



RECOMMITTING TO PUBLIC EDUCATION IN ALBERTA

BY CAROLYN BLASSETTI AND BARBARA SILVA

Support Our Students Alberta started as a group of concerned parents on the playgrounds of Alberta. Like many parents across the country, our interests focused on class sizes, busing, school lunches and under resourced classrooms. However, as our understanding of education issues evolved we have come to understand that our initial concerns are only small symptoms of a larger ailment. Since 2015, we have explored the educational landscape in Alberta, meeting and listening to anyone interested in public education issues.

BRIEF HISTORY OF ALBERTA EDUCATION

When Alberta became a province in 1905, both public and separate (Catholic) schools were created and continue to this day across all jurisdictions in both rural and urban settings, including public and separate francophone boards. Today, all 61 school boards have distinct, publicly elected governing boards, individual administration, facilities and operations. Currently over 92% of Alberta students are enrolled in the public system. All are 100% funded by the provincial government.

Since 1967, the Alberta government has also publicly funded private schools. There are several types of private education in Alberta but accredited funded private schools are comparable to public and separate schools.¹ They receive 70% of the per-student base funding regardless of tuition cost.²

In 1994, building upon the education reform movement that was gaining momentum globally, charter schools were introduced to Alberta with the stated intention of being innovative and

collaborative with public schools.³ Charter schools are autonomous, privately run, publicly funded schools that must be approved by the education ministry, follow the Alberta program of studies, cannot be religious in nature, and have a unique and innovative teaching approach. Currently there are 13 charter schools in Alberta, the majority in the urban centres of Calgary and Edmonton.



ALBERTA EXPERIENCE

Alberta is witnessing the (spoiled) fruit of the Klein era cuts to education. The student-based funding model — attaching a dollar figure to every school-age child in Alberta — has resulted in an education system that fractures and divides Alberta students along many fault lines. In 1993, Premier Ralph Klein cut funding for

kindergarten, reduced educator wages by 5%, and stripped local schools boards of their taxation abilities and autonomy. Klein also amalgamated 141 school boards into 60, and opened the door to school choice with the introduction of charter schools. As a result,

inequitable funding and under-resourcing continue to be an issue in Alberta public schools, where schools fees, rising mental health issues, poverty, food insecurity and school based fundraising are all putting pressure on schools beyond what many jurisdictions can handle.

Since the 1990's there have been a number of government actions that were supposed to guide education policy in Alberta, including the Alberta Commission on Learning (2003), Inspiring Education (2009) and the now nine year old, unproclaimed Education Act. Unfortunately there seems to have been little will to follow through on these policy initiatives that would have addressed issues like class size, the future direction of education and updating regulations in the School Act. Sadly, these initiatives remain as relics to the unfulfilled promises of former education ministers.

Since being elected in May 2015, Premier Rachel Notley has followed through with her commitment to fund each student in the system ("funding for growth"). The NDP government has also started addressing the infrastructure deficit by building and modernising many new schools across the province.⁵ In his first year as Education Minister, David Eggen turned down two charter school applications, curbing that growth.

Following through on Bill 10, legislation that enabled students to form GSA (Gay Straight Alliances) at school to help support LGBTQ2+ students, Eggen mandated that all schools create *Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions*.⁶ The fall 2017 sitting of the Alberta legislature added protection for students from being 'outed' through parental notification of participation in a GSA, and is widely seen as a commitment to creating a more inclusive society and recognizing the need to defend marginalized populations in Alberta.

Another significant policy brought in by the Alberta government addresses the impact of food insecurity on student learning: the School Nutrition Program which will see \$10 million dollars invested in the 2017-18 school year, will provide K-6 students in selected schools a daily nutritious meal.⁷ In the spring of 2017, Minister Eggen also introduced Bill 1: An Act to Reduce School Fees, which eliminated all instructional, supply and material school fees as well as busing fees for eligible students. The \$50 million commitment

is expected to reduce school fees by 25% across the province. While highly divisive among parents, this was a necessary measure to try and regulate schools fees that had run wild for four decades.

CONFRONTING INEQUALITY

Currently, along every branch of education in Alberta, students experience barriers, dividing students along socioeconomic, religious, ability, and geographical lines. We are experiencing the adverse consequences of a market based education system.⁸

This has been part of a longstanding campaign of undermining public education in order to create a market — and demand — for a privatized system. It started long before Klein, with the funding of private schools in 1967, was augmented in 1994 with the introduction of charter schools, and was magnified and expedited through the Klein years when education funding was completely decimated.

