of the ongoing needs of the system? No one wins.

Children in Manitoba are crammed into crowded classrooms, and Manitoba workers in the public education sector are burnt out and overworked. After experiencing several years of frozen funding, rising costs and layoffs by the provincial government, educators and frontline workers in the province's public education sector say that the top-down austerity policy has weakened the entire public education system to the point of the system failing our most vulnerable students.

According to the more than 100 educators and frontline workers in the public education sector who responded to a survey as part of the *Public Service in Tough Times: Working Under Austerity in Manitoba* project, the Manitoba government's education finance policy has

been blind to the needs and challenges of learners and educators in this province.

It would be negligent not to listen to these respondents, who have insider experiences and perspectives of working, teaching, and leading in our schools. They have worked directly with students and have seen first-hand those who are most negatively affected by the reductions in resources and programming.

Most notable are staffing shortages due to the cuts required as costs have risen while funding was frozen when the current government came to power in 2016. Fewer staff members mean increased workloads. Three out of four respondents said their work has increased considerably. Nine out of every 10 mentioned that their mental health and job satisfaction have plummeted. They have experienced a high level of burnout and dissatisfaction because they are asked to fill in multiple roles beyond their main areas of responsibility, including, but not limited to, the roles of mental health experts, special needs specialists, speech language pathologists, coaches, care providers, and so on. Being asked to multi-task and being overstretched and overworked have resulted in an

**Cuts to effective programs such as early intervention in learning and academic support will have much larger costs to taxpayers in the long run, as schools are currently unable to help children and youth build the capacity to become responsible and independent adults.**

unnecessarily stressful work environment, not to mention reduced supports for students.

Fewer staff also means larger class sizes, while funding constraints have undermined the conditions for learning and teaching overall. Recall that the current government scrapped the K-3 class size cap. Larger class sizes have led to situations in which students' emotional and mental health needs are difficult to address in a timely and adequate way. Larger class sizes mean kids get less attention from their teachers to their academic needs. Smaller class sizes increase engagement, and lead to higher academic and non-academic outcomes, especially among early

year students and students who experience poverty and social disadvantage.

Four out of every five respondents noted that the quality of education they can provide has severely declined, resulting in some educators feeling frustrated while others feel guilty, as though they are the ones failing students, even though this is due to funding shortfalls that are beyond their control.

The negative effects of austerity are most acute among children who are vulnerable economically. Three out of five respondents said that there is less support for students

who are economically insecure, including cuts to breakfast programs and family outreach programs that have been cancelled.

Half of the respondents noted a worsening sense of safety as a result of an increase in violent incidents and a reduced level of threat assessments in schools. They also noted fewer resources for mental health, well-being programs, and police and child abuse checks, and cuts to social work staff. Reduced spending on public and community safety has decreased a sense of safety in school communities.

As far as the cost-saving of austerity is concerned, an overwhelming majority of educators said: No. Cuts to effective programs such as early intervention in learning and academic support will have much larger costs to taxpayers in the long run, as schools are currently unable to help children and youth build the capacity to become responsible and independent adults. They argue that the level of need across all public sectors, including health and social programs, will rise in the long run.

There is no magic bullet to reforming the education system. The correct path, though, is one that respects and includes the voices of educators, leaders, and workers in the public education sector, and one that has the best interests of Manitoba's children at its core. ●

**Ee-Seul Yoon** is an associate professor in the faculty of education at the University of Manitoba and a research affiliate with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives—Manitoba. A version of this article appeared in the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Contact info: Ee-Seul.Yoon@umanitoba.ca



# Despite the overblown AI hype, we're not ready for what comes next

**Hadrian Mertins-Kirkwood**

When OpenAI's ChatGPT was released to the public in November 2022 it sparked a frenzy of hype and panic about the capabilities of generative artificial intelligence (AI) — a form of AI that creates original content based on a user prompt.

The software's ability to understand natural language and to offer creative responses was not just amazing but downright uncanny. It could write compelling essays and working computer code. It could play word games and tell jokes. It could listen to your mental health struggles without judgment and offer therapeutic advice. It was, it appeared, truly intelligent.

That enthusiasm was met just as quickly with fear. Within days, commentators were forecasting the decline of everything from software developers to journalists to doctors to the artists and writers whose work was used to train the AI without their consent. Meanwhile, technology scholars came out of the woodwork

to warn about the threat to humanity posed by an artificial intelligence that could soon outsmart, overcome and discard its fleshy captors.

Investors, smelling the next big tech gold rush, poured billions of dollars into OpenAI and other Silicon Valley startups. In the months that followed, Google and other big tech companies rushed out ChatGPT competitors of their own. Some employers even tried to replace their workers with AI, as in the case of call centres that shifted to ChatGPT-powered text support.

Caught off guard, some governments around the world raced to control the technology. The EU and U.S. led the way with attention-grabbing regulations that, various critics argued, would simultaneously strangle progress and do nothing at all to reign in unsafe AI development.

Through it all, workers, students and other curious individuals began playing around with ChatGPT and its ilk. And the more they played, the more they became aware of its limitations.

These AI tools were prone to making things up — what the experts call “confabulation.” They reflected biases in their training data. They were unaware of current events. They wrote



arguments and code that looked good but didn't hold up to scrutiny.

As users began to understand how the algorithms behind tools like ChatGPT function — by probabilistically guessing one word at a time based on patterns in its training data — the sheen of intelligence also began to fade. It wasn't "thinking" after all. Far from understanding what it was talking about, ChatGPT was just stringing together words in a sensical, but fundamentally unintentional, way.

One year after the release of ChatGPT, it's tempting to dismiss both the hype and the panic that surrounded the popular emergence of generative artificial intelligence. Neither the utopian nor dystopian visions of an AI-powered world have come to pass. And, in retrospect, that should have come as little surprise given the typical trajectory of novel technologies.

The internet itself is an illustrative example. Though the basic consumer infrastructure existed in the 1990s, it took decades for many individuals and institutions to fully integrate it into their lives and processes. Even then, many of the predicted casualties of the world wide web are very much alive today. Their business models may have been forced to adapt, but for all the Googles, AirBnBs and Bitcoins out there, we still have libraries, hotels and banks.

And yet, the internet did transform the world in many ways, for better or worse — the stunning, unprecedented shift to remote work and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic being a particularly poignant example. It is now difficult to imagine life without the internet. And that's precisely why dismissing generative AI entirely at this stage would be a mistake.

First of all, tools like ChatGPT are already having a real-world impact, and nowhere more

so than in schools. Teachers have been plagued by AI-written submissions — a novel and discrete form of plagiarism — without the tools or training to address it. This is a context where the downsides of the AI, such as inaccurate information, are harder to trace. Meanwhile, the upsides, in terms of fast and free homework generation for students, are incredibly alluring.

The education system may yet stand to benefit from generative AI. For example, a personalized expert tutor on every single subject that could work in tandem with real teachers is an enticing prospect. But an education system caught unawares by ChatGPT's unregulated release hasn't had enough time to figure out how to make it work in a responsible and effective way. In addition to concerns about accuracy, there are serious outstanding risks related to security, privacy, accountability and the inherent safety of these tools, especially when it comes to their use by students. Until a legislative framework is in place to mitigate these risks, it will be very difficult for educators to make the most of the technology.

In other sectors, there is anecdotal evidence of ChatGPT being successfully adopted by workers. Early studies have found that workers who use AI tools, flawed as they may be, tend to get more done and to produce higher quality work than those who don't. That generative AI can help many workers be more efficient without fully replacing them is an encouraging finding at this stage. Whether workers will ultimately reap the benefits of that increased productivity, or whether over the long-term they'll be expected to do the work of multiple people for the same pay, may be a source of labour disputes moving forward.

The second reason not to dismiss generative AI is that it simply takes time to have a transformative impact in the real world and the ChatGPT era is still young. As in the internet example, it will be years before employers and other big institutions figure out how to fully integrate generative AI into their processes, both technically and culturally.

Indeed, even if you eschew the AI hype now, every word processor and email client will soon have an AI co-pilot that helps you write and edit your work. Some already do. Familiarity with AI tools will likely be as essential a professional skill as using Microsoft Office, even if the technology never gets better than it is today.

But of course it will get better, which is the third reason to take generative AI seriously. The technology is evolving extremely quickly. Unlike when it was first released, ChatGPT can now

look things up online and can both “see” and create images, among other improvements. AI tools are now able to read and parse large documents, to interpret spreadsheets and to perform many other complex analytical and creative tasks that were previously seen as impossible. The sheer number of companies working to develop artificial intelligence technologies also makes it unlikely that, regardless of the pace of development, the cat will ever be put back in the bag.

