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Editorial

Enduring privatization of public education in Canada

It's been nearly five years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and while the immediate crisis may be behind us, its effects live on. This special issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* emerged from our interest in understanding the pandemic's impact on the privatization of public education across Canada as part of our work with the Public Education Exchange (PEX).

The PEX is a formal partnership between the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the Canadian Teachers' Federation, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation, York University, the University of Windsor, and the University of Manitoba. The project is supported in part by funding from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

One of the PEX's main goals is to enable people to access and share knowledge about how public education is being privatized across Canada. Privatization happens in part through policies and practices that shift responsibilities from governments to private actors. Some refer to this process as the privatization *of* public education.[1] Shifting responsibilities include funding, governing, or providing education. Charging ever-increasing school fees and encouraging homeschooling are examples of these practices.

Privatization also occurs when policies enable people and businesses to profit from public education. The involvement of private actors sometimes changes how teaching and learning take place. Google classroom and other learning platforms are good examples of these changes and give rise to privatization *through* public education.[2]

Education privatization also happens when values, practices, and policies from the business sector are introduced into the public education systems. This is privatization *in* public education.[3] Policies that create and support markets in education, such as funding private schools with public money and offering specialized programs in public schools, are examples of privatization *in* public education.

The PEX creates ways for people to share their experiences of these overlapping and dynamic forms of education privatization. Our strategies include a dynamic website (www.pexnetwork.ca), an Instagram account, in-person and virtual events, and publications like this one. The PEX also engages publics across Canada in discussions about education privatization using the World Café approach. World cafés are structured dialogues that promote knowledge exchange and co-creation. Finally, the PEX aims to advance understanding of how crises impact education privatization.

Past issues of *Our Schools/Our Selves* highlight paths and variations of education privatization across the country. The articles in the current issue help us understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected this process. Research on past emergencies, such as the 2005 hurricane in New Orleans, shows that crises can create the conditions for education privatization to accelerate and expand.

While the articles in this special issue suggest that the pandemic did not dramatically impact the *trajectory* of education privatization across Canada, the process continued — and continues — today.

Enduring privatization

Private money is still widely used to address underfunding of public education. A number of school divisions across Western Canada continue to raise money by charging school fees and fundraising in schools and through charitable foundations. In Ontario, parents may pay for special education testing and supports. Across the country, public education systems look to international students as an additional source of funding. And as Yvonne Kelly demonstrates, relying on families and charities to fill funding gaps not only lets governments off the hook for fully funding public education, it's also unreliable.

Private actors are involved in public education in ways that go beyond funding. Manitoba spent almost $2 million to outsource mental health support for students, and educators across the country are embracing EdTech giants' artificial intelligence (AI) tools faster than policies can be put in place to ensure students' privacy and security and public oversight. Governments continue to form public-private partnerships (PPPs) that see private actors rather than educators deliver curriculum and provide training for students. The terms and benefits of these agreements are often unavailable for public scrutiny.

This issue's authors also demonstrate how privatization *in* public education continues, especially through on-going support for education markets. Alberta, for example, removed the cap on the number of charter schools allowed in the province and made it easier for new ones to be approved. It also launched a kindergarten home education pilot program. Meanwhile, Saskatchewan created a new category of private school, the Certified Independent School; schools of this type receive 75 percent of the average per student rate allocated to public schools. Previously, the most an independent school in Saskatchewan could receive was 50 percent.

BC and Quebec continue to fund private schools as well. Extensive research across Canada and around the world shows that policies supporting school choice, such as publicly funding private schools and creating new school types in education markets, offer more benefits to already advantaged children and recreate patterns of social inequality.

It hasn't all been business as usual, though. Since the pandemic's onset, the Ontario government has — no fewer than four times — offered money directly to families to support their children's education. Observers wonder if these payments might be priming the public to accept a voucher approach to education (becoming increasingly common in the U.S.) wherein families use public money to pay for any kind of schooling they choose. Multiple provinces have engaged in renewed debates over whether parents or public institutions should determine curriculum and decide what is in kids' best interests. Shannon Moore, Matthew McCorquodale-Bauer, and Kevin Lopuck argue that New Brunswick's accommodation of parents' demands through the revision of Policy 713 *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity* and Manitoba's and Saskatchewan's policies that allow parents to remove their children from classes about human sexuality constitutes a new kind of privatization: education privatization through private values.

Cautions and considerations

Privatization exacerbates *existing* inequities in educational systems. Public schools are not inherently equitable or just. Funded by political states, public education is a "site of continuous cultural struggle."[4] In Canada, public education has always been part of the colonial enterprise and cannot be divorced from genocidal acts toward Indigenous peoples and racial capitalism.

The study of privatization can focus our attention on policies and practices that undermine the pursuit of democratic and socially just public schools and the need to double down our efforts to achieve them.

Finally, while the articles in this special issue are written by authors from multiple locations in Canada, we acknowledge that this collection is missing voices from Indigenous communities as well as commentary on how privatization uniquely affects and is influenced by race and racism and other intersecting identities and oppressions. These gaps offer directions for the PEX as the network grows and engages with the many publics across Canada. We invite you to join us.

Dr. Sue Winton is the York Research Chair in Policy Analysis for Democracy, a professor in York University's Faculty of Education, Director of the Public Education Exchange, and author of *Unequal Benefits: Privatization and Public Education in Canada* (University of Toronto Press). Her research critically examines policy advocacy, influences, and enactment.

Sonia Martin is a PEX Research Assistant and Knowledge Mobilization and Events Coordinator and a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University. Sonia's doctoral inquiry is a transdisciplinary project that focuses on the connection between water and language to inform anti-colonial, anti-racist language practices for international education.

Notes

1 Stephen J Ball and Deborah Youdell, "Hidden Privatisation in Public Education" (Education International, 2008), 10.

2 Stephen J. Ball, "Privatising Education, Privatising Education Policy, Privatising Educational Research: Network Governance and the 'Competition State,'" *Journal of Education Policy* 24, no. 1 (2009): 83.

3 Ball and Youdell, 9.

4 Jessica Gerrard, "Whose Public, Which Public? The Challenge for Public Education," *Critical Studies in Education* 59, no. 2 (2018): 209.

Illustration by Jo Penhale

The shifting educational funding landscape in Ontario and Quebec

Holt Stuart-Hitchcox and Lana Parker

Public education systems in Canada face significant challenges relating to underfunding and the concomitant shift to privatization. Underinvestment and reliance on what are sometimes colloquially termed "alternative revenue streams" (e.g., public-private partnerships) erode the long-term sustainability of public education and compromise the day-to-day experience of schooling for students and their families.

As a part of the Public Education Exchange (PEX) research project, our team examined shifts in public funding that increased privatization in Ontario and Quebec. We contend that conditions of austerity force schools and districts to fundraise for themselves, often leading to unsustainable strategies, such as the increased reliance on international student tuition that we see particularly in the postsecondary context. We also argue that while the two provinces are quite different, a pattern is clear: as budgets shift away from full public funding and school districts become dependent on privatization, education systems in both provinces are becoming increasingly inequitable.

Ontario public education: a slow creep toward unsustainable public funding

In Ontario, education funding cuts are increasingly starving the public system of much-needed resources. Though the government claims to be making historically large investments in education, Ontario education funding has repeatedly failed to keep pace with inflation. A recent release of education ministry documents suggests that Ontario school boards are running broad deficits, relying on reserve funds to maintain operations. Many

of these boards have already depleted their resources or are expected to deplete them in the next few years.

The constrained budget has also led the government to increase class sizes and cut program grants. A further manifestation of the unsustainable funding model is the backlog of repairs that are needed to keep schools safe and healthy for students. The fallout from this funding shortage will create more stress on the system and will likely worsen classroom learning conditions in the immediate, medium, and long-term.

One of the ways the government is cutting education spending is by compelling schools to expand mandatory online learning. The Ontario secondary curriculum now requires that, unless they opt-out, students must graduate high school with a minimum of two online courses. The Ministry of Education has lowered the amount of funding for schools based on projections of online courses taken, meaning that the shift to mandatory online courses will lead to fewer actual funding dollars for in-person public school funding.

In addition, the provincial government has encouraged TVO to pursue marketization of their online learning modules, selling courses to other provinces and other countries. The move to online learning and the attendant prospect of curriculum sales may be largely motivated by a fiscal rationale, since there is significant research showing that online classes are unsustainable and unengaging, and fail to meet the needs of Ontario students, teachers and parents.

In a more overt move toward education privatization, the Ontario government has engaged in explicit transfers of public education funds to private interests. These private-public partnerships include restricting $12.5 million of education funding to be spent towards "ministry-approved" early reading screening tools from Pearson, Nelson and Acadience, and $15 million to go towards similarly approved "math skills digital tools" from a broad range of education corporations. The government also partnered with Rogers and Apple, purchasing internet and iPads for at-home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, patterns in Ontario suggest a drift away from adequately funded public education, with increases in alternative revenue streams and with funds being diverted through public-private partnerships and direct parental payments.

The COVID-19 pandemic also saw the repeated diversion of public education funds away from the schools. The 2021 *COVID-19 Child Benefit* and the 2022 *Plan to Catch Up* saw per-child payments to parents of $200-$250 and $400-$500 respectively, meant to be spent on costs associated with student learning during the pandemic. These were funds that could instead have been used to address clear concrete needs and deficiencies within the already underfunded public system. Direct-to-parent payments have also made those familiar with the American education system uneasy, as they could set the groundwork for a future transition to voucher-like programs.

These examples, among many others, indicate a pattern of moving public funds from the schools, where they are sorely needed, into the coffers of private for-profit companies, who bear no commitment to facilitating sustainable and quality public education.

Overall, patterns in Ontario suggest a drift away from adequately funded public education, with increases in alternative revenue streams and with funds being diverted through public-private partnerships and direct parental payments. Should this continue apace, school boards will likely be forced to fundraise (producing ongoing inequality in socioeconomically diverse neighbourhoods), seek international student tuition dollars, and rely on technology to replace in-person, personalized educator-student instruction.

Quebec public education: "l'école à trois vitesses"

Quebec's education system has a more overt emphasis on privatization. Referred to as "L'école à trois-vitesses", or a three-tiered education system, Quebec's system is divided into regular public schools, selective public schools, and tax-subsidized privatized schools. The prevalence of high-school attendance at Quebec private schools has grown steadily over the years, comprising only 5 percent of students in 1970 but rising to 21 percent in 2022, with 39 percent of Montreal students and 42 percent of Quebec City students attending private schools. In addition to private schools, 20 percent of Quebec high-school students now attend selective school; specialized programs which choose students based on entry assessments including exams and auditions. These programs are exclusionary in nature, often declining admission to students who have not been adequately trained in the program's specialty.

The three-tier system disadvantages students attending regular public schools, reproducing

systems of inequity broadly reflective of social and class origin. Private and selective public schools offer enriched programs in diverse subjects, which significantly raise the likelihood of attending students being accepted at postsecondary institutions. Meanwhile, with a concentration of disadvantaged students not admitted to selective schools and unable to afford private schools, the ability of the public system to meet the needs of the students (and the political pressure to do so) is compromised.

Looking at the impacts of this system, a study found that regular public school graduates attend college and university after graduation at rates of 49 percent and 15 percent respectively, while selective schools see these enrollment rates rise to 91 percent and 51 percent and private schools display even more drastic percentiles at 94 percent and 60 percent. The attendance of these schools is highly reflective of social origin and leads to the reproduction and intensification of class divisions.

This is worsened by the fact that Quebec private schools receive heavy subsidies from the provincial government. Though the official percentage of per-pupil funding at Quebec private schools is 60 percent of that provided to a public-school student, some experts argue that after accounting for funding discrepancies, the proportion of funding is much closer to 75 percent. As there are significant funding challenges in the Quebec public school system as-is, it is concerning that the government would choose to allocate such a large amount of public resources to private institutions, especially as they cut school property tax rates by approximately 13 percent between 2017 and 2022.