The slow, deliberate, calculated attempt to undermine public education using standardized test scores, attacking teacher professionalism and, more recently, implementing a curriculum rewrite, has not only been about promoting private schools. Alberta has methodically privatized the public system with charter schools and alternative programming — from which, we were told, public systems would benefit as a result of the competition. The reality has been that our most marginalized children continue to be overlooked, and inequity has widened.⁹

Public schools now include hockey academies, ballet schools, baseball academies, elite athlete schools, various faith based program, art schools, science schools, Mandarin program, German, French, Ukranian, Spanish bilingual.... the list goes

on and on. Woven throughout almost every type of program are institutional barriers such as extensive application procedures, long waitlists, costly requirements or auditions. Alberta schools have widely unregulated fees that serve as barriers for a large segment of Alberta society, and many retain the legal right to turn away students. The majority of Alberta rural students are largely excluded from much of this niche programming.

Saying no to a more segregated system seems like a no-brainer. But when privatization and specialization is packaged and marketed as a personalized program for an individual child, and

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SNAPSHOT OF SCHOOLS IN ALBERTA

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

- Receive public dollars, up to 70% of the per student amount (in 2015 this came to a total of \$258 million)
- Have the right to refuse student admission based on any reason, including religious, financial, or ability, via the school's application process.
- Some private schools are built exclusively for special needs students; however, the demand far exceeds the availability, and the associated costs exclude a large number of students.
- 13 of the top 15 most elite private schools in AB are in Calgary, and charge tuition as high as \$20,000 per year.
- Religious private schools continue to assert that they have the right to dictate both what and who is taught under their jurisdiction, using the coded terminology of parental choice. Private homeschooling also falls under this category, and recently examples of their financial mismanagement and academic weakness came under investigation.

CHARTER SCHOOLS

- Defined by Alberta Education as autonomous non-profit public schools, they are not allowed to be religiously based and are not obligated to accept every student.
- Publicly funded, receiving 100% of the per student amount.
- Do not report to a publicly elected school board and their financial operations remain internal.
- The terminology under public school changes from tuition to fees. Charter schools are able to charge additional fees, including costs for laptops, overnight excursions, uniforms, enrichment and special resources for which there is no cap and no current regulation.
- They are under no obligation to provide or implement IPPs (Individual Program Plan). Some charter schools cater exclusively to gifted children, for whom costly assessments are required
- Currently there are 13 charter schools in Alberta: six in Calgary, five in and around Edmonton, and one each in Valhalla and Medicine Hat. With 11 of 13 schools in metro centres, charter schools are almost entirely an urban phenomenon.
- In Alberta, legislation allows for a maximum of 15 charter schools in the province. However, charter schools have found a way around this cap by opening multiple campuses under one charter school application. As a result, the existing 13 charter schools occupy 23 school buildings.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- Alberta has four parallel arms under the public umbrella: public schools, Catholic schools, francophone schools, and Catholic francophone.
- There are growing concerns over the relevance of providing an entire, parallel, self governing system to one religion. Some public figures and organizations are calling for the merging of the two boards, to eliminate duplication and to share resources.
- Some metro public school boards offer several schools that silo students based on religion, all of which are authorized and fully publicly funded under the alternative program designation. The lines between private and public schools becomes blurred as some alternative program schools operate under public boards.
- Since every student brings more funding into a school board, public schools have responded with a plethora of alternative programs to compete for students as young as five. Programming can be exclusive, sometimes requiring extensive applications, interviews, and/or auditions. Academic streaming is a reality in Alberta with some public schools requiring exams before admission.
- Some families have noted the ways children with behavioural needs or learning issues are counselled out of attending language or decidedly "academic" programs.
- Alternative schools (aka magnet schools or schools of choice) are almost exclusively available in urban centres. And depending on what part of the city a student might be in, programming availability can be limited.
- Many public schools across Alberta charge fees, including lunchroom supervision, transportation, and anything a school may deem required for specialized programming, posing a barrier to children living in poverty.

parents are in the throes of child-centered early years, it is difficult to argue against the strategic marketed slogans of doing what is “best” for your child, particularly for those parents who can afford or have access to these individualised options. What parent would not want to provide what is marketed to them as the best, most personalized educational experience for their child? The public “one size fits all” model can’t meet *your* child’s needs, parents are told. Gifted children need gifted programs, children of faith require faith based programming, and children with an affinity in arts or science must specialize in these areas.