Predictions vary, but some experts believe that within the next decade AI tools could displace around a third of the hours currently worked by people in developed economies such as ours. That's neither a dystopian nor utopian prediction, since the distributional consequences will have more to do with policy than technology. If history is any indication, the widespread adoption of novel technologies will create many new jobs that don't exist today. But whether the economic benefits are shared or concentrated in the hands of capital will depend on our regulatory and taxation schemes.

Nevertheless, we may be confronting a labour upheaval comparable to other major technological innovations of the past hundred years, such as the introduction of computers into offices. However, the question we should be asking ourselves is not whether ChatGPT is going to replace workers directly — in the vast majority of cases, it can't — but how we are preparing for a future where generative artificial intelligence plays a large and growing role in our economy and society.

How can unions and employers support workers as AI becomes integrated into workplaces? How can governments regulate AI to mitigate the risks of erroneous and harmful content as well as poor data management practices? How can educators prepare young people to use AI tools while thinking critically about their outputs? And how do we ensure the public benefits from a technology that is largely owned and controlled by private U.S. tech firms?

The initial generative AI hype may have been overblown, but we have a lot of work to do to prepare for what comes next. ●

Thank you to Mischa Terzyk and Mia Travers-Hayward for their feedback on earlier drafts of this commentary.

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# The higher costs of higher education

## **Will Saskatchewan fund the future of its universities?**

**Simon Enoch**

It won't surprise anybody that reads *Our Schools/ Our Selves* that the costs of a university education is increasingly being transferred from governments on to the backs of students. Increasing tuition, government funding cuts and higher student debt have been the sad constant of Canada's universities for decades.

Certainly, Saskatchewan has not fared much better than the rest of the country in this respect. While Saskatchewan has not declined as quickly as other provinces, it has nevertheless seen its proportion of funding from government fall from 54 to 50 percent over the past 10 years. More troubling, over the past two decades real per-student spending has declined by 12 percent in Saskatchewan, with only Ontario and PEI experiencing larger declines. In comparison, per-student government spending nationally has declined by only 3.4 percent since 2001.

As government funding shrinks, universities have been forced to rely more on tuition fees, with international student fees fast becoming the go-to option to replace revenue lost to government cuts. Once again, Saskatchewan has not been immune to this trend, with universities seeing their proportion of funding from tuition and fees grow from 14 percent in 2010 to 22 percent in 2020. Similarly, Saskatchewan universities



have also experienced increased reliance on international tuition with the proportion of tuition revenue from international students at the province's two universities growing from just under 10 percent in 2007 to 25 percent in 2020.

As that reliance on fees has grown, so have tuition fees themselves. Saskatchewan's current tuition fees for a domestic undergraduate program of \$ 9,232 are second only to Nova Scotia, and over \$2,000 more than the national average. While international undergraduate tuition in the province remains below the national average, it has increased by 67 percent over the last decade, coming in at over \$27,000 this year.

As you would imagine, this combination of declining government support and rising tuition fees has led students to depend more on loans to fund their education. Unfortunately, the government made significant cuts to Saskatchewan's student grant system in their 2017 budget, forcing students to rely even more on borrowing rather than grants and bursaries. Indeed, as the graph illustrates, the student loan portion of student aid in SK exploded after 2017, while the provision of non-repayable-grants has cratered.

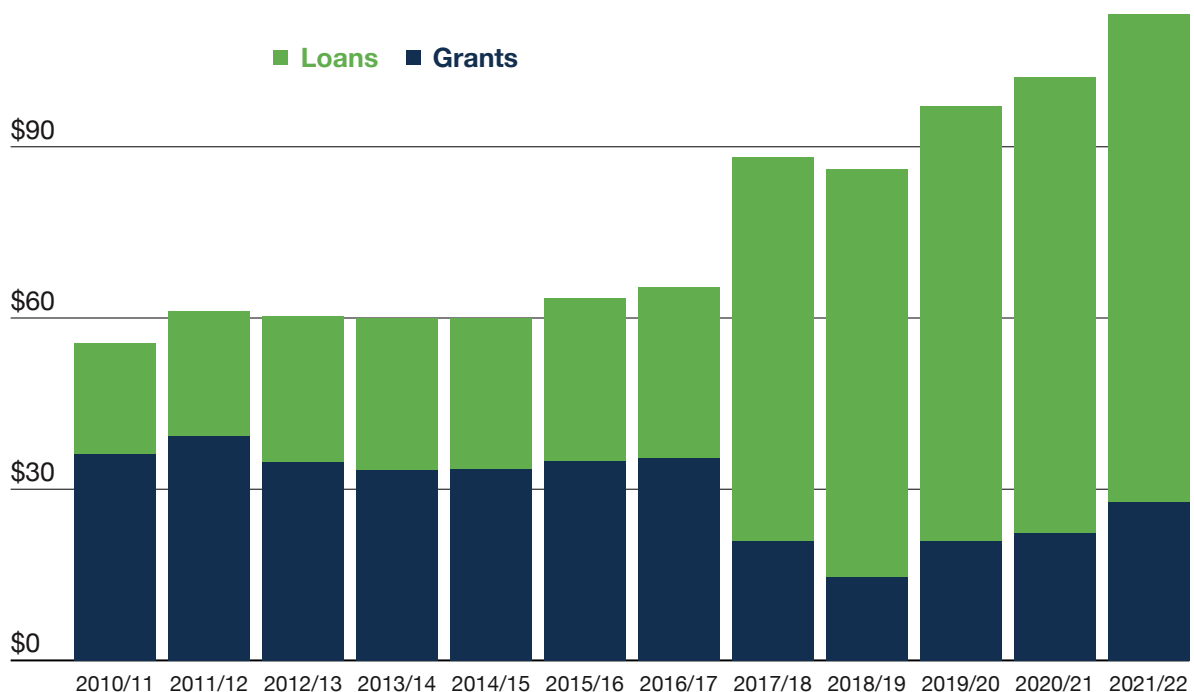
We know students are borrowing more to pay for the increasing cost of a university education – but what are they paying for?

While we recognize the modern university requires a host of services and supports, it is curious that increased costs don't appear to be going to the people that most of us associate