Simultaneously, the Quebec government has refused to cut funding to private schools, with Education Minister Bernard Drainville simply stating "it's not in the cards." Former NDP leader Tom Mulcair believes that the system is actually working as intended, writing that in Quebec "wealthier families, including politicians, keep a privileged system in place that gives their kids better schools, higher grades and better prospects," noting that "Pauline Marois has been the only Quebec education minister that I know of to have sent their kids only to public school."

Broadly speaking, the systemic stratification of the Quebec public system and consistent diversion of public funds towards private schooling defies democratic ideals for public education as a levelling ground where students are given the opportunity to pursue high-quality study regardless of social origin. Disinvesting in private schooling and returning committed funding to the public system would help Quebec to revitalize their struggling public schools.

Though the official percentage of per-pupil funding at Quebec private schools is 60 percent of that provided to a public-school student, some experts argue that after accounting for funding discrepancies, the proportion of funding is much closer to 75 percent.

Postsecondary funding and international student tuition as an alternative revenue stream

As noted in the discussion of elementary and secondary education in Ontario and Quebec, austerity and privatization create conditions where public institutions are forced to make drastic and often undesirable changes to continue operating on reduced budgets. A clear example of this phenomenon can be seen in postsecondary education, which has not received funding increases in well over a decade.

The lack of funding has translated to meaningful budgetary concerns in Ontario, described in a recent report as the lowest provincial transfers in higher education investments and a concomitant ban on raising tuition fees for in-province students. In Quebec, recent funding changes and tuition hikes for English institutions have called the long-term feasibility of public postsecondary study in the province into

The neglect of public schools will inevitably breed resentment that public education "doesn't work," inviting further dismantling of the public offering in favour of private, privileged (and thereby exclusionary) schools. In truth, any public system requires generous public support to function as intended.

question, with McGill and Concordia arguing that these changes are financially unsustainable for their institutions.

Universities and colleges have subsidized the lack of government funding through tuition and other fee increases, public-private partnerships, the pursuit of philanthropic donations, and by extending the market for international student enrolment. International student tuition is not regulated in the same manner as domestic student tuition, allowing postsecondary schools to set fees for attendance. These fees are responsible for 100 percent of increased spending in Canadian postsecondary student tuition since 2010. In a particularly revealing insight into the situation, the *Toronto Star* reported in 2023 that Ontario international student college tuition from Indian students only had surpassed the entirety of provincial funding for Ontario colleges.

The implications of this sort of funding strategy are wide-reaching. Incentivized by a lack of public funding, education institutions market their programs, and sell the idea of attending Canadian colleges and universities to students abroad. Recruiters often misrepresent the ease of finding accommodations and work when studying in Canada, and exaggerate the likelihood of attaining residency and citizenship after graduation. The aggressive expansion of this higher education fundraising strategy creates serious problems for social welfare. First, the exorbitant costs of living for international students lead to debt and mental health strain, as they struggle to find work and housing during their studies. Second, the students are incorrectly scapegoated for issues with housing availability and foodbank use — which are social ills that preceded them and that, ironically, are also caused by a lack of public investment.

These problems could have been avoided through adequate domestic funding of postsecondary institutions. Without the fiscal imperative, internationalization policies could have been implemented for reasons of pedagogical and cultural enrichment, to ensure the population of students has access to the supports they need to study, including housing and secure employment. The difficulty is that as colleges and universities become dependent on alternative revenue streams, they become the default mode of covering operating costs. This puts pressure on colleges and universities to expand revenue-raising programs in ways that are both unsustainable and exploitative.

International students are not the only out-of-town group to bear the costs of general disinvestment. Last year, Quebec announced a tuition increase for all out-of-province Canadian students, aiming to fundraise for French-language postsecondary programs within the province. Students from other provinces now need to pay $12,000 per year in tuition, a 33 percent hike in fees. Effects of this fundraising program have been catastrophic, triggering significant drops in enrollment at Quebec institutions, with Concordia University reporting a 28 percent decrease in new students this year, and McGill University projecting losses of $91 million due to the changes.

In January 2024, the Canadian government responded to problems in health care and housing by capping international student enrollment nationwide, vastly reducing revenues for schools that have become reliant on international student tuition to compensate for the gaps in public funding. While this legislation interrupts an unsustainable method of funding Canadian postsecondary education, it fails to draw public attention directly to the fiscal constraints at the provincial level that produced this unsustainable policy; it also places the duty of funding these programs back onto the provinces, putting programs in jeopardy in provinces where funding remains inadequate. In the Ontario context, for example, the government announced funding support in response to the international student cap and general funding struggles, but this additional funding still does not adequately address the deficits that occur as a function of long-term, persistent funding shortfalls. In Quebec, further recent cuts suggest the government is not enthusiastic about addressing funding shortfalls in postsecondary education.

Sustainability

The current difficulties in the postsecondary landscape serve as a cautionary example of unsustainable shifts in public education funding: underfunding undermines the long-term health of a quality school system accessible to all. Stop-gaps and band-aids will not fix these problems in the long run. Instead, in our roles as members of the Public Education Exchange, we argue that there is a need to recognize and commit to two basic principles: 1) quality public education is a necessary societal good that should be equally accessible for all young

people; and 2) funding should be adequate to the responsibility of maintaining the inheritance of strong education systems from one generation to the next.

Fiscal sustainability is not merely a matter of dollars and cents. Systemic underfunding destroys confidence in public education. The critiques that emerge from a system in financial stress can be seen in discussions of public healthcare, which is frequently criticized for long wait times and a lack of staffing, opening the door for arguments for a two-tiered public-private system. The neglect of public schools will inevitably breed resentment that public education "doesn't work," inviting further dismantling of the public offering in favour of private, privileged (and thereby exclusionary) schools. In truth, any public system requires generous public support to function as intended.

Private schools and education businesses are keen to develop profitable markets in education. They offer temporarily low-cost "solutions" for the educational problems that are caused by underfunding. But the delegation of public responsibilities to private interests is not a low-cost strategy long-term, as these companies are wont to raise prices in service of their bottom lines. This has the effect of degrading the quality and equity of public educational institutions over time. As such, we encourage educational stakeholders in Ontario and Quebec to hold governments accountable for sustainable funding, protecting these institutions against the dangers of austerity and privatization, in recognition of their vested responsibility to sustain these goods for current and future generations.

Holt Stuart-Hitchcox is a doctoral student in education at York University. He examines neoliberalism's increasing privatization of education and critically considers shifts in study emphasis to subjects most aligned with neoliberal ends. Beyond his work on the Public Education Exchange project, Holt examines neoliberalism's increasing marginalization of music study in education, and considers how music and arts study might serve to resist neoliberalism in society at large.

Lana Parker is an Associate Professor of Education at the University of Windsor. She draws on philosophical and empirical methods to analyze emerging phenomena in education, including neoliberal influences on policy and curriculum. In addition to the Public Education Exchange Project, Lana's current nationally funded research includes a phenomenological analysis of how capitalism and social media shape how youth make meaning amidst complexity.

The nightmare of outsourcing

PAX good behavior game and PAX dream makers

Hafizat Sanni-Anibire, Melanie Janzen, and Christine Mayor

The aftermath of COVID-19 has seen an increase in mental health concerns among young people. In response, rather than tackling this head-on, a number of provincial governments are directly funding *private organizations* (i.e., for-profit and not-for-profit groups) to provide mental health support, training, and curriculum in K-12 schools — a form of outsourcing that is part of the broader trend of privatizing public education which has rapidly expanded and accelerated during — and since — the pandemic.

Outsourcing diverts taxpayers' dollars from public schools to private organizations — funds that could be directed towards locally determined, professional supports that address specific school and student needs. This ultimately undermines education as a public good in favour of private interests and profits.

While conducting a research project[1] about mental health programs in Manitoba, we came across a slew of outsourced mental health programs being recommended and/or adopted by Manitoba's provincial government and numerous school divisions.

One such program, the PAX Good Behavior Game (GBG) and its off-shoot, PAX Dream Makers, both created by the PAXIS Institute, are examples of how public dollars can end up in the hands of for-profit[2] organizations to deliver questionable content.

PAX good behavior game (GBG) and PAX dream makers

Back in 2012, the Manitoba Government (under Premier Greg Selinger) launched a $1.3 million province-wide pilot of the PAX GBG. The PAX GBG is a behaviourist-oriented program developed by the for-profit PAXIS Institute located in Arizona, USA. The PAX GBG is played in short intervals during regular classroom time. Students are divided into teams and can earn PAX points for demonstrating desired behaviours or lose points for enacting undesired behaviours (called "spleems") which include (developmentally normal and child-appropriate) actions like doodling, talking, and giggling. Winning teams get rewards randomly chosen by the teacher from Granny's Wacky Prize Jar, which includes options that otherwise would be seen as inappropriate in classrooms such as fake burping, arm farting, and hooting like a monkey. The PAXIS Institute claims that using the PAX GBG will help "build children's self-regulation, resulting in improved focus and attention, improved test scores and other

academic outcomes, reduced alcohol and other drug use, reduced psychiatric disorders, and reduced suicide."[3] This program continues to be used by school divisions across Manitoba.

In 2020, the Manitoba government allocated $675,000 to implement PAX Dream Makers — a recently developed off-shoot of PAX GBG — in northern First Nation communities, claiming it to be a trauma-informed, culturally safe, Indigenous youth suicide prevention measure. PAX Dream Makers is described as responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to eliminate educational gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and establish community-based youth organizations that would deliver programs on reconciliation. The funding announcement was made in a news release (on the 19th of June 2020), in which the Families Minister, Heather Stefanson claimed that PAX Dream Makers "empower[s] youth to take leadership roles by creating peace, productivity, health and happiness in their communities"[4].

The problems with PAX

As is common with many for-profit mental health companies, the marketing of PAX GBG, PAX Dream Makers, and other PAX products include wide-ranging and often dubious claims that include ensuring students' future financial success,[5] reducing crime, preventing psychiatric disorders, and being a "universal behavioral vaccine."[6] One document promises that teachers who use the game "will see 20-30 percent reduction in the need for special education, 50-70 percent reduction in mental health difficulties[...], an increase in school attendance, happier families" and so on.[7] These promises are not only hard to believe, but they are not supported by independent research and appear to be making causal links between PAX interventions and outcomes that are, at best, correlational. Further, there is a lack of evidence showing how well they work with students who are Indigenous, racialized, 2SLBTQ+, disabled, neurodiverse, and/or living in poverty. Perhaps not surprisingly, many studies evaluating PAX products have authors with direct ties to the PAXIS Institute, raising the question of potential biases.

These "wacky" prizes are ineffective in addressing the core reasons for behavioural issues and understanding children's individual differences and needs. Indeed, some of the so-called spleems, such as doodling, could be a means for students to calm themselves, yet these coping mechanisms are disallowed other than when they are offered as "rewards" for compliance.

The PAXIS website is filled with buzzwords reflective of popular trends in mental health and school-based practices: "trauma-informed," "anti-racist," "strengths-based," "rooted in neuroscience," "provide socio-emotional learning," "peacemaking," "draw on cultural wisdom," prevent suicide/violence/crime, use "preventative science," are a "health equity intervention," and more. While programs might seek to accomplish multiple goals, we should be wary of these numerous, wide-ranging, and sometimes contradictory positionings of PAX's work, or claims intended to appeal to a wider market of educational leaders offering silver-bullet solutions to complex problems.

While the PAX GBG was initially sold as a school-based program to be used by teachers, the PAXIS training has expanded its audience (and its market) to include community educators, youth workers, human service workers, camp counsellors, youth mentors, faith-based youth workers, social workers, and more. *PAX UP!* is a purchasable app designed for teachers to use when implementing the PAX GBG to monitor "spleems" and collect and report data. This app is an unregulated technology and using it raises ethical and privacy issues about what and how student data is used, stored, managed, commodified, and shared. This is particularly concerning when the one collecting the data is a for-profit, U.S.-based company. The buzzwords, span of target groups, and variety and scope of programs available are all ways that the PAXIS Institute appears to be focused on its marketability and profitability.