However, this is short term thinking, because what’s best for your child right now, individually, may not be best for your child as an adult navigating a diverse society. To add to the confusion, the marketed advantages of the private school, the charter school, the alternative program, are entirely perception-based. Study after study show these programs do not significantly outperform public schools, and when they do it is a direct result of the socioeconomic status of the student’s family. There is no real academic advantage to these programs — but the social and societal impacts of dividing students are far-reaching.

The results and failures of this marketized system can be found here and elsewhere. Urban centres like Calgary have built an entirely unsustainable system based on competition and alternative programs. The public board can no longer sustain the costs associated with busing children across the city in a spiderweb of routes that take children out of their communities. We see rural

schools trying to redefine themselves due to declining populations, desperately trying to remain open.

The concept of market-based education has been exported all over the world and in every instance proved to fail its most marginalized students and widen inequality. In Chile, Australia, Sweden, the UK and the U.S., privatization of education has generally led to lower academic outcomes, overcrowded public schools, divisions along socioeconomic lines and greater inequality.

If it is obvious whose lead Alberta should *not* follow, it is equally obvious what country has succeeded in providing a quality, accessible and rich education for all its students. Finland, arguably, does education better than most nations. Outperformed only by a handful of countries like Singapore and China, Finland achieves consistently high scores without ever placing any real importance on standardized tests. Instead Finland’s system is built on a larger vision of creating learners and thinkers, not merely workers and taxpayers. Finland’s system is rooted in equity first, outpacing academic excellence as a priority, and all children are exposed to language, music, and play with equal emphasis on math, science and technology.

REDRAWN BATTLE LINES

Public education is the current battleground for conservative ideology where marketized education masquerades as choice. The battle cries echo around, falling standardized test scores,



curriculum rewrite, unionised teachers, GSA parental notification and failing public schools. This became glaringly evident in Alberta's 2017 municipal elections held this past October. Robocalls, sign wars, and widespread mail-outs were employed by self-proclaimed conservative candidates. Endorsements from provincial conservative MLA's and even MP door-knockers influenced what have traditionally been non-partisan elections.

In January 2017, a request was made to Alberta Education by the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta (CCSSA) to fund an alternative human sexuality curriculum which would be written by educators, but reviewed by Alberta Catholic bishops and clergy. 'Problematic areas' with the provincial curriculum identified in the document by the CCSSA include consent, reproductive technologies, contraception, same-sex relationships, and gender identity.

The precedent here could be catastrophic. What role would a provincial standard curriculum play, and what assurances would there be that children across the province are receiving a quality and equitable education?

Premier Rachel Notley emphatically shut down the debate, and the application, by reminding Albertans that consent is the law, and no child will be exposed to curriculum that is not accurate or science based. "We will not use public dollars to have sexual health programs that deny science, that deny evidence, and that deny human rights," she said.¹¹

Jason Kenney, recently elected leader of the United Conservative Party of Alberta, jumped on the opportunity to defend the CCSSA. And as he now prepares himself to run for a seat in the Alberta Legislature, courtesy of Dave Rodney's resignation on October 29, 2017, education will likely continue to be a topic where battle lines are drawn. Calls for a recommitment to and redefining of public education are more important than ever.

RECOMMITTING TO PUBLIC EDUCATION

An equitable public education system is one where rural students have access to programs available in urban schools, where children do not have to choose between a music focus or science focus school by Grade 1. SOS Alberta envisions a public system where gifted children have the chance to learn and experience school alongside a student with autism. We know these children will cross paths as adults in society. Our goal is to encourage and promote diversity, acceptance and resilience by providing children the opportunity to engage with others when they are most adept at and open to acceptance.

We can build a system that is resourced well enough to meet the needs of all children by providing adequate infrastructure, training, and wrap-around services. We should build schools as community hubs, as places for communities to gather, grow and strengthen and not just be warehouses of academics. We can equitably fund education and still provide local schools the autonomy to reflect the needs of their communities. We can build schools in ways that are walkable, bikeable, with recreational facilities and libraries, emphasizing how education is an investment in society at large and not the sole responsibility of parents. We can ensure every child has access to rich curriculum, whether they live in rural or metro Alberta, and includes second/foreign languages, includes arts, physical education and science. No child should have to choose between those options.