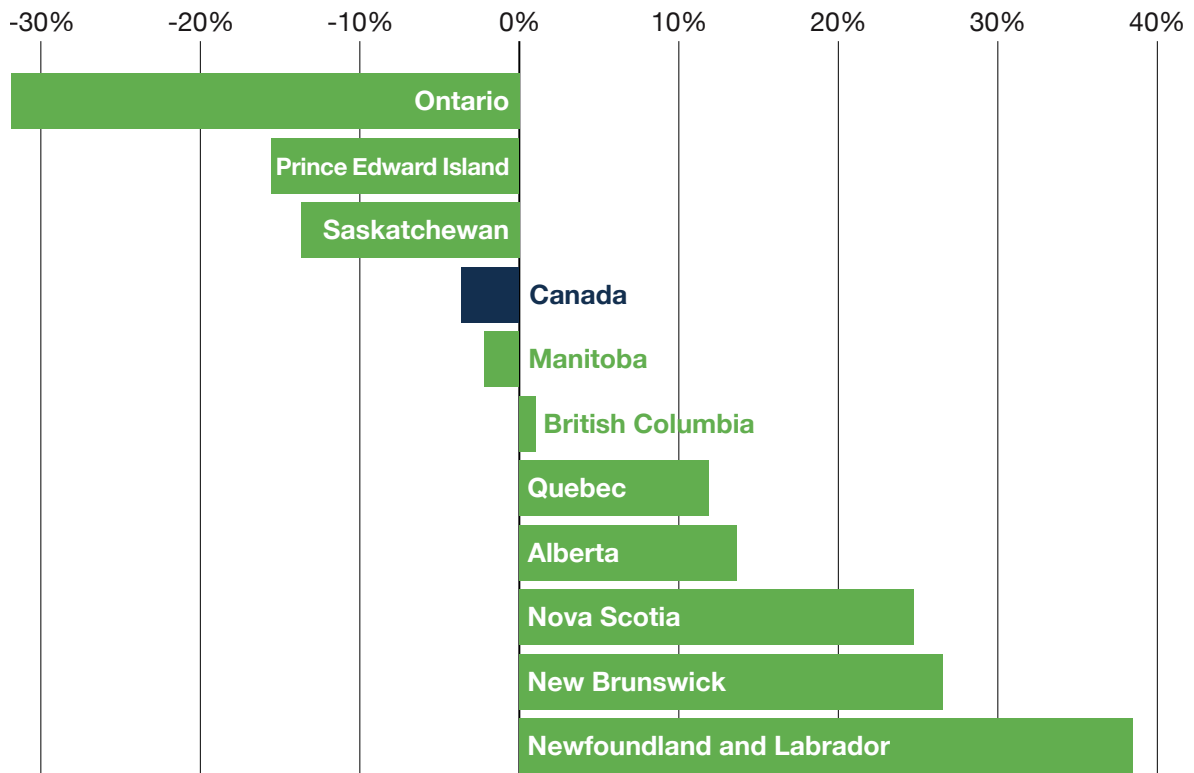
## Provincial student aid

2021 dollars, millions

\$120



## Change in real per student government expenditure from 2001/02 to 2019/20



a university with — academics. The proportion of university spending on academic salaries in Saskatchewan has declined from 37.5 percent in 2000-01 to 30.9 percent by 2020-21. In comparison to the national average, where academic salaries still outpace non-academic salaries, Saskatchewan has seen spending on academic salaries drop *below* that of non-academic salaries over the past five years. In 2020/21, universities in Saskatchewan spent the largest proportion of their budget (65%) on items other than academic salaries and student aid of all the provinces.

Students are paying more, and taking on more debt, in order to support a university system that appears to dedicate less and less to the primary mission of the university — an academic education.

While we would like to think that governments would want to halt and even reverse these trends, the ‘solution’ that most conservative-minded provincial governments are embracing will only cause more damage. Governments in Ontario, Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan have become increasingly enamoured with U.S.-style “performance-based funding” (PBF) — which distributes monies for universities based on their ability to meet certain metrics such as graduation rates. To the average person, this can seem quite reasonable. Why not incentivize our universities to produce what appear to be positive outcomes? But if universities are financially incentivized to meet such metrics, then they will likely prioritize those goals above all others.

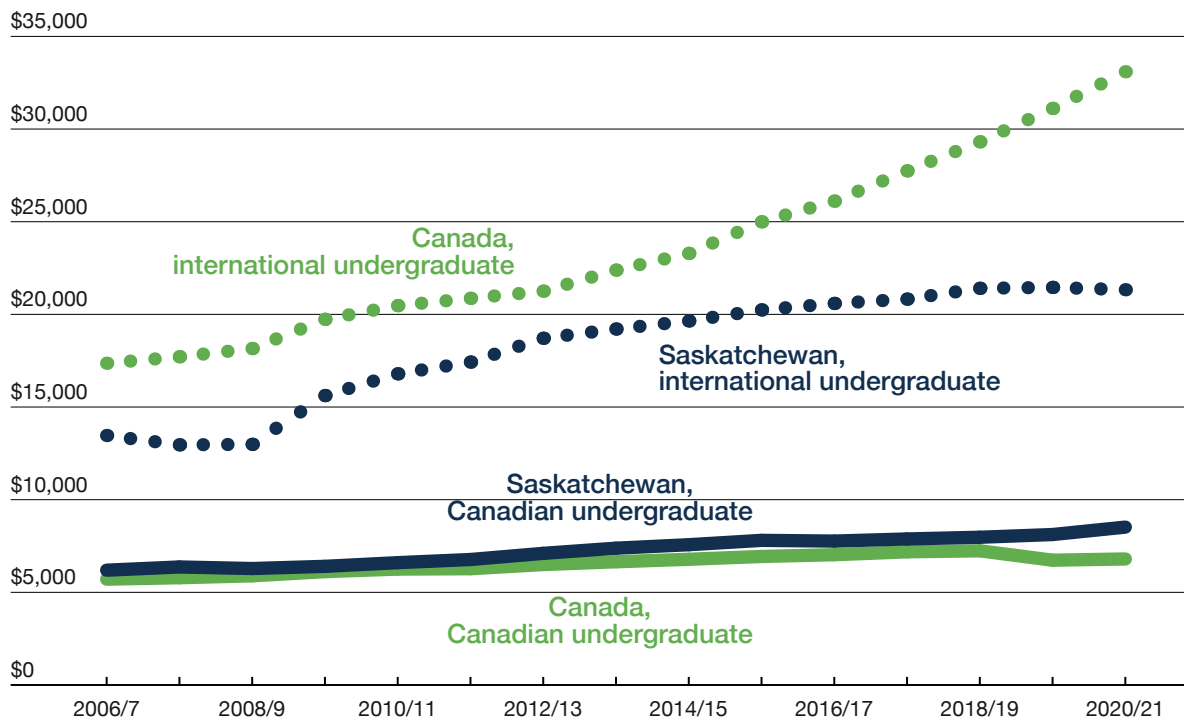
So, while maximizing graduation rates may seem like a good idea, the effect may be for universities to become more exclusionary, accepting only those students who have a high probability of graduating, while rejecting those (historically marginalized and under-represented groups) who do not. Certainly, this has been the evidence from the U.S., where a comprehensive review of PBF policies found there is “compelling evidence that PBF policies lead to unintended outcomes related to restricting access, gaming of the PBF system, and disadvantages for under-served student groups.”

Moreover, PBF systems invariably require extensive and costly administration to compile, monitor, report — and ultimately game — the new metrics. As University of Regina Education Professor Dr. Marc Spooner concludes, “It is no surprise that these frameworks have led to drastic deformations and growing bureaucratic bloat, while diverting larger and larger pieces of the pie away from teaching, research, and service — the very budget line items that best serve students and society.”

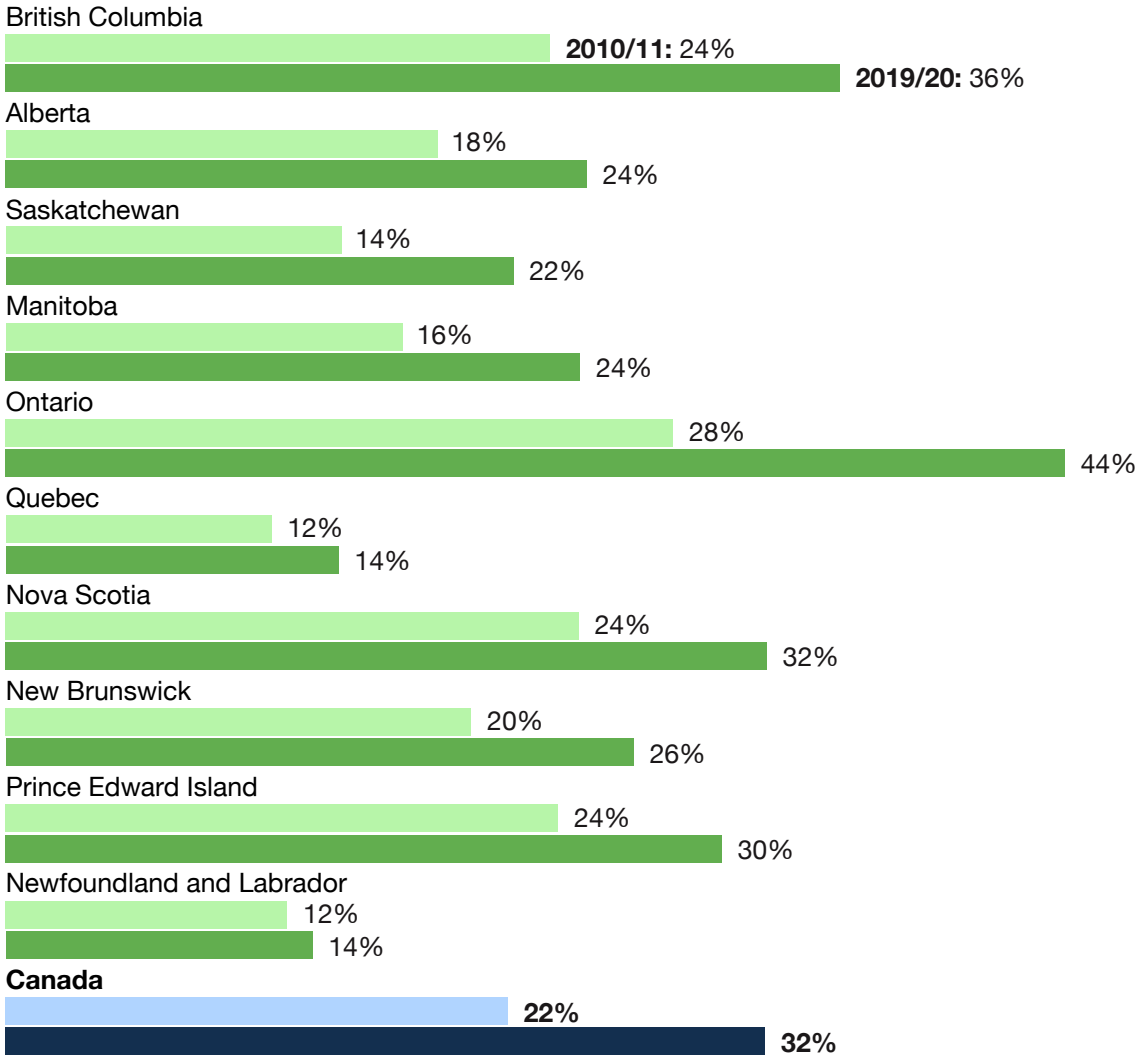
While governments like to cloak PBF in high-minded rhetoric about “accountability,” it may just be the newest way to disguise funding cuts from the public. Research from Saskatchewan’s own Ministry of Advanced Education into Tennessee’s PBF model concludes that “there has been a significant reduction in annual state appropriations to higher education institutions, and an increase in annual tuition and mandatory fees for students during the period that