Although the PAX developers often use the language of "self-regulation," the GBG's design is premised on a behaviourist approach which reinforces desired behaviours and punishes undesired behaviour. PAXIS claims that by doing this, "children develop agency and command to delay gratification and reduce impulsivity."[8] This simplistic and reductionist view of human behaviour fails to account for the psychosocial, emotional, contextual, and historical factors that influence children's behaviour. Consistent with widely accepted critiques of behaviourism, the PAX GBG game does not provide children with the intrinsic motivation or understanding that might help them to change their behaviour. Rather, the game trains students to hide undesirable behaviours while enduring constant surveillance by the teacher and fear of punishment–consequences that may lead to reduced self-esteem, undermining personal agency, increasing anxiety, rewarding peer competition, and inducing blaming and shaming.

Truly listening to youth voices, community perspectives, and Elders' advice about what would be most meaningful in supporting youth mental health is more appropriate than purchasing and implementing a pre-packaged behaviour program that undermines the development of sustainable, professionally-informed, and community-driven solutions.

Within this behaviourist framework, PAX GBG labels normal childhood behaviours as undesired spleems that need to be eliminated. Ironically, the game involves converting spleems into items in Granny's Wacky Prizes that are then used as rewards when children conform to expected behaviour. This twist implies that the spleem behaviours themselves are not the problem, but rather the problem is that they are done without the permission of the teacher. In this way, compliance is turned into a commodity to be traded for silly and superficial external rewards.

Importantly, this approach does not consider *why* a child might be exhibiting particular behaviours. For example, the child might be bored, hungry, or distracted by something that happened at home or on the commute to school. These "wacky" prizes are ineffective in addressing the core reasons for behavioural issues and understanding children's individual differences and needs. Indeed, some of the so-called spleems, such as doodling, could be a means for students to calm themselves, yet these coping mechanisms are disallowed other than when they are offered as "rewards" for compliance. Although the producers make repeated claims about PAX being a trauma-informed program, controlling students' behaviours and restricting potential coping mechanisms risks eroding a sense of safety for those children who may have experienced trauma.

Furthermore, youth who do display harmful or dangerous behaviours in schools require a holistic response, rather than punishments and nonsensical rewards. In the PAX model, the responsibility for behaving differently lies solely with the student, without recognizing other contextual factors (such as school environment and culture, teacher-student relations, peer relationships, socio-economic conditions, intergenerational trauma, racism, etc.). While the available research on the impact of PAX Dream Makers focused on improved resilience, this framing results in blaming individual youth for conditions beyond their control and placing undue pressure on them to rise above structural problems. The resilience rhetoric — that of "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" — downplays the importance of social support systems, collective healing, and policies aimed at ensuring fair access to resources.

Government funding continues

Despite these concerns, the Manitoba government provided additional funding ($670,000 in 2020) to run programs in Northern and mostly Indigenous communities in Manitoba. The programs include the PAX Whole School (where PAX trainers go to the North to train groups of teachers in PAX GBG) and PAX Dream Makers (where youth are trained to implement elements of PAX and participate in community gatherings of youth and Elders). Interestingly, in one research publication[9] that documented the youth's perspectives of PAX Dream Makers, youth highlighted the importance of gathering with other youth from Northern communities and having time to receive teachings from Elders at the PAX gatherings. Notably, this research did not discuss how the youth responded to the behavioural aspects of the program.

Aside from the fact that the kind of individualism, control, and surveillance — central to the PAX ideology — have long been criticized in contemporary childhood and education research, it is also inconsistent with Indigenous ways of being, where community and relationality are prioritized. While the research indicated that there was collaboration with First Nation communities in program implementation, funding this program represents a colonial move that imposes external solutions rooted in Western ideologies. Simply taking a prepackaged game and recruiting Indigenous youth to implement it, does not make it culturally appropriate. Truly listening to youth voices, community perspectives, and Elders' advice about what would be most meaningful in supporting youth mental health is more appropriate than purchasing and implementing a pre-packaged behaviour program that undermines the development of sustainable, professionally-informed, and community-driven solutions.

Recommendations

While addressing mental health in schools is critical, it must be done in a way that prioritizes long-term and systemic solutions, respects the professional role of educators, ensures that children receive the comprehensive support that they need, and prioritizes locally determined, anti-racist, and decolonizing principles.

When government officials, educational leaders, and educators are faced with options to outsource mental health programs, we

recommend that they consider the following questions:

- Does this decision move funding, personnel, or resources out of the public education system and to private organizations?
- Who is the private organization and what are their interests? For example, are they for-profit or do they have expertise not otherwise available in the schools? Are they local Knowledge Keepers or community-based organizations that bring a particular set of knowledge and insights?
- Does this private organization do the work that can and should be done in schools, by school-based professionals? If so, might the money be better spent on hiring teachers, school social workers, counsellors, Elders, or therapists?
- Does the private organization's program, training, or curriculum reflect and engage anti-racist, decolonizing, and equity-oriented principles? Is there sound independent research available to support the program's claims?
- Does the content of this program, training, or curriculum put the blame or responsibility for change on students, families, or teachers? For example, is there a focus on students being "more resilient" or does it recognize and focus on systemic factors?

Thinking critically about these questions will prevent unnecessary investment in problematic programs such as PAX. Instead, we must focus our efforts on well-funded and community-specific support for schools and students.

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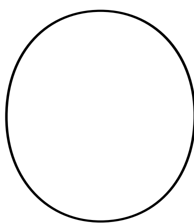
Enshittification, artificial intelligence, and privatization in public education

Chris Samuel



One of the last public events I attended before the COVID lockdowns in 2020 was a panel discussion on technology, profit and market trends in the education technology sector called *Friends, Enemies, Frenemies*. The event was an opportunity for ed tech reps to get together to talk about trends in education technology (Ed Tech) and strategies for promoting the industry.

One piece of advice was particularly chilling. The panelists noted that they had already enjoyed some success marketing directly to professors in the post-secondary system and that they viewed teachers as more likely than boards to experiment with and adopt new technologies. Their advice was simple: leapfrog Ministry and board policy by marketing directly to teachers, and then let teachers pressure their schools and boards to officially adopt what they are already using.

Consider the context in which that advice is playing out. In nearly every public education system around the world teachers and education workers are under-resourced, overworked, expected to take on roles outside their actual job, and struggling to connect with and prepare a population of students with increasingly complex needs for a world of increasingly complex demands but with drastically scaled-back social, environmental, and community supports. Educators are caught in a perfect storm. Enter Ed Tech and all its promises of reducing workloads, personalizing learning, and generally revolutionizing education.

So far, artificial intelligence in education (AIED) is following a pattern that is very familiar to observers of education technology, or Ed Tech. The pattern goes like this: tech's hyped potential outpaces evidence of its efficacy;

profit opportunities incentivize targeted marketing to educators; school boards and unions belated scramble to establish policy guard rails. As a result, new technological practices, including AI, become embedded in schools through a for-profit model before pro-public actors are able to articulate, let alone implement, a fully public alternative.

Education unions and our allies need to work on how to communicate with members and the public about the potential benefits and the very real hazards of AIED. Such communications need to reflect the complexities of AI itself as well as the multiple ways in which educators will use AI in their jobs. To do this, we need explanatory frameworks that help transform complex and abstract realities about AIED into concrete terms. This will be important for providing pedagogical and policy advice, certainly, but it will be absolutely essential for helping educators and the public to understand how AIED threatens to increase privatization.

Author and tech critic Cory Doctorow has introduced a new word and a new framework for understanding why our collective experience of the internet and apps seems to be getting worse and worse: *enshittification*.

Enshittification captures the market incentives and resulting behaviours of internet behemoths such as Facebook, Amazon, Google, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok and how those incentives inexorably lead to a worse and worse — enshittified — experience for users and advertisers alike. The potential parallels for education privatization are remarkable.

According to Doctorow, enshittification follows a three-stage process through which platforms develop a large user base, hold the user base hostage on behalf of advertisers and publishers, and then hold *both* hostage so they can rake in massive products. The result of enshittification is that the experiences of the platforms' individual and business users alike become gradually and then rapidly worse and worse.

It goes something like this.[1]

First, a platform provides a novel experience and value with big promises of making that experience better and better as more people join and the platform grows. Think of Facebook for example, with its initial promise to show you content generated by your friends (and only content generated by your friends) without spying on you or harvesting your data. As more people joined, Facebook enjoyed a "network effect," meaning both that the user experience improved (you have more friends to follow, more groups to like!) and that the cost of remaining outside or leaving got higher (you'll miss out on all those friends and groups!). In effect, friend groups got locked into Facebook. It was time for stage two.

In the second stage of enshittification, platforms sell their user base to advertisers and publishers. Facebook broke its promise to only show you the content you asked for (by following friends and subscribing to groups) and instead began to show you ad content. They also broke their promise not to spy on their users and began harvesting data to sell to advertisers. In doing so, Facebook re-allocated the value of their product away from the user base and toward advertisers and publishers. Soon enough, advertisers and publishers also become hostage to the platforms. Practically the only way to get eyeballs on their ads, videos, and stories is to have the platforms force their content into users' feeds. At this point, the time is right to re-allocate value again; this time it goes to the platforms' shareholders.

In third-stage enshittification, advertisers, who had been getting cut-rate deals to show their products to users, start having to compete against each other to be at the top of feeds. Publishers, who used to be able to get users over to their own websites by showing some teaser text with a link, start getting punished (by being sent further down the feed) unless they

At this point, enshittification is complete. Platforms no longer function to provide either an optimal user experience or an optimal business experience. They only provide an optimal profit experience for their shareholders.

Educators will be bound by board policies meant to ensure high standards for educational practice, while boards will be bound by contracts and service agreements that make switching to a better alternative unworkably costly, both financially and administratively. At that point, AIED will function in ways that are profitable for developers, but that do not attend to what educators want and students need.

include full-text articles with no way of redirecting readers off platform.

At this point, enshittification is complete. Platforms no longer function to provide either an optimal user experience or an optimal business experience. They only provide an optimal profit experience for their shareholders.

A similar dynamic will almost certainly play out in the education sector. Recall the advice from the *Friends, Enemies, Frenemies* panel: market directly to teachers. This is how AIED is happening. Teachers need supports and they are excited by the potential AI has to offer a customized, interesting, and novel experience for students. The AI adopters are innovators who see AI as inevitable and are deeply committed to making sure their students are ready for an AI-infused world. The Ministry of Education, school boards, and even educators' unions have all been left behind as AIED's astonishing proliferation has outpaced institutions' capacities to think through pedagogical and policy implications, develop ethical standards, and implement guardrails. In this context, AI companies don't need to exert pressure on the Ministry and boards to promote adoption of AI…educators are doing that both through their individual use and through the upward pressure they put on boards to accommodate and standardize what is already happening on an ad hoc basis.

This is stage one enshittification. Teachers and education workers are discovering and making use of all kinds of new teaching and communication strategies made available — and fun! — by AIED. As more and more educators adopt AIED, there will be increasing pressure from students and families for late adopters to jump on board. AIED will become standard and expected, and educators will find themselves 'stuck' to various AI apps and software.

However, boards have a legitimate interest in developing policies and procedures to ensure security and privacy for students. They also need to ensure pedagogical rigour is not abandoned for the sake of technological novelty. Such policies and procedures will almost certainly require standardization and will therefore pressure, or even require, educators to use a specified selection of AI apps. This will help address concerns about security and privacy. It will also enable schools and Boards to save money in the short run through more favourable board-wide purchasing agreements. As institutionalization progresses, Boards will find themselves stuck to apps as the cost of switching to alternatives gets higher and higher: stage two of enshittification will be complete.