The stresses parents in Alberta see every September — increased fees, longer bus rides, less resources, ever increasing fundraising — continue to grow, and will continue to plague students and families until we realize they are not merely the realities of 'going to school' but symptoms of an inequitable system based on competition.

We could continue to try and minimize these issues individually, by signing income waivers, protesting bus routes, abstaining from fundraising, busing out of our communities or opting out of public school entirely.

But none of this will impact real change until we address the root causes of inequity and recognize that the illusions of choice, the false advertising of the advantages of a free market system has brought us here. To a place of inequity. Of division. Of streaming. Of undermining public education for the perception of an individual advantage.

It is time to recommit and redefine what universal public education is in Alberta and what it is meant to do.

While we recognize private schools will always appeal to some Albertans, it is not the responsibility of government to fund a decision to leave the public system, particularly when doing so dilutes funding for public schools. We are also committed to providing very real solutions to existing inequities.

To this end, Support Our Schools Alberta has developed 10 strategies to achieve a quality, equitable and accessible public education system, with the understanding and underlining premise that the funding model itself (attaching a dollar figure to each student) must be evaluated before any of these strategies can be effective, and that all public dollars should be focused on public education.

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STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE A QUALITY, EQUITABLE AND ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

1. Make high quality early childhood education universal and accessible, leveling the playing field and closing the achievement gap for underprivileged children.

2. Build schools as community engagement centres, comprehensive facilities where children and citizens can participate physically, intellectually and civically. Allowing for some local autonomy to reflect the specific needs of the community.

3. Eliminate ALL barriers including all school-related fees (including, but not limited to, instructional materials, busing, lunch supervision) and application procedures.

4. All schools should have a full, inclusive, and balanced curriculum including but not limited to arts, music, science, history, language arts, additional languages, mathematics, and physical education.

5. Reduce class sizes to bring them in line with the recommendations in the Alberta Learning Commission report of 2003, while placing strong consideration to class composition.

6. Integrate charter schools into public system, eliminating all fees and ability to deny access.

7. Provide integrated services for students including medical and social services that help children keep up with advantaged peers. One in six Alberta children live in poverty.

8. Reduce emphasis on high stakes standardized testing by broadening definition of student and school success.

9. Return to specialization for teachers at all grade levels.

10. Recognize that public education is a public responsibility not a consumer good. Its quality and accessibility should be equitable across the province.

CONCLUSION

Public education is a fundamental human right every child deserves. When we marketize it, we do a disservice to our most marginalized students and society at large. The good news is, we do not have to buy into this marketing, we are not obligated to support this narrative. Albertans can change this, we can consistently elect legislators who are committed to public education and can reverse the damage done through decades of deliberate underfunding, so that every child has an equitable chance at a great education. We can adequately, equitably fund a universal public education system that serves every child, and every community.

Universal public education is meant to engage children equally, instill a love of learning, and create numerate and literate citizens — but not to the exclusion of creating engaged, diverse, resilient citizens who can think critically, work collaboratively, and develop strong relationships. Public education was meant to build our society and provide our children the experiences and ability to learn across faith, culture, ability and socio economic status. The promise of public education should be to lay the groundwork for the society we wish to live in, where all our children can thrive. ●

CAROLYN BLASETTI grew up in Southern Alberta attending public schools in Okotoks Alberta before moving on to the big city to attend the University of Calgary, graduating with a Bachelor of History. She continued her studies at the University of Lethbridge, graduating with a Bachelor of Education specializing in Native Education. Carolyn taught for the Calgary Board of Education before moving into the non-traditional teaching field of Environmental Education. She worked as an environmental educator at Alberta Environment and then Inside Education, a non-profit organization focused on a bias balanced approach to teaching environmental issues.

Born in Ontario but raised all over Canada, **BARBARA SILVA** attended 11 different public and separate schools in Alberta & Ontario. She holds a BSc in Chemical Engineering from the University of Calgary. She worked in the Oil & Gas industry for six years before pursuing her Master Of Education from the University of Western Ontario. After working in the Rockyview School Division for four years she now volunteers her time to advocate for children's rights to an accessible, quality and equitable public education.

ENDNOTES

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