## Average tuition fees for domestic and international students for Saskatchewan and Canada

2021 dollars



## Proportion of PSE funding from tuition and other fees



performance-based funding has been used.” Citing the overall impact of PBF in Tennessee, the Ministry observes that under that model, state appropriations for post-secondary education have decreased by close to 40 percent, while students’ share of funding for PSE has increased by 70 percent.

PBF allows governments to transfer even more of the financial burden of a university education onto the backs of students, while allowing governments to wash their hands of any responsibility through the handy justification that the universities just couldn’t meet their metrics.

In every respect, PBF fails to reverse the troubling trends outlined above. It is certainly not the way forward for Saskatchewan. Only a real commitment to fund the future of our universities through reinvestment in the people and resources required to provide a quality university education can restore the promise of our public universities. ●

This article is based on the CCPA Saskatchewan report *Fund the Future: The State of Saskatchewan’s Universities* released in September.

**Simon Enoch** is the director of the CCPA Saskatchewan Office.



# Whack-a-moles and hydra

## Searching for a new privatization metaphor in education

Nichole Grant and Pamela Rogers

Privatization in publicly funded public education is not a new phenomenon — *Our Schools/Our Selves* has published on this topic for decades. But the struggle to successfully confront privatization continues partly due to the immensity and complexity of the issues, be they the lack of funding for public education, the sense of disconnectedness created by provincial and territorial education systems in Canada, and/or the multiple layers of public education that are affected by local, national, and global factors. Some of these factors include shifting education governance structures, intensifying cultural debates and divides, the influence of neoliberal and conservative populist politics, and the changing nature and delivery of public education in a digital age. Trying to pinpoint one cause or effect in this complexity is difficult to grapple with in one province, let alone the country.

Due to privatization's multiple forms that can manifest differently from one place and time to the next, scholars and advocates have used visual metaphors to capture these large concepts, such as the often-cited hydra, a

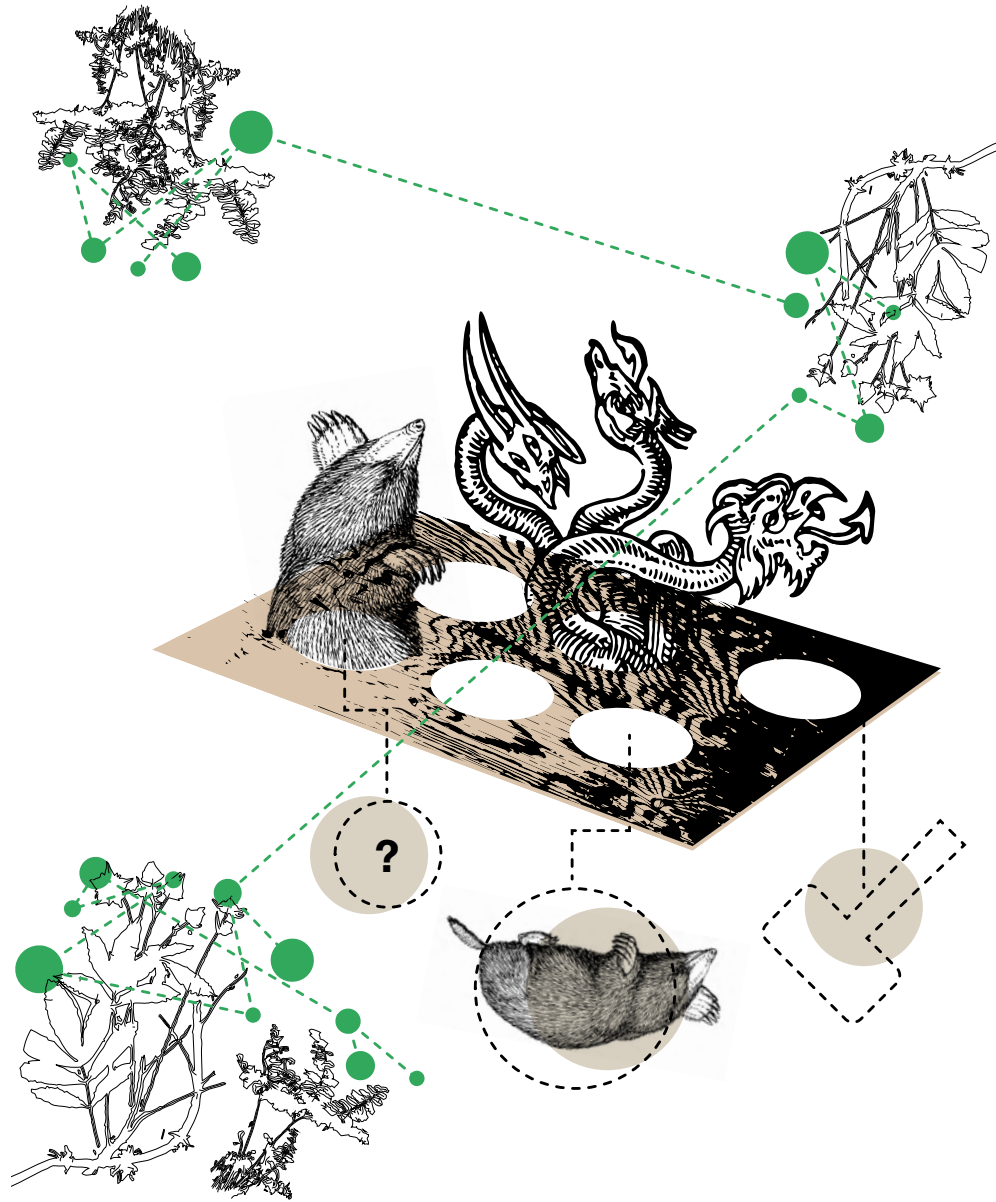
nine-headed Greek mythological monster, and the classic arcade game, whack-a-mole. The visuals evoked by these metaphors are ones of conflict: endlessly needing to cut off quickly regenerating hydra heads to defeat the monster or smashing whack-a-mole heads with a mallet to win the game.

Margaret Kovach (2021) has explained that metaphors allow us to “paint pictures with words to express ideas to a wide range of people” (p. 229), and that such illustrations “provide tangible form” (p. 47) that can shape how we imagine future possibilities for action. However, metaphors that we regularly use to describe and know the world are not static entities and need to evolve alongside our changing understandings. The hydra and whack-a-mole show how metaphors have the potential to concretize large concepts into forms that are understandable and actionable.

But, on the other hand, metaphors can also limit potential actions in response to neoliberal privatization.

### **A metaphorical battle of privatization**

As metaphors, the hydra and whack-a-mole suggest an adversarial relationship between



two sides: one side generates or instigates an unexpected *action*, while the other side needs to defend itself in *reaction*. In both cases, the metaphors require first, an antagonist, and then a responsive protagonist to defeat the chaotic onslaught of hydra heads or pesky moles. When describing privatization, the metaphors encapsulate the fight between private entities (the hydra and moles) as infiltrating the public good in multiple ways, emanating from one machine or body.