At that point, the platforms and developers will have considerable leverage to start raising prices and adding new criteria to agreements. Want to renew these licenses? Then you'll have to bundle them with this additional software. Or you'll have to purchase proprietary hardware and devices to run the software. Or you'll have to purchase through a specific portal that brings with it new junk fees and surveillance. In a worst-case scenario, the tech companies force use of their own lesson plans and content as part of access to AIED. This is the potential logic of enshittification in education.

Suddenly, educators find that they're unable to engage in the discovery and innovation that attracted them to AI in the first place. Educators will be bound by board policies meant to ensure high standards for educational practice, while boards will be bound by contracts and service agreements that make switching to a better alternative unworkably costly, both financially and administratively. At that point, AIED will function in ways that are profitable for developers, but that do not attend to what educators want and students need.

In his analysis of the enshittification of platforms such as Facebook and TikTok, Doctorow points to key constraints that would help stop tech leaders from pushing us inexorably down the enshittification pathway. These include robust and well-enforced competition laws, equally well-enforced regulations, maintaining users' ability to free themselves from the worst faces of enshittification through ad-blockers and other kinds of technological self-defense, and strong worker protections to enable folks working in the tech industry to push back against their leaders' worst impulses.

The work of education unions and our allies in the fight to defend quality public education needs to immediately focus on figuring out comparable constraints within the education sector. At the very least, boards and educators must avoid getting locked into purchase agreements with ballooning rents and hidden fees lying in wait. Educators also need to be empowered to protect themselves and their students from enshittification through access to quality professional development. They also

need to be protected through strong collective agreement protections that defend their professionalism and protect them from unanticipated technological developments.

At a recent Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation/Fédération des enseignantes-enseignants des écoles secondaires de l'Ontario (OSSTF/FEESO) workshop on artificial intelligence, participants reported that they saw potential for AIED. They thought it could assist with time management, help broaden students' perspectives, help teachers with providing feedback and planning lessons, and even level the playing field among students. However, they also expressed major concerns about bias in AI-enabled decision-making, the potential for cheating, loss of creativity and critical thinking skills, and even the replacement or de-professionalization of teachers. These results are perhaps unsurprising as they reflect AIED's dual nature: tremendous potential accompanied by serious concerns. Defenders of public education need to take both sides of the duality seriously.

Happily, unions and boards are beginning to work on these issues, if somewhat belatedly. The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) has issued a policy brief on AIED, noting that policies around its adoption are murky and variable across the country. They rightly note major risks created by the absence of coherent and well-considered policies, particularly relating to privacy and security, commercial exploitation, discrimination and bias, and de-professionalization of teaching.[2] In the United States, both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have developed comprehensive policies and guidance documents. Indeed, AFT has gone further by partnering with NewsGuard and GPTZero to provide tools and supports to members so they can safely and effectively integrate AI into their practice.[3]

This work needs to continue and be expanded upon across Canadian jurisdictions. If we want to avoid an enshittified education system where tech giants make decisions about pedagogy and AIED on educators' behalf, we need to mobilize now to develop student-centered, indeed human-centered, guardrails for how and to what extent artificial intelligence makes its way into our classrooms and workspaces.

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The cost of inclusion

Special education and privatized solutions in Ontario's public schools

Gillian Parekh and Paulie McDermid

In August 2018, *The Globe and Mail* published a piece on the gap between what schools can offer students with disabilities and what they need to be successful.[1] The tagline reads: "Many Canadian parents feel the public- and private-school systems simply can't support their kids with special needs and are seeking out more specialized programs to help their children." The article describes the amounts parents spend to involve their children in programs, therapies, and extracurricular activities, and suggests that parents of children with disabilities are apt to spend two or three times as much as other families. These findings align with our recent *Critical Transitions* study exploring how families navigated the elementary to secondary school transition and the supports they used to ensure their children were successful.

When what children need isn't being offered in school, what options do parents have? And, importantly, which parents have options? From our study, many parents are spending their own money to ensure their children have access to much needed accommodations in school. However, when approaching disability as an individual issue, are we unintentionally creating the conditions for greater privatization in education?

The costs of disability

As noted in *The Globe,* access to education can be expensive, particularly for students with disabilities. Although some forms of equipment, technology, and/or services are offered through the public education system, there appears to be growing reliance on private services and supports to address student needs. For instance, securing devices, equipment, assessments, and technology can be costly. Even when families have insurance or can access government grants or funds, they typically do not cover 100 percent of the cost, leaving families with additional personal expenses. School boards can offer psychological assessments, but wait times are long.[2] There are dedicated funds for specialized equipment allocations so boards can purchase equipment for students.[3] However, accessing technology through the public education system can take considerable time and administrative effort. Even when technology is made available through schools, staff and students may require training which can be difficult to organize. Access to

specialized therapies is also limited, often with recommendations implemented through the student's teacher as opposed to the therapist.[4]

For many families, public solutions to individual student supports are inadequate, costing their children time, self-confidence and access to academic opportunities.

Securing resources and support for students with disabilities in the Ontario context

Students with disabilities in Ontario won the right to access public education with the passing of Bill 82 (1980), and school boards were legally obligated to provide special education services and supports.[5] To align students with support, school boards across the province brought in the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process through which students would be identified with an exceptionality, placed in a supported setting according to their perceived need, and be guaranteed an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

What happens when the implementation of accommodations is slow, inadequate, or stigmatizing? Or when wait times for assessments risk delaying support, access to speech or physical therapy is inadequate, and approaches to support produce conditions in which students feel othered and unsafe?

The IEP includes important program recommendations, such as accommodations.

In 2004, the province determined that IEPs could be developed in the absence of review through IPRC, speeding up students' access to programming and support.[6] As a result, most students participating in special education in Ontario have not gone through IPRC but are supported with an IEP.[7] The system's commitment to the IPRC and IEP shows that the province recognizes the urgent need to ensure students are supported and accommodated in school. However, many families and advocates say the system is inadequate and point to ongoing barriers to support, lack of accommodations, experiences of exclusion and bullying as well as a pervasive lack of agency and/or autonomy.[8]

In the past, special education pooled resources into special education classes and schools, meaning if students needed access to additional support, they would require a specified placement. Since Bill 82, there have been monumental shifts towards greater inclusion in education where most students participating in special education are learning in mainstream classes.[9] A primary approach to inclusion is the implementation of individual accommodations, a strategy that focuses on individual needs and, as a result, individual solutions. The accommodation strategy is protected under Ontario Human Rights Code with school boards being obligated to ensure students are accommodated to the point of "undue hardship".[10] But what happens when the implementation of accommodations is slow, inadequate, or stigmatizing? Or when wait times for assessments risk delaying support, access to speech or physical therapy is inadequate, and approaches to support produce conditions in which students feel othered and unsafe? The individual nature of accommodations means that families do not have to "change the system" to secure support. If they have the means, they need only secure solutions for their child through private options.

Critical transitions

In this article, we share some insights from our work in the *Critical Transitions* (CT) project into what families of students with disabilities do when their needs are unmet. The CT study set out to explore student pathways through school with a particular focus on the transition between middle and high school (Grade 8 to Grade 9). We wanted to better understand how students and their families navigated the education

When solutions are not made readily available through the public system, families whose children's needs are not being met, and have the means to do so, can "choose" individualized, free-market solutions. However, acquiring solutions from the private sector removes the onus on public systems to adopt universal strategies of support that would ultimately serve a greater number of students.

system, secured access to support, and learned about secondary school course selection and access to postsecondary education.

Some of our early findings show that there is a notable lack of governance around important aspects of student transitions, leaving educators, families and students without much direction. Also, we uncovered that families seeking additional support for their children often found little in the public education system. As such, many families were motivated to reach out to the private sector to access services and resources, with some driven to leave the public system for the private system altogether.

Inflexible systems that stigmatize disability

The experiences of one family interviewed for the CT study offers a snapshot of how inflexibility in the public system — failures of access for disabled students within it — push those parents with sufficient social and economic resources towards solutions offered in the private sector. The parent in this example family had two teenage daughters in secondary school, both of whom had been assigned IEPs for most of their school careers. Despite having accommodations outlined in an IEP, both Students A and B experienced being in classes with educators who did not or would not adapt their teaching methods. Student B told us, "I just gave up […] trying to explain, because [the teacher] didn't really understand my IEP at all".

Students with disabilities, like Students A and B, can find themselves othered and stigmatized when trying to unlock entitled supports. Because her IEP authorized a separate room in which to write assessments, Student A was obliged to carry around a brightly-coloured permission slip. But this permission mechanism, devised by school administrators, outed the student's disability to peers: "Nobody wanted to carry the paper in the school because you'd get made fun of if you carried the bright[ly coloured] paper".

What's more, when she needed to access a laptop that had been assigned to her, Student A would have to collect it from a specific Special Education room in the school, outing her to peers who may see her enter. Pointedly, this stigmatized space was also where students perceived to have "behavioural" challenges would be sent, reminding us that Special Education is at times treated as a literal and figurative "dumping ground" for anyone who disrupts the practices of an inflexible classroom.

Privatized solutions

The challenges faced by students with disabilities in the public system — such as those faced by Students A and B — create opportunities for the private sector. In part, we would argue, these challenges are consequences of how disability is taken up by schools as an issue of individual needs requiring individual solutions. When solutions are not made readily available through the public system, families whose children's needs are not being met, and have the means to do so, can "choose" individualized, free-market solutions. However, acquiring solutions from the private sector removes the onus on public systems to adopt universal strategies of support that would ultimately serve a greater number of students.

The individual approach to disability and accommodation leaves families on their own to navigate a system fraught with barriers to access. The case-study family was often encouraged to seek private resources to subsidize where public schools were failing their children. Early in their schooling, educators suggested that Students A and B be assessed for learning disabilities. But educators told their parent, "I would consider going private if you have the coverage because you're going to wait for a very long time". While diagnostic testing, as noted above, can be provided in the public system, long waits can persuade parents with financial means to seek private assessments and jump the queue.

When Students A and B were frustrated by educators not following their IEPs in the classroom, the school advised their parent to go outside the public system and engage private tutors. Pushing back on this advice, the parent asked, "What have you done to support? I'm happy to pay for a tutor. However, I want […] to exhaust everything before I go and spend". Having the economic resources to do so, the parent did eventually hire a private tutor, and when Student A was faced with the not-so-accessible special education-issued laptop (and the stigma surrounding it), the parent paid out of pocket to buy her a laptop of her own.

Being able to afford a tutor netted an extra dividend when the tutor informed the parent about an alternative program within the public

system which offers fully online courses for a (small) fee per course. Once Student B enrolled in this online program, their IEP provisions for classroom accommodations became mostly redundant, only necessary for end-of-course assessments. As such, the disabling classroom conditions the student had experienced effectively disappeared. This online program is run by a charitable organization and is under the public system umbrella, but the program still represents a paid-for "choice" (fees, requirements of equipment, access to wi-fi, etc.) that not all have the means nor knowledge of to access.

Certainly, a range of "choices" become known only to those parents who also enjoy the benefits of social resources. These social resources are apparent in networks of friends and personal contacts who provide exclusive access to valuable information on how to unblock the system. The parent in our example family is also a school principal, and a friend in her personal and professional network worked as a teacher in her children's school. One day, this friend told the parent, "You need to talk to the new VP: she's all about Spec[ial] Ed[ucation]". Acting on this exclusive information, the parent advocated to the new senior administrator for Student A's unmet needs, and practices in the school — such as the brightly coloured permission slip — were reformed.

Towards equitable access for all

The inequities we describe here require not individual but collective effort to address. More affluent parents might contribute to these efforts by pooling their social and economic resources to advocate for systemic change related to access and inclusion in the classroom. However, because of the lack of attention paid to supporting students with disabilities across the system and the individualized nature of accommodations, families who have the resources to engage the private sector will do so, taking their capital and investment with them.

Market-oriented impulses towards competition and efficiency corrode potential for solidarity and collective action. So long as private options are available and individual families with means continue to draw on private stop-gaps to public education problems, there is little motivation for systems to change their approach to supporting students in timely and productive ways. As a result, the urgent need for our public schools to support all students equitably is diminished.

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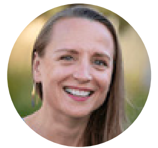

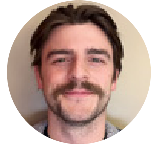

Placating private values

A fourth pathway to education privatization

Shannon D.M. Moore, Matthew McCorquodale-Bauer, and Kevin Lopuck

Those who defend censorship, who make allegations of ideology under the rubric of "woke," are interested in maintaining doctrinal control in education, very often allying with parental rights over public education.
—Butler, 2024, p.98

Moves to secure 'parental rights' in education are not new. While American examples surrounding the teaching of evolution, mandatory schooling, and desegregation are more widely known, Canada has also witnessed highly publicized battles over the teaching of comprehensive sex education in K-12 schools.

Undeniably, claims to parental authority in schooling have always existed; however, several factors make this moment distinct. Namely, social media has amplified and mobilized 'parental rights' claims alongside rampant disinformation about school curriculum and teaching practices. Moreover, current moves to secure 'parental rights' in education are occurring in the shadow of a global pandemic that catalyzed anti-government rhetoric and assertions of individual rights and freedoms.

Another unfortunate distinction of this moment is the use of 'parental rights' to veil and validate transphobia and homophobia (Mayo, 2021). In this current iteration of the 'parental rights' movement, we are also witnessing provincial governments enact legislation, alter policies, and adapt curriculum to cater to the demands of some parents[1], namely, those opposed to curriculum and policies that recognize gender and sexual diversity. In doing so, provincial governments are privatizing public schools by: privileging particular parents, legitimating private values that ignore established individual and collective rights, and consequently undermining those established public values.

Actions taken by provincial governments to cater to *certain* parental demands rather than the broader public good are emblematic of education privatization.

Pathways to privatization

The scholarly literature has importantly outlined three pathways of privatization in public education.

Exogenous privatization, or privatization *of* education, involves opening the public system to private, for profit, participation, or relying on private companies to design and deliver

When provincial governments introduce policies and legislation that ignore children's rights, and uphold the fallacy of 'parental rights', they are contributing to education privatization through private values.

specific elements of schooling (Ball & Youdell, 2008). For example, contracting out the development of curriculum, food, cleaning or transit services, or utilizing public-private partnerships.

Endogenous privatization, or privatization *in* public education, involves importing private sector ideas and practices into the public system so that schools are run more like businesses (Ball and Youdell, 2008). For example, encouraging competition between schools for student enrolment through boutique academic, athletic, or outdoor programs. These specialized programs often use an application process and require additional fees and are therefore not accessible to all students.

These select programs connect to the third pathway of privatization, which involves *wringing the public system* for individual benefits or private gain (Winton, 2022). For example, public education that serves individual pursuits and employers rather than the public good.

By naming and identifying the distinctions between these three pathways, scholars have helped to expose hidden forms of privatization. Because of this scholarship, more people are aware of the ways provincial governments and education reformers are promoting privatization of public education through school financing and management.

In order to increase awareness of education privatization, we argue that the validation and imposition of private values in public schools should be recognized as a fourth means of privatization. Public schools are beholden to public values[2], specifically those established through human rights legislation, The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child (which Canada ratified in 1991). When provincial governments advance, defer to, and accommodate private values that undermine and ignore children's rights and human rights, they are contributing to public education privatization.

The fourth pathway

Recent policy changes in New Brunswick, Alberta, and Saskatchewan are emblematic of this fourth pathway. In 2023, New Brunswick revised Policy 713 to mandate parental consent in order for students under the age of 16 to change their preferred name or pronouns at school. The updated policy lists the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in its references but fails to cite the application of any specific language from the document. Likely, this is because The Charter does not include language about 'parental rights'. If parents were to receive additional or special rights it would "diminish recognition of children as full rights bearing members of our society" (Carter, 2008). In this way, New Brunswick is validating a concept that does not exist ('parental rights'), and undermining enshrined public values, namely the rights of children.

The New Brunswick Child & Youth Advocate declared these policy changes a violation of protected rights in both The Charter and the Human Rights Act. They also ignore The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which not only recognizes the rights of children to form and express their own views; it mandates that governments protect children from discrimination. Rather than protecting children from discrimination, these policies encourage discrimination against them. Moreover, they position children as property of their parents; however, they are full rights-bearing citizens. Following Shulman (2014):

> All children are entitled to an education that is, in the fullest sense, public: that transports them beyond familiar boundaries; that provides a check on the narcissism of their guardians, both public and private; that burdens them with the necessity of moral judgment; and that, finally, makes them truly free, free to stand and free to fall (p. 18).

When provincial governments introduce policies and legislation that ignore children's rights, and uphold the fallacy of 'parental rights', they are contributing to education privatization through private values. Although this policy was enacted by a democratically elected government, and could therefore be viewed as representative of new public values, these policies have encountered legal challenges from the Canadian Civil Liberties Association in New Brunswick because they violate Charter Rights, The Human Rights Act and The New Brunswick Education Act.

Ignoring established rights, judicial rulings, and public backlash, the Saskatchewan government invoked Section 33 of the Charter—the Notwithstanding Clause—in order to entrench in law parental inclusion and consent policies. The Notwithstanding Clause can be used by provincial governments to enact legislation that denies other sections of the Charter. In doing so, the Saskatchewan government is admitting that it knows its legislation violates the rights

of 2SLGBTIA+ children and youth, and is using the Notwithstanding Clause to shield itself from rightful legal challenges. Viewing this as an abuse of power that limits democratic accountability and undermines the rights of marginalized groups, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association has challenged the provincial government's use of the notwithstanding clause.

Legitimizing discrimination of 2SLGBTQI+ people

The fiction of 'parental rights' is being used to advance neoconservative views in schools, and to alibi transphobic and homophobic views (Mayo, 2021). 'Parental rights' legislation "endorses the invisibility and harm that LGBTQ+ families have historically experienced within the school system" (Goldberg et al. 2024, p.227). Moreover, it ignores "parents who want to raise their own children to be respectful of diversity" (Mayo, 2021, p. 373). In turn, a compulsory heteronormative education is enforced on all students (Butler, 2024).

Additionally, these policies legitimize homophobia and transphobia, and teach youth in public schools that private religious values have no limits. However, religious rights *do* have limits; when people have positioned private religious values above decided public values, the law has sided with 2SLGBTQIA+ rights (Short et al., 2021). People can expect respect of their private values up to the point that they infringe on the rights of others (Journell, 2018), and the marginalization, omission, and governing of gender and sexual identity is indeed an infringement on established rights.

The use of parental opt in/opt out policies translates to private values being imposed in public schools through the censorship of research-informed curriculum that aligns with rights legislation. Additionally, it denies children the right and responsibility to learn about diverse values and ways of being.

Private values shouldn't dictate school curriculum

Private values have also been used to ignore and override public values that are outlined in school/divisional policies and provincial curricula. In the province of Manitoba (where we live and work) the curriculum is written to recognize and support public values: "The Manitoba curriculum aligns with the Manitoba Human Rights Code and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms along with supporting policies and resources which includes, Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Manitoba Schools" (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2018).

We do not use this example to suggest Manitoba is an exemplar in upholding the rights of children and 2SLGBTQ+ people: after all the previous provincial government under the Progressive Conservatives started using 'parental rights' rhetoric in the lead-up to the provincial election in 2023. Rather, we raise it to demonstrate that the provincial curriculum is designed to represent public values. Any attempt to censor provincial curriculum or advance discriminatory private values through the curriculum (e.g., labelling some learning outcomes as 'sensitive content', using generic human rights language rather than expressly naming 2SLGBTQIA+ topics and themes, or offering opt outs for particular curricula) undermines the values upon which the curriculum is grounded.

Despite the Manitoba government's claims, the Manitoba Physical and Health Education Curriculum requires that teachers garner parental consent for teaching human sexuality (it is unfortunately the only time this document uses the term 'consent'). Similar opt-out practices have been adopted in Saskatchewan, and Alberta has proposed opt-in policies. As a result, parents are granted the rights to make this educational and personal choice on behalf of their children.

As full rights-bearing citizens, children have a right to learn about consent, sex, and healthy relationships. Scholarly research clearly demonstrates the crucial role of Democratic Humanistic Sexuality Education "to prepare young people for responsible and healthy sex lives in a complicated world" (Bialystock and Wright, 2019, p.195). Moreover, as members of a society, learning about consent is not an individual pursuit; one's understanding of sex, healthy relationships, and consent impacts other people.

Following Bialystok (2018): "Being overly respectful of parental conscience in the case of sex education risks reproducing the illiberal paradigms that the curriculum is intended to erode, and thus subverts its own liberal intentions" (p.26). In this way, the use of parental opt in/opt out policies translates to private values being imposed in public schools through the censorship of research-informed curriculum that aligns with rights legislation. Additionally, it denies children the right and responsibility to learn about diverse values and ways of being.

Public values in public schools

We are certainly not the first authors to speak about the way 'parental rights' rhetoric is

being used to undermine public education and advance privatization in Canada. Critical scholars and public education advocates have importantly raised awareness about the ways that 'parental rights', and other exploits of the culture wars, have been used to place doubt in the public system in order to encourage and rationalize more private options (Ganshorn, 2024; Shaker, 2023a; 2023b). However, as Ganshorn (2024) points out, neoconservatives are not just interested in creating more educational choices for their students, they are interested in reforming education for *all* students. In this way, the interests of some parents are shaping schooling for everyone, and undermining human rights, the rights of children, other parents, and community members (Hornbeck, 2023).

Claims of 'parental rights,' and the pressure asserted by the 'parental rights' movement, have resulted in undemocratic changes to public schools. Public schools must defend established rights rather than showing deference to private values that violate human rights, Charter rights, and children's rights. There is no way to curate schools to recognize the private values of all parents, nor should we want to. When particular private values are endorsed and accommodated, public schooling loses its own value(s).

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Notes

1 First, we recognize that some people in the 'parental rights' movement are not parents. They may be lobbyists or education reformers who are using the movement to advance the privatization of public schools for economic rather than value reasons. Or, they may be community members who are not parents, but who are driven by the desire to change the values taught in public education. Second, we recognize that guardians and caregivers are part of the 'parental rights' movement.

2 Throughout this article, we use the term *public values* to represent the rights outlined in The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, The Canadian Human Rights Act, provincial human rights legislation, and the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child (which Canada ratified in 1991). These documents represent enshrined public values. When we speak of private values, please note that we are speaking of private values that violate or undermine the rights outlined in these documents.

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Relying on corporate charity to fund student nutrition programs

A recipe for disaster

Yvonne Kelly

In June 2024, as principals closed their school doors for the summer, many wondered how they would feed their students in the fall, especially the kids from food insecure households who relied on the school's nutrition program. The challenge of meeting students' nutritional needs is a daily one for many educators, and the absence of full funding for student nutrition programs puts schools at the mercy of private funders like the President's Choice Children's Charity, which has funded schools in previous years. How did we get here?

In Ontario, central to this discussion is the Conservative Privatization Playbook based on a two-step method. One, create a crisis. Then two, create a market solution to address it.

In the mid-1990s, Harris's Conservative government cut $500,000 million from public education (the crisis), and the solutions offered up were of a private kind. Enormous cuts to staffing and programming forced secondary schools to charge user fees for everything from lab materials, athletics and art supplies to communities' use of school facilities. Schools increasingly relied on parent fundraising to cover the cost of lost programs like music and sports. We also saw an increase of families moving from public to private schools, exacerbating existing funding challenges. [1]

Fast forward to 2018 when the Conservatives were re-elected under Doug Ford and neoliberal policies ramped up the defunding of public education; $1,200 per student has been cut since then.[2] Schools continue to look to private sources to fill funding gaps, and more than ever, students receive inequitable qualities of education depending on where they live and what school they attend. A 2023 survey of public school principals by People for Education found that high-income schools raised nearly three times the amount raised in low-income schools in 2022-23 (i.e., $10,423 compared to $3,757 per school).[3]

Against this backdrop, student nutrition advocates have been working to secure

adequate government investments in student nutrition for close to 40 years. Internationally, school meals have been proven to be one of the most successful drivers of improved health, education and even economic growth, with the equivalent of a $3 to $10 return on every dollar invested.[4] Despite these potential benefits and cost savings, Canada remains the only G7 country without a national, fully funded, school food program.[5]

Since 2016, the Student Nutrition Ontario (SNO) program has provided partial funds for school based nutrition programs; the rest of the funding must come from private and charitable sources. This program was set up to rely on private funding.