The battle requires an actor wielding a sword (or mallet) to bring down a singular entity with several moving parts, representing how the many forms of privatization work their way into public education. As a metaphor, the hydra and

whack-a-mole suggest the need to reactively fight against an external source of frustration by either defeating the body of the hydra as its heads continue to multiply, or by being able to anticipate and quickly take down the whack-a-mole machine's next move.

These multiple actions, however, are limited in scope, and they position privatization — albeit with many heads or moles — as one entity or a machine to be defeated in a reactionary way; as if privatization emanates from one distinct source, which we can defeat by being faster with a mallet or handier with a sword. The metaphors also paint the picture of a singular protagonist — usually only one person battles the hydra or plays whack-a-mole — so the hero

in the fight for the public good versus privatization is imagined as working alone.

Clearly our metaphors need updating and fine tuning. We know that privatization is not a singular external threat, but that it occurs in multiple ways, through many sources, and that one person or organization cannot dismantle systems of privatization in public education alone. We also know that there are multiple sources of privatization in education; some are indirectly connected to each other, like a hydra's heads, but that does not tell us the whole story, nor does it allow for a better navigation of privatizing influences that exist internally, working within the education system. Such actors, be they politicians, consultants, or even trustees, are not separate from the education system, and in such circumstances the issue is not simply an external foe to be defeated — the system itself needs to be examined.

### **Moving away from metaphors of “good” and “bad”**

In the natural world, a rhizome is a type of root often found in grasses. It grows laterally underground, sending up shoots in opportunistic places, and creating new base plants if shoots are cut off from one another. The rhizome as a metaphor was originally developed by theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) to conceptualize complex non-hierarchical systems and processes, particularly helpful in fields of learning and knowledge production.

Rhizomes organically grow and adapt to their surrounding environments, resourcefully using the space around them to sprout above and below the ground. Similarly, education privatization has taken root using multiple pathways in relationship with each provincial/territorial, political, economic, and social context, in each case using opportunities in the system to proliferate. Some of these aspects are visible (above ground), like public-private partnerships. Some are less obvious, like subtle discursive changes around public education that shift towards corporate language.

Rhizomes are also dispersed and do not have a central machinery or body like the whack-a-mole and hydra. Like privatization in education, there is no central person or singular entity (corporation or government) that can be pointed to as being the sole cause or originator of privatization. While it is true that some governments or leaders have allowed for more corporate influence than others, its slow and uneven implementation across Canada over the last 30 years has multiple points of entry.

Lastly, due to the rhizome's organically opportunistic growth patterns and decentralized “body,” the whole root system needs to be inspected, and not just pruned at points we can see above the ground. Unlike the hydra and whack-a-mole (adversaries contained within one body or machine), both good and bad exist within the rhizome, so simply destroying the whole system will not work. Nuanced responses and contextualized knowledge are needed to weed out privatization's entanglement in public education.

### **A new metaphor requires collective actions**

The rhizome offers a different way of seeing the problem of privatization, including its histories of production, continuity in public systems, and insight into which contexts have supported and influenced its growth. It positions privatization as not only something we can advocate against, but also something we can follow, pulling up the roots and tracing them to other systems across provincial, territorial, and global borders. To accomplish this, it will not work to have a single hero against a singular foe as it requires a strategically networked, collective response: tracing relationships and finding privatization's deep connections, bit by bit cultivating a better environment so that privatization cannot take root.

We offer this commentary to further collective thinking, but we know it too has its limits. Collectively, we are in a place where we need a new metaphor — for explaining the multiple ways in which privatization is embedded in education systems, but also to build networks with the collective capacity to advocate for public education as a public good across Canada. ●

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**Nichole E. Grant** (she/her) currently resides with her family in Ottawa, Ontario, the traditional unceded territories of the Anishinaabe Algonquin Peoples and is Researcher and Policy Analyst at the Canadian Teachers' Federation. Nichole's research focuses on anti-oppressive practices and educational policies in Canada, as well as methods of knowledge formation and neoliberalism in everyday spaces.

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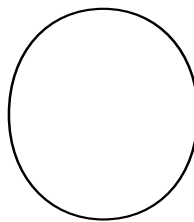
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# Connect the dots

## School boards, democracy, and human rights

Molly Hurd

 In a gray day last September, I attended a counter-protest at the Grand Parade in Halifax. I was there as part of “Education Saves Lives” — a response to the deceptively named “1 Million March4Kids”, a nationwide movement fueled by some parents’ opposition to what they call “gender ideology in schools”. It was a chilling example of one arm of the culture wars that are dividing us — the so-called “Parents’ Rights” lobby.

The counter-protest vastly outnumbered the actual March4Kids, but I found the blatantly misleading signs displayed by the parents’ rights group disturbing. “Hands off our Kids” implies that teachers are “grooming” and “sexualizing” children with sex education and the acceptance of SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) which is enshrined in most education system’s inclusivity policies and in our human rights code.

Another sign “Our Kids, our Consent” shows that some parents have been told that their rights trump their children’s. While some might be surprised or unfamiliar with the frankness of some of the language used in Canadian sex ed classes, it is disappointing to see parents, many who are new to Canada, being co-opted by this movement and lied to about our public schools’ work on inclusivity.

Another common sign there, “Education, not Indoctrination” shows the influence of the

American far right on Canadian conservatives — the idea that public schools are indoctrinating children with a socialist, “collectivist” ethos, as well as actively promoting a “decadent” 2SLGBTQIA+ lifestyle.

In our article “Not Immune: the Neoliberal Trajectory of Public Education Reform in Nova Scotia,”<sup>1</sup> published in *Our Schools/ Our Selves* only a year ago, Angela Gillis and I talked about how the lack of school boards and other mechanisms for parent feedback in Nova Scotia leaves our education system open to the influence of small “anti-woke” groups like the above. Since then, both New Brunswick and Saskatchewan’s Conservative governments have overruled school boards, educational professionals and even elements of their own caucuses and turned back the clock on the advances their teachers have made with regards to gender identity and inclusivity.

By changing Policy 713 to require teachers to inform the parents of any children under 16 of a name or gender identity change, Premier Higgs has whittled away at a policy developed by educators to protect 2SLGBTQIA+ students. In spite of having okayed the policy less than two years before, he was swayed by a small group of parents protesting the policy at a workshop where teachers were working on its implementation.

Saskatchewan’s Premier Moe made a similar change, and then declared he would use the notwithstanding clause if necessary to defend it



against a court challenge. Manitoba's Conservative premier ran partially on a promise to pass the same type of anti-trans legislation in their recent election, but was fortunately defeated.

Given recent events, it seems likely that other like-minded premiers in Canada would do this when they feel it politically expedient as part of the increasingly right wing ideology underpinning today's conservatives. The question Nova Scotians are asking is, could it happen here?

### **Nova Scotia**

Nova Scotia's premier Tim Houston was elected with a majority government in September 2021, making it very clear in his campaigning that his party is the "Progressive" Conservative Party, distinguishing it from the federal Conservatives. At the beginning of his mandate, he initiated several programs which had pundits declaring his government was more progressive than previous Liberal governments. However, more recently they passed Bill 329 in which the provincial Minister of Housing has taken over the Halifax Regional Municipality planning and development authority, ostensibly to streamline the building of "affordable" housing to address the housing crisis. This they did despite cries of foul from all other levels of government, as well as from

the opposition. Political scientist Tom Urbaniak declares that this move is a gift to developers and will invite corruption.<sup>2</sup> Others (correctly) decry it as anti-democratic.

One of the Premier's campaign promises was to revisit and possibly restore the elected school boards which were abolished by the previous government. This may have given him his very slim majority as many teachers and parents switched their vote from the Liberals, who they felt had bargained with them unfairly in 2017.<sup>3</sup>

But after a series of "public engagements" (surveys and something called Thought-Exchange) with parents, educators and representatives of African NSian, Indigenous and Disability groups,<sup>4</sup> the government recently announced that instead of reinstating elected school boards, they would increase funding to School Advisory Councils. These volunteer parent groups were touted by the Liberals as the new mechanism for accountability to replace school boards, but have been almost non-existent in many schools: raising the annual funding from \$5,000 to \$10,000 is unlikely to galvanize busy parents.