As a current staff member of the York Region District School Board as well as co-chair of the York Region Food for Learning Committee, I have watched schools compete with one another to top up the province's contribution to the SNO program. The government funds just 3-5 cents per snack/meal served in our York Region schools.

Even for schools with parents who are predominantly in a higher income bracket, it is still a lot of work to fundraise for school-based programs. However, the struggle is very real in schools whose parent population is in a lower income quintile. Raising less than $2,000/year, a situation many of our schools are in, doesn't allow a school to meet its basic education needs, and it can never make up for the $1,200 per pupil funding cuts. Ensuring an adequate and sustainable nutrition program has forced these schools to look to businesses, service clubs, and, increasingly, corporate charities. Corporate charities have lots of money, benefit from tax write-offs, and sometimes collect personal donations in their stores.

Charity is a business in and of itself. It garners good will and publicity in the general public when it is being promoted, but there's far less fanfare when funding is pulled and those who are reliant on it are often hesitant to speak out for fear of never being considered for funding again.

The President's Choice Children's Charity in York Region schools

In Ontario, President's Choice Children's Charity (PCCC) began funding nutrition programs in York Region about six years ago. You've probably seen or even donated to this charity in a Loblaws, No-Frills or Superstore. In York Region, PCCC school funding was initially between $2,000 and $5,000/year, rising over the years to between $10,000 and $15,000 depending on the size of the school, not the level of need. PCCC refused to collaborate with the SNO Community Development Coordinators who are familiar with local schools and could direct funds to where they were most needed, and instead chose to remain completely disconnected from the other players working to support these programs.

In the spring of 2024, York Region's schools didn't hear from PCCC. Applications were not available on the PCCC website, and schools were not being invited to apply for funds as before. School administrators heard that this year only select schools would be invited to apply, which made everyone extremely anxious. A number of schools with the highest need for funding were not notified in a timely way and in some cases PCCC's emails were sent to the wrong school addresses. If schools missed the deadline by even a day they were not considered. Most schools heard nothing: those in the York Region familiar with the application process estimated that 80 percent of schools that had received PCCC funding previously were not invited to apply.

The handful of schools that managed to connect with PCCC staff were told that donations were down and the situation was out of their hands. Principals closed their doors at the end of June, hoping to hear something over the summer months, but most did not. Ultimately, of the schools that were funded, the amounts were much lower than in previous years. The

loss of funding across 213 schools amounted to over $1.5 million dollars.

Reliance on charity for public priorities

This cautionary tale brings us full circle to the way in which the reliance on charity and fundraising (i.e., private money) has become normalized and reinforces that precarity of funding should simply be expected. The PCCC case portrays some of the issues with relying on a corporate charity: their agenda and priorities, and the stated goals of the programs — let alone the need being responded to — are often not in sync. Charity is a business in and of itself. It garners good will and publicity in the general public when it is being promoted, but there's far less fanfare when funding is pulled and those who are reliant on it are often hesitant to speak out for fear of never being considered for funding again.

Just as public education needs strong, secure public investments to achieve its mandate, so, too, do student nutrition programs. For some time now, we've been told there isn't enough money to sustain public services such as education, health care, and long-term care, and that privatization and charity are increasingly our only options. This messaging is straight out of the Privatization Playbook.

While there is a National Food Program on the federal agenda, and it was recently announced that Ontario was signing on to receive the monies, the jury is out on how long it will take for funds to reach the ground and meet the growing need. And while the program is national in scope, it's not intended to fully fund programs by any stretch. The federal funding is also mainly for new programs — promising to feed an additional 160,000 students across Ontario. (Editor's note: the recent prorogation puts all of this in jeopardy.) Existing programs that receive pennies on the dollar from their provincial government will not benefit as much, and all programs will continue to rely on private donations.

Survival of the wealthiest should not be the standard for public institutions, especially when we are talking about the health, well-being and success of our children and youth. Once again, underfunding and forced reliance on private money has set public education and student nutrition programs up for failure. Could there be an agenda here?

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K-12 international students in Canada

Blurring the lines between public and private education

Nancy Bell

Most Canadians are familiar with stories about international students. Post-secondary institutions, struggling to make ends meet during times of declining government support and, in some cases, frozen tuition rates for domestic students, have chosen to charge hefty tuition fees for international students to compensate for institutional financial challenges.

Media attention has alternated between empathetic and critical. For several years, stories of exploitation by unethical recruiters and students living in substandard housing aroused our sympathy. Then, when a shortage of affordable housing became a national concern, the conversation shifted focus to blame these same students for the crisis.

But not all international students are studying in post-secondary schools. In fact, some 60,000 study permits are issued annually to K-12 students from around the world. While this figure includes children whose parents have temporary work permits, and those here for a short term "study abroad" experience, a majority of K-12 international students are enrolled in long term educational programs to obtain a Canadian high school diploma.

Many K-12 international students study at private institutions where everyone pays tuition. Indeed, there are schools in larger centres such as the Greater Toronto Area and the Lower Mainland of British Columbia whose entire enrolment consists of fee-paying students from abroad. However, particularly in the past

20 years, international students have been actively recruited to study in our publicly funded schools — from one end of the country to the other. According to the Canadian Association of Public Schools — International (CAPS-I) there are 30,000 long term K-12 international students currently enrolled in their member schools.

It's a small group in comparison to the post-secondary cohort, but these numbers are significant, and they are trending upwards. For those of us who value a publicly funded system that offers free quality education for all, this raises some concerns.

The practice of recruiting K-12 international students began in British Columbia in the 1980s and has increased in momentum: today every province is engaged in the activity. A quick Google search reveals most school boards have "international education" pages on their websites, highlighting the quality of their education and encouraging students from abroad to experience the benefits of a Canadian education — with a particular emphasis on learning English (or French to a lesser extent).

Many public boards of education are members of the CAPS-I or similar provincial organizations that market Canada as a destination and collectively recruit students from abroad. They also share programmatic knowledge about issues such as the provision of insurance and home care support for students who are away from their families. In a sense, they both collaborate and compete against each other in the lucrative international student market.

Provincial governments across the country support these initiatives and emphasize the positive economic impact on school districts and their local communities *and* the educational benefits for international students and their domestic peers in the schools who host them. The financial incentives are certainly evident: international students pay as much as $18,000 a year in some school boards. And those fees add up. In 2017, Alberta reported that K-12 international student spending (including long- and short-term stays) and their visiting friends and relatives generated an output of $66.4 million dollars. In British Columbia, international students paid $256,829,0941 in tuition to BC public school districts in the 2017–18 school year.

However, increased reliance on earned revenue from external sources is a risky way to maintain financial stability in a system that is, in theory, publicly funded. The flow of fee-paying students from abroad is subject to market disruption based on government regulation, geo-politics and, as we have seen, global health issues. During the pandemic, the number of K-12 international students decreased dramatically, even though many schools pivoted to offering online options as a stop-gap measure. According to the International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF) most schools bounced back to 80 percent of their pre-pandemic enrolments by 2022-23, but the pandemic certainly exposed a weakness in the model. In addition, despite concerted recruitment efforts to diversify the market, most international students come from a handful of countries with China by far the largest source.

There are other elements of the financial picture that are concerning. Public funding for education is based on the premise that all students have equitable access to resources. However, the revenue from international students is not distributed equally. For the most part, boards and schools in large urban communities are much more successful at attracting students.

For example, in 2019, a British Columbia funding review noted that international student revenues, used to enhance programming in schools, was distributed unevenly across the province with school districts in Vancouver and Victoria benefiting the most. In the same province, researchers have noted that legislation allowing school boards to establish for profit companies to recruit students was passed at the same time the government cut provincial support for public education and downloading costs onto school districts. A similar pattern exists in Ontario, with large boards in the GTA attracting thousands of international students, and smaller numbers choosing to study in other areas across the province.

The distribution of international students within school boards is also uneven. For example, in the school board where I taught, international students tended to be clustered in schools with low enrolment that offered English as a Second Language (ESL) programs to an already linguistically diverse student population. In 2020, when I was conducting my research, well over 10 percent of the population of my school comprised fee paying students. Their tuition fees, however, do not go to the schools

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that host them — the revenue is spread throughout the board.

Beyond the question of who reaps the economic benefits is a concern about access to the benefits of the "international education" initiative. A study in Manitoba and my own dissertation research found that parents and families primarily send their children to Canada to master English proficiency and gain access to post-secondary studies in a North American institution. While many of them make huge financial sacrifices to afford this, they are members of a global middle class who have advantages unavailable to most. They are buying their children an opportunity to gain skills that will make them more competitive in the global marketplace. It's not an option for most people — in Canada or abroad.

As for their educational experiences, international students in our public schools receive varying levels of support. Programmatically, the level of government involvement varies. In Nova Scotia, a centralized international student program recruits and places students in schools across the province. In Manitoba, a Legislative Act intending to protect international students and ensure the quality of the province's reputation as a provider of international education was passed in 2016.

Most public school boards have international education offices that focus on recruitment and, to some extent, provide non-academic support for the students. In some cases, guidance counselors are trained in issues specific to the international student population, such as study permit renewals and (paid) health insurance programs.

Recent studies, however, suggest that governments and boards of education are more interested in the financial gains than the educational outcomes of the project. In Ontario, where there is very little provincial oversight, many boards of education are members of the Ontario Association of School Districts International. The organization advises its members on best practices, but there are no binding policies. Other schools pursue their international education agenda independently.

Most public school boards have international education offices that focus on recruitment and, to some extent, provide non-academic support for the students. In some cases, guidance counselors are trained in issues specific to the international student population, such as study permit renewals and (paid) health insurance programs. However, this support is often limited. In my school, there was one itinerant counselor for international students — shared with nine other schools. In a study of several school boards in Ontario that host students, administrators commented that they largely relied on existing guidance and ESL teachers at the schools to attend to the international students' academic and linguistic needs.

While many international students are high academic achievers, they are also a vulnerable population. Not surprisingly, many suffer from linguistic, social and emotional isolation. They live away from their immediate families, often in homestays — where English is spoken, and daily routines and foods may be unfamiliar — at a formative time in their lives. In the classroom, they often struggle with linguistic barriers, new academic routines and the challenge of fitting in.

Of course, classroom teachers generally strive to meet the needs of all their students. I would wager that few make a distinction between who is paying a fee and who is publicly funded — in fact they may not know. Still, if an international student requires additional supports that are not provided directly by the school/board and funded by their tuition revenues, what is a teacher to do? Does the students' tuition entitle them to fewer, the same, or more benefits than their publicly funded peers? The ethical issues are complex and

difficult to isolate when the lines between public and private become blurred.

In theory and sometimes in practice, schools are places where diversity and inclusivity flourish. Some boards, schools and individual teachers employ programs and teaching strategies to encourage the intercultural experiences of their students and create lively and inclusive environments. However, this is not a given. Studies indicate that international students largely reach out to students from the same country, or other newcomer students facing similar linguistic and cultural barriers. This is understandable; wouldn't most of us do the same if we were studying abroad? International students who participated in my dissertation research reported that they developed friendships with "Canadian" students late in their study terms, if at all.

The presence of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in our public school system has the potential to create positive learning experiences and prepare students for living in an increasingly global community. The question is whether these aspirational goals are being met by an initiative that seems largely focused on generating revenue.