So, given these recent events, yes, I believe that if Tim Houston gets another majority or even if he is lobbied by a very vocal group such



as the organizers of the March4Kids, he could change some of the policies around gender identity and inclusivity, perhaps even going further than premiers Higgs and Moe. Without school boards, where concerned citizens have the chance to bring up issues and have them dealt with through a democratic structure, if parents rights' groups get a sympathetic ear from the government, there is little that can be done to stop a top-down change.

### **Pronoun policy**

To someone who is not a teacher, the mere requirement to add parental permission for their child's pronoun change may seem innocuous. But it strikes at the heart of the teacher-child relationship and adds to their responsibility to make school a safe place for all children.

Teachers are constantly put in positions where they must make decisions about confidences and observations they and their pupils make. If a child confides that they are being abused at home, does the teacher call the parents? If a 13 year-old whose parents believe that god created only two genders wants to join a Gay-Straight Alliance or wants to change pronouns, should a teacher be forced to inform those parents? This is where a child's human

right to safety and protection of their privacy butts up against a parent's right to know. In Canadian law, the child's right is paramount. It will be interesting to see what happens when a New Brunswick or Saskatchewan teacher refuses to get permission from a parent before using different pronouns — will their union defend them? What will the courts decide?

NDP MLA Lisa LaChance is believed to be the first genderqueer person elected to the NS House of Assembly. On the Trans Day of Visibility last spring they spoke in the House about the rise in trans- and homophobic hate in this province. They described pride flags being desecrated, 2SLGBTQIA+ businesses targeted with online hate, trans students afraid to use the bathrooms of their chosen gender at school and hateful graffiti vandalizing buildings.

Teachers have reported a rise in violence and hate in schools — one told me about a child taken out and homeschooled rather than be taught by an openly gay teacher. Another teacher worried that the newer principals (hired since the Glaze Report) do not have the experience or training (or protection of a union) to deal with incidents of bullying or to stand up to parents who make vexatious complaints about gender orientation or sex education.





Teachers, already overworked and underappreciated, are concerned about this new type of “Parents’ Rights” movement that has the potential to further undermine or even wipe out years of their work at creating an inclusive environment in public schools. Guidelines for teachers and administrators on how to support trans and gender non-conforming students were developed in 2014, but many advocates, health professionals and students feel that they are inadequate and urgently need to be updated. The government promised a new set by the end of 2023, but in December, the CBC, after filing an access to information request, found that new guidelines have been developed and have been “under review” since September. CBC did not obtain a draft copy, nor is there a set date for the public (and educators) to respond to it.<sup>5</sup>

Having to use access to information to find out what is happening to educational policies, whether it is about delays or the actual content of them is indicative of the lack of transparency and accountability in Nova Scotia’s present Department of Education. The School Advisory Councils have no power to change anything or access to information apart from what they get from their principals. School boards, that extra layer of democracy, where contentious

issues can be openly debated and where the democratically elected members can lobby the government on behalf of their constituents, do provide that authority and access.

After attending that counter-demonstration where we out-numbered the original “Parents’ Rights” group at least three-to-one, I feel confident that school board meetings — if we still had school boards — would provide us with a venue to show up and debate these regressive views (even out-vote them). To help protect public debate and engagement with key issues about public education, Nova Scotia needs to bring back school boards. ●

**Molly Hurd** has had a wide variety of teaching experiences in northern Quebec, rural Nova Scotia, Nigeria, Tanzania and Britain. She was teacher and Headteacher at Halifax Independent School for twenty years and is the author of the book, “Best School in the World: How students, teachers and parents have created a model that can transform Canada’s public schools”. Molly is a long-standing member of Educators for Social Justice-NS, and is a member of the Steering Committee of CCPA-NS.

## Notes

1 *Our Schools/Our Selves* Jan.2023

2 <https://www.saltwire.com/nova-scotia/news/youre-setting-yourself-up-for-massive-fraud-halifaxs-fast-track-list-of-favored-developers-opens-door-to-abuse-experts-say-100918714/>

3 Double Glazed — <https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2021/07/CCPA%20Monitor%20July%20August%202021%20OSOS.pdf>

4 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/school-board-public-education-governance-plan-fall-1.6957304>

5 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/changing-guidance-teachers-support-gender-diverse-students-1.7057742>



# Costly gambles

## Who loses from a commodified university education?

Matthew Kurtz, PhD

Perhaps you've heard the one about Harvard University? That now it's basically a hedge fund, but with a school attached?

That quip is becoming more applicable to some universities in Canada too. And with the volatility of the financial markets, this is creating problems for the current generation of students, staff, professors, and early-career academics.

Here is one example. At the University of Ottawa where I teach part-time, the president announced last year that the school had lost \$72 million in the market value of its investments due to a "dramatic decline in financial markets." In response, the university "reduced academic and administrative unit budgets by 3.5%" for the upcoming year. Graduate students saw huge reductions in what they could earn as teaching assistants, professors were left with more marking, and this doesn't begin to tally the other costs — among staff and among the undergraduates — that also resulted from these budget cuts.

\$72 million is a lot of money, but keep in mind that the *actual* deficit at uOttawa last year was just \$3.6 million. When compared to \$1.34 billion in total revenues earned from the school's core work, \$3.6 million represents a deficiency of less than one percent. Put another way, the revenue we generated at uOttawa — as professors, staff, and students — covered

99.7% of the expenses that the institution incurred. In the nonprofit world, that's close to a balanced budget.

We need to remember that the \$72 million that the president mentioned was a *paper loss*. It reflects the ups and downs of the financial markets, and their volatility is now magnified by the size of the institution's portfolio (Table 1). UOttawa's investment portfolio held \$1.16 billion in April 2023, composed of bonds ("fixed income"), stocks ("equities"), off-campus real estate, and other assets.

The money in uOttawa's portfolio has been accumulating for decades. The problem is that it is not based entirely on donations and investment income anymore. They account for all of the 'endowment' (valued at \$334 million, included in the tallies in Table 1), but donations and investment income only account for *part* of the other \$829 million in the university's investment portfolio. Presumably the remainder includes some from the university's basic operations — capital drawn from the surplus, what it clears from tuition, research grants, and services — the extra money left-over after the expenses were paid — which has been re-directed into these investment funds.

To generate that surplus, to make extra cash that can be 'invested' in the markets, the school's executives have been cutting expenses that otherwise could have been invested in our students and in the university's workforce.

**Table 1: University of Ottawa's investment portfolio**

Fair value of long-term investments, April 30, 2023, \$thousands

	Pooled funds	Segregated funds	Total
Fixed income	114,607	280,728	395,335
Canadian equities	172,773	4,884	177,657
Foreign equities	218,513	-305	218,208
Real estate and infrastructure	226,538		226,538
Hedge funds	51,844		51,844
Private debt	71,177		71,177
Investments in wholly owned subsidiaries	22,236		22,236
<b>Total</b>	<b>877,688</b>	<b>285,307</b>	<b>1,162,995</b>

Source: University of Ottawa Notes to Consolidated Financial Statements

**Part-time faculty**

One way that university executives cut expenses is by replacing full-time professors who are retiring with lower-paid part-time professors, an increasingly common practice. Across Ontario the number of full-time professors has increased very slowly since 2008. At uOttawa, the number of full-time professors was actually flat from 2008 to 2022, (around 1,250 people), and only started growing again in this last year.

Historical data on the number of part-time professors is hard to find, but one indicator points to rapid increases: the proportion of the total expenses that uOttawa used to pay its part-time professors was only 1.7% in 2002. By 2022, it had climbed to 4.1%. This increase is not because we are now much better paid. It is because, even in proportion to higher student enrollments, there are many more part-time professors at uOttawa.

How much work has been turned over to part-time professors? That data is also hard to find. The ideal indicator would track the number of individual student credit hours that are taught by full-time professors vs part-time professors. In practice, one can count the course-sections that are delivered by members of the two groups: full-time vs part-time.

This is something I have monitored since 2019. I focused on lecture-based courses and did not include seminars, labs, tutorials, or field-courses. Data limitations prevented me from including the Faculty of Education as well

as part-time professors on long-term contracts. Some results are in Table 2.

Consider some details first. As is generally the case across Canada, departments in the Arts are relying more on part-time faculty. Full-time faculty are not being replaced, or at best, not very often. The 'social' disciplines (social sciences, law, management, health) rely more on part-time faculty than fields based on the natural sciences (e.g. engineering, medicine).

The most important point is that uOttawa's part-time professors teach over 40% of its undergraduate lecture-based course sections. If those on long-term contracts were included, it would likely be in the neighbourhood of 50%.

So, well over 40% of the lectures are delivered by part-time faculty, but according to COFO (Council of Ontario Finance Officers) data, salaries for part-time faculty at uOttawa accounted for 4.1% of the total expenses in the 2021/2022 academic year. The full-time professor salaries, on the other hand, account for 18% of all expenses.

This is one way to save money, and money saved can then be 'invested' in stock markets.

But consider the costs. Part-time faculty are not fully integrated into the university community, and they are provided with few (if any) research funds and conference attendance fees. They may be far less familiar with the services that are available on campus for students; this is another way that students can end up short-changed. If they are teaching

**Table 2: Part-time professors at University of Ottawa**

By faculty in the fall of each year

Academic unit	Lecture-section count			% taught by part-time profs		
	2019	2021	2023	2019	2021	2023
Faculty of Arts	749	844	697	48%	51%	52%
Faculty of Social Sciences	435	704	436	39%	29%	45%
Faculty of Health	144	149	162	37%	53%	44%
Telfer School of Management	200	222	230	50%	47%	43%
Faculty of Law	217	313	217	25%	18%	30%
Faculty of Science	226	263	229	25%	22%	26%
Faculty of Engineering	182	189	192	29%	28%	23%
Faculty of Medicine	37	46	70	0%	0%	0%
<b>uOttawa (excl Faculty of Education)</b>	<b>2,190</b>	<b>2,730</b>	<b>2,233</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>40%</b>

more than one course per semester (many do), there is little job security, because budget cuts can wipe out sections that part-time faculty are last-in-line to teach.

Most importantly (and I say this as a part-time professor who will soon retire from teaching), part-time faculty positions in their current form offer little hope to scholars in the early stages of their careers. Our most promising students see bleak prospects for the academic profession. This is made worse by ‘investment’ strategies that leave our universities exposed to the ups-and-downs of stock markets. These institutions are supposed to be investments for the future, but the financial markets offer little security.

Still, it is to these same markets that many universities have turned to generate more income in the future, and a considerable portion of the money invested in those markets no doubt comes from “spending less now” — short-changing current generations of students — in order to “save for the future.”

**Investment strategies**

One might claim that most universities have few investments beyond their endowments. But uOttawa is in good company. Just consider three peer institutions: York University (in Toronto), Queen’s University (in Kingston), and Western University (in London, Ontario). They are all similar in size and, like uOttawa, the latter two have medical schools as well. All four have

built up their portfolios well beyond the size of their donation-based endowments over the last 12 years.

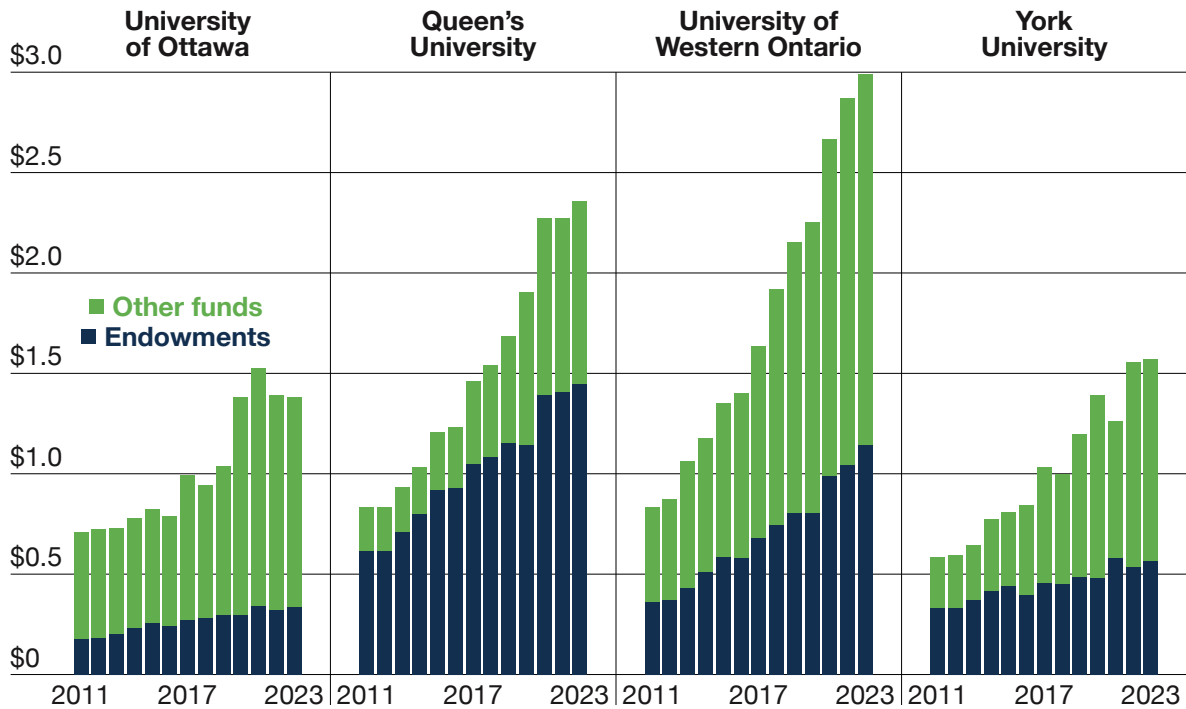
Figure 1 shows what this looks like. Compared to uOttawa, Queen’s and Western both have portfolios now worth well over \$2 billion. Their permanent, donor-based endowments are in green and other funds are in purple. The totals include both short-term and long-term investments. But the long-term investments constitute the largest portions, and they are subject to the most volatility in the market-value.

You might think, based on Figure 1, that Western was better at choosing its investments, but this is not necessarily true. Using some math called “Internal Rates of Return,” the average annual yield on Ottawa’s long-term investments seems to have been about 6.3% over these 12 years. For Western’s portfolio, the average yield looks like 5.4% per year. At uOttawa, around 60% of the increase over those 12 years came from financial market returns — including that ugly year in 2022 that the university’s president mentioned. For Western, financial returns accounted for only 50% of their increase over the same years. Donations make up part of the difference: Western received almost half a billion over the period, while the other three universities received substantially less.

How likely is it that the remainder — a considerable part of the other 50% — came

## Figure 1: The increasing value of university portfolios with stocks and bonds

2011-23, \$billions



from cutting expenses and plowing the surplus revenues into the investments? I think the evidence is strong. Western, for instance, borrowed capital from its own workforce by letting its liabilities for employee future benefits climb by \$100 million over the period. This provided some money that its executives could direct into the school's investment portfolio. Western also borrowed money from bond-market investors (\$100 million in 2017), which cash-flow statements suggest was used to buy more financial securities, not to build or renovate campus infrastructure. Queen's, York, and uOttawa have done this too.

In other words, a number of universities in Canada are using leveraged investment strategies: borrowing money at low interest rates in bond markets so as to increase the size of their investment portfolios, while cutting many expenses at the same time. It's the "spend less now, save for the future" mantra.

Still, consider just one line on uOttawa's list of expenses: the \$51.4 million that the school spent on the salaries of its part-time faculty. That one line, which made use of 4.1% of the university's total budget, paid for the delivery

of well over 40% of the undergraduate lectures on campus. Comparatively, the total that the uOttawa has left in the hands of some hedge funds was virtually the same amount (see Table 1).

### Conclusion

When cutting expenses in order to build a university's financial portfolio, it would help to remember that these funds, held in reserve, are a gamble on decent market returns. Nowadays, these gambles look quite risky. Instead, that money could be 'invested' in younger adults, and in part it could be used to create more stable jobs, and more of them, for our early-career academics — more promising jobs that involve teaching, paid research, allocations for public service, better integration into the university community, and good possibilities for advancement. Doing so would help build a more socially sustainable future. ●

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# School grounds turned battlegrounds

## War, conflict and peace education

Steven Staples

Months after the October 7, 2023 attacks by Hamas fighters on Israelis, and the ensuing and ongoing bombardment of Gaza by Israeli Defence Forces that continue to kill thousands of Palestinians, the war and its underlying historical and political context is a simmering daily reality in Canadian schools, especially where students' families have ties to either side.

According to pollster Nik Nanos, "The conflict has created tension across the country that is being felt in our communities." Seven in 10 Canadians are concerned (39 per cent) or somewhat concerned (30 per cent) that there will be an increase in hate-motivated incidents in our communities resulting from the conflict in the Middle East according to his recent opinion research (Nanos, 2023).