Given the precarity of funding, inequities in access, and the cost of providing adequate care and education of the students, there are many reasons to question whether the practice of recruiting fee paying students is a viable or ethical solution to the chronic underfunding of education.

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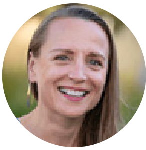

The parallels and perils of pandemic privatization across western Canada

Ellen Bees, Ee-Seul Yoon and Shannon D.M. Moore

Privatization in public education began well before the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the pandemic, trends of creeping privatization and marketization in public education have emerged across Western Canada, including Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Because education is primarily a provincial responsibility in Canada, territorial borders can hide the common tactics and consequences used to undermine public education and advance privatization. As well, the differing contexts of each province, including past policies, governing parties, and impending elections, have shaped the ways privatization has unfolded.

Despite these factors, education privatization has occurred in comparable ways in the four Western Canadian provinces since the outset of the pandemic, and understanding these trends is an essential part in resisting this movement.

When examining how privatization has crept into the four provinces from March 2020 to December 2023, we considered both exogenous and endogenous privatization. *Exogenous privatization* is where the private sector takes on roles within public schools that once were a public responsibility, and *endogenous privatization* is where practices and values from the for-profit sector are adopted within public education (Ball & Youdell, 2007). Exogenous privatization includes new or changed roles for businesses, parents, and not-for-profits within schools, as well as the increase of private methods for school funding, such as fees, fundraising and more. Endogenous privatization includes the increase in policies relating to school choice, marketization and other for-profit values or practices.

Both types of privatization are at play, and several trends are noticeable in the four provinces: reduced public school funding and increased investment in independent schools, new policies in support of independent schools, an increase in alternative sources of funding for public schools, and a focus on for-profit values and practices in the public system.

Of the four provinces, trends in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta most closely mirror each other. For most of the pandemic period, these provinces were governed by conservative parties while British Columbia was governed by a left of center party. While these privatization trends are most prominent in the first three provinces, there are notable similarities across all four provinces.

Reduced public school funding and increased investment in independent schools

The general trend across the Western provinces was a reduction in funding for public schools, a trend that in some cases existed prior to the pandemic. For instance, in Manitoba the provincial government under the Progressive Conservatives increased education funding at less than the rate of inflation from 2016 to 2022, resulting in de facto decreases over time. Similar critiques have been made in Saskatchewan and Alberta, where education funding increases have in recent years periodically failed to meet the rate of inflation. Manitoba took this defunding a step farther in 2023 when the provincial government stopped school boards from raising property taxes and penalized a school division that raised taxes to cover insufficient funding (Macintosh, 2023). This defunding of public schools is one means of destabilizing public systems.

In this same period, increased investment in independent (private) schools was persistent. In British Columbia, independent schools received $491 million in public funding and subsidies in the 2022-23 school year, which is twice as much as in 2000 (Hemingway, 2022). While the governing Saskatchewan Party increased public school funding by 2.5 percent in 2023, which was lower than the rate of inflation of 5 percent, independent schools received a 23 percent increase in funding. In Alberta, the United Conservative Party (UCP), elected to a majority government in 2019, took a more active role in supporting independent and charter schools.

In 2020, the Alberta government updated their funding model to use a three-year weighted enrollment average to allocate funds, which resulted in lower school funding grants in many cases. However, new schools were given financial assistance. This new assistance coincided with the lifting of the charter school cap, thus encouraging the establishment of new charter schools. In 2020, $75 million was also given to expand charters in Alberta. This increased investment in independent and charter schools demonstrates a disparity in financial support between the public and private systems across the Western provinces.

Deregulation for privatization: independent, charter, and home schools

In some provinces, independent schools received increased support through legislation and policy changes. Alberta provided the strongest example. In 2020, the Choice in Education Act was passed. This legislation allowed people to apply directly to the provincial government to create charter schools, in an effort to increase the number of charters across the province. The Choice in Education Act also formally recognized the importance of independent schools and reduced supervision of homeschooling families.

In 2022, the Red Tape Reduction Act was passed, which reduced oversight relating to private revenue for independent schools and other organizations. Critics have voiced concerns that this means reduced transparency for the funding of independent schools (Bellefontaine, 2022). Finally, the province started a kindergarten home education pilot program in the 2023-24 school year, actively promoting increased enrollment in homeschools for their youngest students. These policy changes signal the overwhelming support the governing UCP has for homeschooling, independent, and charter schools.

Similarly, in 2022, the Saskatchewan government under the Saskatchewan Party introduced a new category of Certified Independent School, which received 75 percent of the average per student rate. This change provided a step between Qualified Independent Schools, which receive 50 percent of the per student funding for schools up to 399 students, and Associate Schools. The goal of this change was to allow for continued growth of independent schools.

These policies that strengthen education privatization are striking, particularly considering the underfunding of the public system that hampered their ability to compete within this marketized education system.

Increasing reliance on the alternative privatized sources of funding

Due to the financial constraints imposed by provincial governments, public schools across Western Canada have been forced to pursue other sources of funding by increasing fees, engaging in fundraising, grant writing and soliciting philanthropy.

These tactics are not new. In Alberta some school divisions continued to rely on pre-existing charitable trusts. For instance, Edmonton Public Schools routinely raise money for programs or supplies that fall outside of the government's public funding, such as full day kindergarten, nutrition programs, mental wellness, enrichment, and technology. In Manitoba, Winnipeg School Division continues the practice of fundraising via individual schools and endowment funds and continues to rely on philanthropy to cover shortfalls. In British Columbia, Surrey School Division was a registered charity prior to the pandemic. It has a designated department that facilitates donations of money, services, and goods, plus the development of partnerships. Donations to this charity increased from 2019 to 2023.

In other provinces, charitable foundations became more prominent after the pandemic. Increased reliance on fundraising and donations was evident in Saskatchewan since the start of the pandemic. For example, the Living Sky School Division launched an Innovation Fund in 2023 meant to support programming like nutrition programs or outdoor learning resources (Kurz, 2023). Donations to the charitable foundation for Saskatoon Public Schools increased substantially compared to pre-pandemic, with the foundation raising enough money to fund full day kindergarten.

Increased school fees were also a problem in several provinces. In 2023, the Winnipeg School Division in Manitoba increased fees for summer courses. In 2019, Alberta reversed rules on fees, which opened the door for new school fees to be introduced in subsequent years. In 2023, school fees increased in various public schools across Saskatchewan. Premier Scott Moe urged school divisions to draw from reserve funds, even though these were non-existent in many school divisions (Vescera, 2022). While the increase in school fees was often contentious, it was viewed as a necessary means to overcome insufficient public funding.

However, while increased fees and fundraising are often positioned as a solution to underfunding, these alternate funding methods work to erode public systems and legitimize education privatization.

> In our province of Manitoba, the Teacher Idea Fund included a competition for grant funding for mental health related projects. This was frustrating for educators who were told to compete for funding while witnessing the widespread mental health impacts of pandemic schooling.

New roles expanding for private actors

As public school systems worked to overcome underfunding, new roles emerged for private actors. In the four Western provinces, provincial governments partnered with the private sector and non-profits to deliver programming, particularly relating to financial literacy, job skills, career development, and technology. For instance, Manitoba turned to the private sector to hire curriculum consultants and to report on remote learning strategies. The provincial government under the PCs also chose to pursue several public-private partnerships, particularly a plan announced in 2023 to build nine new schools using P3 agreements (Lambert, 2023). People for Public Education was among the many voices advocating against this plan, and it was later abandoned after the election of the New Democratic Party (NDP) government in October 2023.

Affirming for-profit values and practices in the public school systems

Considering the participation of private actors in delivering financial literacy and job skills programming, it is not surprising that for-profit values and practices were emphasized in other

areas of the school system. In some cases, these values were already firmly entrenched. In British Columbia, there is a long history of for-profit values and practices in schools. As a result, there remained a focus on generating revenue in schools in British Columbia during the pandemic period. In Alberta, the prominent support for choice in education that emerged after the 2019 provincial election continued previous policies promoting school choice.

Other for-profit values emerged during this period. Both Manitoba and Saskatchewan introduced Teacher Idea or Innovation Funds, where teachers competed for grant money to fund innovative projects. In our province of Manitoba, the Teacher Idea Fund included a competition for grant funding for mental health related projects. This was frustrating for educators who were told to compete for funding while witnessing the widespread mental health impacts of pandemic schooling.

Manitoba also made the biggest foray into pursuing for-profit values in education from 2019 to 2023, as the government pushed for education reforms focused on accountability, standardization, improving achievement, and consolidating governance structures through Bill 64: The Education Modernization Act. These proposed reforms would have eliminated public school boards and introduced other changes aimed at improving accountability. While these changes would have integrated for-profit values into the school system, they were met with significant resistance and were ultimately withdrawn.

Conclusion and looking ahead

While schools were increasingly strained by the COVID-19 pandemic, privatization and marketization continued and to some extent expanded during the pandemic period in education. This included inadequate public funding, the pursuit of privatized sources of funding, increased support for independent schools, expanded involvement of private actors and the affirmation of for-profit values. Resistance to these elements of privatization also arose in various provincial contexts. In Manitoba, Bill 64 was met with resistance from established organizations and new grassroots groups, unions and other community members. In 2023, the PC government of Manitoba was defeated by the NDP, and many privatization projects were ended, such as the rejection of public-private partnerships for the construction of new schools. During the pandemic period in Manitoba, education was a battleground where pre-existing and grassroots groups protested education privatization.

In other provinces, community groups continued to push back against creeping privatization. This included SOS Alberta, who worked to question the UCP's dedication to school choice amidst chronic underfunding. The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation advocated on behalf of teachers, but also for robustly funded and inclusive public systems. In British Columbia, the Institute for Public Education continued to advocate for a strong public education system in BC and beyond. More recently, the Public Education Exchange built connections across provinces to better understand privatization and marketization in education in Canada and to communicate the dangers these pose.

While education privatization is a growing threat to strong public systems, we are optimistic that by better understanding how these trends are playing out in different provincial contexts, a cross-border response is possible to advocate on behalf of a strong public education system.

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Increased public funding for private schools is dividing us, and needs to stop

A view from British Columbia

Patti Bacchus

Public schools are often referred to as the cornerstone of healthy democracies, where children from all backgrounds have equitable opportunities to reach their potential and acquire the skills and knowledge to become engaged and productive citizens. That's a good reason to publicly fund them and ensure they're accessible to all.

But what happens when public funding is redirected to private schools, while public schools struggle to cover the costs of delivering quality education services and supports to all students?

Does it lead to increasingly polarized politics? Does an eroded public system open the doors to the misinformation and manipulation that undermines democracy? Does it exacerbate economic equality? Based on what we've seen play out over the last decade in the U.S., one could argue that the answer to these questions is "yes" — and that we're seeing more of these outcomes in Canada in recent years.

Here in British Columbia, public funding for private schools has been growing steadily since the provincial government started subsidizing private (also referred to as independent) schools in 1977.

Under BC legislation passed in 1989, private schools receive either 50 percent of the per-student annual funding allocation to public schools (if they don't spend more per student than neighbouring public schools), or 35 percent if they spend more than public schools).

It adds up. In BC this year, the public is directly subsidizing private schools to the tune of a staggering $570 million dollars in annual

operating grants, while public school boards struggle to balance their budgets. At the same time, BC now allocates less of its Gross Provincial Product (GPP) toward its public schools than any province except Newfoundland and Labrador, according to Statistics Canada.[1]

According to that 2021 data, BC allocates just 3 percent of its GPP to K-12 education, while Manitoba allocates 4.9 percent, Nova Scotia 4.4 percent, Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island 4.2 percent, Quebec 4.1 percent, New Brunswick 4 percent, Ontario 3.8 percent and Alberta 3.3 percent. This smaller percentage means BC school boards have less funding available for student support and to provide up-to-date, adequate and safe school buildings.