Schools reflect and are visited by the political and social forces that shape the broader society. Since October 7th, incidents of reported racism directed at Palestinian and Jewish

communities have spiked, according to the Toronto District School Board.

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario called on school boards to ensure those affected are supported and safe. "The conflict will undoubtedly affect the sense of safety and well-being of many students and staff members, some of whom have family members in Israel and Palestine," ETFO said in an October 10 statement (Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, 2023).

But direction from the Ministry, boards and administrators has been of little help, and may be making matters worse in some cases.

For instance, the Toronto District School Board reversed its policy of informing parents by letter of hate incidents at schools in a measure to lessen their impact. But several parents were "disheartened" to learn from their children that swastikas were spray painted on school property, rather than normally being notified by school officials over email. A board spokesperson explained these reports may result in further harm to students and the overall school climate, and communication about such



incidents prompted copycat incidents (“Toronto school board,” 2024).

“There’s been a lack of information and nothing has come out [from the Ministry] pedagogically and policy-speaking,” said Dr. Vidya Shah, Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University. Educators have been left largely on their own to navigate angry parents, activist groups, and wary children, sometimes resulting in confusion and frustration in a school system that is reaching the boiling point.

Teachers are trying their best to create a safe space for pupils. “At this point in the year I’m pretty connected with them as individuals and I check in with them one on one if I see that they seem disconnected from school in any way,” a Grade 8 Toronto public school teacher, who wished to remain anonymous, told me in late October. “I think most of us are just letting students know that we are here for them if they need to talk.”

But troubling incidents have persisted. In October a principal of an Ottawa public school apologized for asking an elementary school student to remove the Palestinian flag as their profile picture during an online class (Williams,

2023). A video of the incident reported on by CBC recorded the principal saying to the student, “We will follow up with your family because we want to keep all students feeling safe, welcome and included in our classrooms.” The student replied, “You’re not really welcoming me right now.” Two other students changed their photos to Palestinian flags as well.

A statement from the school board following the incident said, “While this was regrettable, we would ask for understanding as school staff are working to navigate an extremely challenging international situation in a way that allows all students and staff to feel safe and supported.”

The circumstances and media coverage surrounding what was likely a well-intentioned principal acting in a policy vacuum will no doubt give pause to other educators trying to address the conflict in classroom settings.

The public school teacher in Toronto I spoke with said, “We had a quick staff meeting a couple weeks stating that we need to be aware and sensitive to the fact that many of our students and their families are being impacted emotionally by what is happening. We have quite a number of Palestinian students. We are



allowed to speak of the war and what's happening if we feel comfortable and are informed enough."

But will teachers feel comfortable and informed enough to broach the subject with students, with so much scrutiny focused on teachers by parents, activists and the media? Are there more risks than benefits?

Sadly, in the absence of sufficient guidance and support, it's perhaps unsurprising that teachers may prefer to avoid handling controversial topics altogether.

Dr. Sharon Anne Cook, Professor Emerita and Distinguished University Professor at the University of Ottawa, points out in her reflections on a career as a peace educator working with pre-service teachers, that early career teachers face plenty of barriers. "They feared that they would emphasize the wrong sources of conflict in this welter of detail...they were unpracticed in unsnarling the cultural origins of conflict and worried about hurting the feelings of participating students," she writes (Cook, 2014).

In November, the Ontario Ministry of Education announced new and expanded mandatory learning about the Holocaust in the compulsory Grade 10 History course and partnerships with Jewish organizations. Last year the province announced an expansion of its plan to combat Islamophobia in schools with province-wide guides, resources, materials and Muslim community partnerships to counter Islamophobic narratives in culture, online, and in the classroom.

Still, the Ministry has not done enough to avoid some teachers and schools refusing to deal with the subject, which has allowed frustration to grow. In some jurisdictions the topic is seen as either an issue requiring conflict-resolution or anti-bullying tactics. In other contexts the conflict is dealt with as a mental health matter where counseling services are provided to help affected students. But treating the thousands of deaths, in some cases of students' family members, as bullying or mental health falls well short of the demands of students.

### **What is the role of peace education in schools?**

The schools administration's reluctance to address the issue in school is a missed opportunity to help students grapple with the roots of conflict, and ways to promote peace in this, and other contexts.

Peace education employs a range of pedagogical approaches. In early grade-levels,

peace education might focus on the personal safety of students, such as anti-bullying strategies in school-yards. In later grade-levels, peace education might incorporate conflict-resolution.

Influential peace education scholar, the late Betty Reardon, did not limit the goal of peace education to "understanding each other" or "nonviolent person behavior," but was very clear that the social purpose of peace education is to eliminate social injustice, renounce violence, and abolish war, which connect the political and interpersonal dimension (Winterstein, 2013).

Like Reardon, peace education expert Dr. Kathy Bickmore at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education is critical of the manner in which conflict-resolution is sometimes taught, considering it better described as "conflict-avoidance."

Bickmore, who prefers the term *peacebuilding*, says peacebuilding education is "defined by peace studies theorists as overcoming structural violence (exploitation, repression, marginalization) and cultural violence (sub-conscious beliefs or assumptions supporting violence)." It should include themes of harmony-building and communication, individual skill-building such as critical reasoning, and political, international and social conflict (Bickmore, 2005).

In her study of curricula from several Canadian provinces, Bickmore identified three thematic groupings:

#### ***Harmony-building***

- 1. Interpersonal contribution, responsibility, communication and cooperation**
- 2. Appreciation of diverse heritages and viewpoints, multiculturalism, national unity**

#### ***Individual skill-building***

- 3. Conflict resolution: managing disputes and avoiding violence**
- 4. Critical reasoning and problem solving skills**

#### ***Political, international and social conflict***

- 5. Citizen participation, governance and (Canadian) ideals**
- 6. Global interdependence: peace, human rights, and ecology**
- 7. Social conflict issues (past or present conflicts or public controversies)**

To contribute to democratic peacebuilding, explicit curriculum would have to delve into the 'unsafe but real' world of social and political

conflicts that defy simple negotiated settlement, including the roots and human costs of current local and global injustices, says Bickmore.

And what of the teacher's own values when teaching peace education? Are they expected to be set aside and the teacher adopts the role of a neutral facilitator of learning?

Kathy Bickmore says, "Given the violent state of the world, presumably no peacebuilding citizenship educator pretends objectivity — we seek to reduce and transform violence and social exclusion."

But Vidya Shah argues that teachers are caught between the expectations of the school system and their own reaction to the terrible conflict in Gaza. "Individual teachers have to speak out because of this internal struggle," she says. And without support, some fear losing their jobs.

### **Parents and students want schools to do more**

Parent groups on both sides of the conflict are pressuring school boards to do more for students. In October parents accused the Toronto District School Board of not doing enough to protect students from anti-Palestinian racism. In response, a TDSB spokesperson said the school board focuses on mental health and wellbeing of students, and takes steps to prevent any form of hate "such as antisemitism or islamophobia in our classrooms" ("Jewish, Palestinian parents," 2023).

These measures were insufficient to avoid a walkout by students in November while the death toll in Gaza skyrocketed as a result of the punishing Israeli bombings. Ceasefire Now, describing itself as a loose coalition of 42 high school groups in Ontario, posted a list of demands that included a ceasefire and that "Ontario schools protect Palestinian students, create safe spaces for them, and refrain from censoring and punishing solidarity with Palestine" (Muslim Link, 2023).

While the Ontario Ministry of Education has demonstrated a clear commitment through curriculum changes to teach the Holocaust and address anti-Jewish racism, some have pointed to a lack of equity of approach, where many educators will be caught between their own personal internal struggles and conflict avoidance.

Dr. Shah is frustrated with what she described as repression of pro-Palestinian voices and views. "I have never seen it to this degree," she said, pointing to several cases of teachers and principals being sanctioned for speaking out on social media against Israel and in support of Palestinians. She says authorities need to, "stop criminalizing resistance and stop policing language so people can speak their conscience without fear of losing their jobs."

Ontario's Education Minister Stephen Lecce said following the October 7 attack he warned all school boards the government did not want "personal perspectives" brought to the classroom. "I think fundamentally the ministry's role is to make sure we build the capacity and confidence of teachers to be allies in rooting out this hate," he said.

Dr. Bickmore says it's very challenging for schools to strike the right balance when handling such complex events, but it's not impossible. "Teachers get blamed when things go badly, but they often don't get a whole lot of support to do things well" ("Jewish, Palestinian parents," 2023). ●

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