Consequently, in BC public school funding doesn't keep pace with inflation and other increased costs, and private school enrolment is growing, with more of the province's public funding being used to subsidize those private schools, further eroding public schools' ability to meet the needs of all students. And it's not just $570 million in direct funding to private schools, it's an array of tax credits, "charitable" tax deductions and property-tax exemptions that divert money from the provincial treasury that could otherwise be invested in public schools.

A perverse sort of charity, for children of the wealthy

Public school trustees and administrators can only dream of the quality of education they could provide if they had the money to work with that schools like Vancouver's elite, private school for boys, St. George's School, has. It starts with the $34,000 annual tuition fee, which is generously subsidized with an additional $3,650 per year per student from BC taxpayers. That's on top of the $6,479,200 the school's charitable arm — The St. George's School Foundation — received in the form of "gifts for which the charity issued tax receipts," according to Canada Revenue Agency documents (in addition to another $1,345,406 in "gifts received for which a tax receipt was not issued by the charity," also according to the CRA).[2]

The generous tax-receipted gifts include direct donations to the St. George's School Foundation "Annual Fund," to which hundreds of families donate each year.

That's a load of dough to be distributed among about 1,200 students, the children of some of BC's wealthiest and most powerful people. Especially when they screen their students for academic ability, prioritizing those on track to attend prestigious post-secondary institutions, meaning those with complex (and expensive) learning needs may be excluded on the grounds of not being "a good fit."

If it does accept students with special needs, the school may also claim 100 percent of the supplementary provincial grants available for public school students with special education designations, thanks to the former BC Liberal government's legislation.

So not only are BC taxpayers directly subsidizing some of the most privileged students in the province, who have access to resources public schools can only dream of, its donors are getting tax deductions for millions in "charitable" donations to what strikes me as a perverse sort of charity of children of the rich, while public school boards are forced to cut staffing and programs to balance their increasingly inadequate budgets.

> Every single child deserves a quality education, not just those whose parents can pay tuition. It's time to privatize private schools by making them fund themselves privately, without the public's money.

A generous deal for families who can afford over $40,000 a year in tuition

While K-12 education is a provincial responsibility, Vancouver taxpayers are on the hook for an especially sweet deal for a small private school on Vancouver's west side.

It's bad enough that so much money flows from the province to BC's private schools, while the government invests less of its GPP on public schools than it has in decades, and wealthy parents can reduce their taxes by donating money on top of their hefty tuition fees.

To add insult to injury to public schools and the students who attend them, Vancouver's city

council recently committed its taxpayers to a generous "in-kind' gift of $31.85 million to the private Fraser Academy School, in the form of a ground-lease agreement giving them a site in one of the country's most expensive postal codes, at an annual rent payment of one dollar a year, over 104 years.

That arrangement, combined with an exemption for the school from paying property taxes — a gift put into legislation by B.C.'s former provincial Liberal government (led by former Premier Christy Clark, who sent her own child to St. George's School) — means generations of Vancouver taxpayers will be subsidizing a private school that charges north of $40,000 year in tuition, and boasts of class size averages of "up to 12 students," while the city's public school board has cut multiple programs and staff positions, and struggles to meet the needs of its diverse student population.

Public education is an investment we can't afford to keep shortchanging

When we don't meet the needs of children when they're at school, we may pay for it later. Not graduating from high school is associated with a number of expensive social and economic outcomes, including unemployment and poverty.

We simply can't afford to keep shortchanging our public schools. Public treasuries are stretched and education budgets are in competition with rising healthcare costs, in a system that is also struggling. We have aging public infrastructure that needs massive investment.

The increased diversion of precious, in-demand public funds to private education is undermining our public schools' ability to meet the educational needs of students, and it needs to stop. This erosion threatens our democracy and leads to division and intolerance and increasing inequality. Public schools bring us together, while private schools divide us.

By redirecting the direct and indirect public funding that is subsidizing private schools — that only few can afford — back to public schools, we can provide the level of education programming and support that some parents choose to pay for in the private system.

Every single child deserves a quality education, not just those whose parents can pay tuition. It's time to privatize private schools by making them fund themselves privately, without the public's money. Let's recommit to a quality public education system and stop putting the public's money into private schools. We can't afford not — to and our democracy depends on it.

Patti Bacchus is a long-time public education advocate and the Vancouver School Board's longest serving board chair (2008-2014). She is currently a Director on the board of the Institute for Public Education (British Columbia). She is also a former education columnist and previously served on the board of the Broadbent Institute.

The Institute for Public Education BC is an independent nonpartisan society providing high quality information and leadership to build a strong public education system for British Columbia's children, families, and communities. IPE/BC offers analysis of current educational issues, supports public education, and shares current research findings to enrich dialogue on educational issues in British Columbia.

Notes

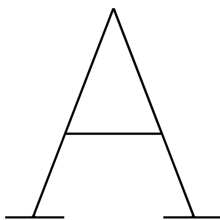
1 Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0211-01 Public and private expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP, by level of education DOI: https://doi.org/10.25318/3710021101-eng

2 Canada Revenue Agency. "St. George's School Foundation—Quick View," 2024. https://apps.cra-arc.gc.ca/ebci/hacc/srch/pub/dsplyRprtngPrd?=0007&selectedCharityBn=119175511RR0001.

International education and PPPs in (post) pandemic times

More of the same in Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador

Declan Amaral and Sue Winton



Along with school closures and the move to remote emergency teaching in spring 2020, the pandemic raised the possibility that education could be changed forever. Those of us who'd been watching the growing presence and influence of private actors in public schools were especially worried. We wondered if this crisis would open the door to more privatization in public education in Canada as it had elsewhere in past emergencies.

As members of the Public Education Exchange (PEX), a network of individuals and organizations interested in creating and sharing knowledge about the privatization of public education, we're studying the pandemic's impact on this trend in the Atlantic provinces. In this article we share what we've learned so far about some of the effects in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) and Prince Edward Island (PEI), specifically in the area of international education and "workplace preparation."

The good news? The crisis did not expand or accelerate international education or public private partnerships (PPPs) in support of workplace preparation. The bad news? These policies, which enable privatization and were in place before the pandemic, continue.

K-12 international education

Like many school districts and provinces across the country, both PEI and NL have histories of

raising funds from international students in K-12 that precede the pandemic.

In PEI, this dates back to at least as early as 2009. But it accelerated in 2012-2013 when the province launched an international education strategy designed to bring more international students — and their tuition dollars — to the Prince Edward Island International Student Program (PEIISP). The province dedicated staff to international education, created a website, and worked with agents to grow their numbers. And grow they did: from 81 students in 2013-2014 to 153 in 2019-2020. However, the number of international students dropped by nearly half during the pandemic.

In 2022-2023, PEI recommitted to bringing international students to the province, developing a new strategic plan, launching a new promotional website, and updating government web pages. The government said it was working with Study Abroad Canada to offer homestay services and recruit PEI residents to host students. It also announced that St. Thomas University will offer a $20,000 discount on its tuition to eligible international students graduating from the PEIISP.

PEI doesn't just bring international students to the island, it also makes money through its affiliated schools program where these schools teach the PEI curriculum and award PEI high school graduation diplomas — for a price.

Problems arise, though, when schools look to international students to supplement (insufficient) public funding. This practice sets districts and provinces up to compete for tuition dollars and lets governments off the hook for providing adequate funds for public education. It also turns Canadian public education into something that can be bought and leveraged by families, facilitating inequality on a global scale.

The province entered into its first agreement with an international school in Japan in 1999. In 2015, there were three affiliated schools (two in China and one Japan), and two more schools joined the program in 2022, one in Egypt and another in Turkey. In 2022-2023, income from its affiliated schools was projected to be $271,500. The province says it "continues to work with and seeks new global partners" to make its curricula available to students abroad.

The government of NL's commitment to international education for K-12 has been less consistent than that of PEI. It listed international education as a line of business in its 2006-2009 and 2009-2011 strategic plans but its next two plans were silent on the subject. In 2018, the NL government said it intended to study "the feasibility of working with other jurisdictions to establish Newfoundland and Labrador-administered schools abroad, selling or licensing the use of [its] K-12 education curriculum to other jurisdictions, developing e-learning education services for access by international students, and increasing the number of international students studying in our K-12 schools" (p. 32)...but there's been no further mention of these activities.

NL's English school districts' engagement with international education is also unclear. In 2007-2008, the then-Eastern District said it supported and promoted activities to attract international students and to develop partnerships via the privately-owned Newfoundland International Student Education Program (NISEP), but this is the last statement on international education we could find by an English school district. Yet, the Canadian Association of Public Schools — International (CAPS-I) currently lists NLSchools as a member.

However, the NISEP continues to coordinate international education placements for K-12 students, placing — according to its website — 250 students from over 30 countries each year. A second company, Newfoundland International Studies Ltd., also advertises its services to arrange schooling and homestays in NL. Both companies' websites list public schools that international students attend in NL, suggesting the province accepts K-12 international students while leaving their recruitment and supervision beyond the school day to private companies.

It appears, then, that the pandemic did not change the course of NL's or PEI's international education policies. PEI's affiliated schools program continues to expand slowly, and the province remains committed to growing the number of fee-paying international students studying on the island. NL's low level of commitment to international education before the pandemic remains today.

To be clear, our concern is not with students from abroad studying alongside domestic students. This arrangement can create social, personal, and educational benefits for both groups as well as positively impact local communities.

Problems arise, though, when schools look to international students to supplement (insufficient) public funding. This practice sets districts and provinces up to compete for tuition dollars and lets governments off the hook for providing adequate funds for public education. It also turns Canadian public education into something that can be bought and leveraged by

It's important to remember that the interests of businesses and the public sector are not the same. For-profit organizations' values of competition and consumerism and their need to prioritize what's good for their bottom line conflict with many ideals of public education, including commitments to cooperation, collectivism, and concern for the environment.

families, facilitating inequality on a global scale.

PPPs to support workplace preparation

While NL may not be looking to families abroad for additional funding of its public schools, the province has a history of working with businesses and career-oriented organizations in public-private partnerships (PPPs). While specific partnerships may change, NL's use of PPPs to outsource students' training for the workplace is not new. And it continues.

NL's partnership with the charity Brilliant Labs is a good example. Brilliant Labs was founded by a group of entrepreneurs with the aim to develop Atlantic Canada's knowledge-based economy.[1] Among its activities, Brilliant Labs provides coding and technology education to students and professional education to teachers. NL's government announced its initial partnership with the organization, along with a $250,000 contribution, in 2018. In 2021, the government gave the organization an additional $282,000 to support its continuing efforts to integrate "creativity, innovation, coding and entrepreneurial spirit within classrooms."[2]

In another case, NL announced a pilot project with the College of the North Atlantic in 2020 with the hope of growing the workforce in the province's technology and innovation sectors. This initiative involves high school students completing an experiential learning placement in a business for at least six weeks (as well as earning a micro-credential in programming and a course credit and tuition voucher in a post-secondary institution).

While these projects may offer unique opportunities and benefits to some students and economies, it's important to remember that the interests of businesses and the public sector are not the same. For-profit organizations' values of competition and consumerism and their need to prioritize what's good for their bottom line conflict with many ideals of public education, including commitments to cooperation, collectivism, and concern for the environment.

As with international education, the pandemic didn't appear to change NL's use of PPPs to support workplace learning. Instead, it was business as usual.

Paradoxes of privatization

International education initiatives and PPPs to support education for the workplace exemplify the paradoxical nature of many policies that are privatizing public education. Looking beyond the government for funding education and training students can expand and enhance what public schools can provide with existing resources. However, involving private actors usually also requires adopting practices, values, and priorities of the private sector which, ultimately, serves to undermine public education.

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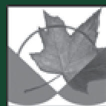
Notes

1 Brilliant Labs. "About Us." Brilliant Labs. Accessed December 1, 2024. https://www.brilliantlabs.ca/about-us.

2 Newfoundland & Labrador. "Provincial Government Supports Brilliant Labs in Preparing Youth for Future Tech Jobs." News Releases, January 15, 2021. https://www.gov.nl.ca/releases/2021/iet/0115n02/.



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