

# Our Schools/Our Selves

The Voice Of Progressive Education In Canada

Canadian Centre For Policy Alternatives

Summer/Fall 2022

## IMBALANCE SHEET

What we lose when we privatize public education



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# Living lessons

**Erika Shaker**

Some of you may know that my research in education and corporatization began in Washington DC, working for Ralph Nader. After I graduated from McGill in the early 90s, I spent a year at the Center for the Study of Responsive Law, digging into the corporate onslaught on public education, which was at that point significantly more evolved? (advanced? ominous?) than it was in Canada. (I returned to Canada around the time Youth News Network started eyeing the Canadian market, presumably to emulate the profitability of its predecessor: Channel One. The rest is, as they say, history...including the acceleration in the commercial onslaught on Canadian schools.)

At that point, the Center was located in a stately Carnegie Building on the corner of P and 15th in the NW district (fun fact: two key scenes from *The Pelican Brief* were filmed there). The offices were on the ground floor and half of the second floor, but we also had access to a very stately reception space for larger events. And it was here, with four chairs set up in the middle of this very grand room, that for the first time I met Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke, who were there to meet with Ralph about recent NAFTA-related events and actions in Canada.

I had heard of both Maude and Tony, but had never had the pleasure of meeting them. And they were truly lovely. But it wasn't until I returned to Canada a few months later, and heard that Maude and Heather-jane Robertson, who sadly passed away last summer, were co-authoring a book about the commercialization of

education that I reached out to send them some of the research I had uncovered while working in the States. It appeared in their book *Class Warfare*. My very first citation.

That afternoon in Washington was my first Maude encounter, but not my last. I traveled to Ottawa for a Council of Canadians AGM the year I returned to Canada. The following year, Maude attended one of the very first talks I gave at a PD event on corporatization of education. She never missed an opportunity to shine a spotlight on the good work of others. She's that sort of activist leader — one who never stops learning, who practices kindness and compassion, and who takes her role as a mentor for the next generation of activists seriously.

We need more of this. For the movement to grow and thrive and diversify across generations we require allies, most definitely. But we also need to lift each other up, even without a guarantee of reciprocity because it's the right thing to do. Because if we spend our time looking for the payback, progress will only ever be fleeting.

It's fitting, I think, to conclude this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* with a review of Maude's latest book, *Still Hopeful* — for a number of reasons. There's the matter of content, of course — this issue is, at least in part, about how the privatization of our public schools has become, as we warned, normalized.

But the other side of the discussion is about the power and potential of public investment in our schools and communities. You cannot build social change on a foundation of what effectively amounts to party favours. If we do not lift

each other up without payment or incentive, wondering “what’s in it for me?”, then it’s not progress at all.

The characteristics I associate with Maude—experience, optimism, kindness and self-awareness—are also key to so much of the work we do as progressives: the recognition that we can and must always do better; the understanding that there are things we don’t know and experiences we can’t claim as our own, but we need to listen to them; that ultimately, the work we do is about not just us (and sometimes not us at all), but rather about other people’s children, and that we are better as a result of learning from other people’s experiences, not just our own, and not just what seems familiar to us.

These things also fly in the face of the market-based model. People, public education, the progressive movement — these things are not mere cash transactions, and they are worth far more than the sum of their parts.

Of course, there is a “return on investment” in a well-rounded, holistic, flexible approach to public education. But this cannot be its only value — or its main one, or even the one we brandish first in an argument.

As several of the authors in this issue illustrate, the market-based, neoliberal approach to public education, to civic engagement, to progress is pervasive. It circumscribes our understanding of what it means to succeed as a student and an educator and even the system itself. But it’s also fundamentally flawed because it’s about lowering expectations and reducing the limitless palette of our collective potential to an individualized and standardized multiple choice test taken in isolation.

And as other contributors show us, there is so much to be gained from a system that learns from its history and from others, that centres compassion and empathy, and that strives to do better for itself and each other.

As we move into summer, I hope you are able to take some time to rest, recharge and reconnect. And I hope we can return ready to take on those who champion the marketplace above all else — in Alberta, Ontario and elsewhere — because we know we can and must do better. For our kids, but for each other’s kids too.

My best to you and yours. ●

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# Populism, polarization and privatization in Alberta education

Heather Ganshorn

Canadians have looked on with a mixture of bemusement, horror, and perhaps a touch of superiority as Republican governments and conservative parents in the United States have attacked public education on several fronts, from book bans, to furious attacks on the supposed teaching of critical race theory (CRT), to Florida's recent so-called "Don't Say Gay" legislation, which forbids instruction on gender identity in kindergarten through grade 3. Such attacks often provide cover for an already well-established privatization agenda. Whereas 20 years ago, "school choice" in the form of education vouchers and charter schools was presented as a solution to the supposed problem of "failing" public schools, now privatization is being presented as a way for parents to preserve their cultural authority over what their children learn about "divisive" topics, in particular racism and gender diversity. Betsy DeVos, who, in her tenure as Donald Trump's Education Secretary, made no secret of her hostility to public

education, recently argued that "school choice" is the solution to "race indoctrination" in the public system.<sup>1</sup>

Here in Alberta, it's hard for public education advocates to view these events with typical Canadian detachment. We are fighting our own version of these battles, as the approach of the United Conservative Party (UCP) government under Premier Jason Kenney to public education echoes many of the talking points in the Republican playbook, with similar results — increased polarization and privatization of education.

In my last article for *Our Schools, Our Selves*, I discussed the provincial government's ideological curriculum rewrite and their mischaracterization of the nearly-finished 2018 draft curriculum, which was initiated under a previous Conservative-led government and completed under the previous NDP-led government, as an exercise in left-wing indoctrination. This of course was cover for the intention to engage in a curriculum rewrite that would focus on right-wing staples such as "back-to-basics" literacy and math, along with a social studies curriculum

straight out of the Victorian era. Demonizing the 2018 draft, which was ditched in spite of the years of preparation that went into it, allowed the UCP-led government to present their own rewrite as a reasonable course correction.

Jason Kenney tweeted in 2018 that “If the NDP tried to smuggle more of their politics into the classroom through their [draft] curriculum, we will put that curriculum through the shredder.” Since then he has only ramped up the language against supposed “woke” values in schools in response to widespread opposition to the curriculum draft from school boards, teachers and parents. In the face of an April 2022 internal leadership review that could displace him from the helm of the party (as of this writing), Kenney is doubling down. Speaking to party insiders at a general meeting, he stated: “Instead of divisive woke-left ideology like critical race theory, cancel culture, and age inappropriate sex education, we are putting kids and the authority of parents back in charge of our education system.”<sup>2</sup> While none of these things was part of any previous curriculum, these are frequent targets of attack by U.S. Republicans, and “parent choice” is often positioned as the solution.

Undermining teachers and public boards is another popular Republican tactic to manufacture consent for ideological curricula and privatization, and we’ve seen the current government deploy these tactics in Alberta. In

2022, Alberta Education removed disciplinary oversight of teachers from the Alberta Teachers’ Association, placing this responsibility with a cabinet-appointed commissioner instead, a decision made without any consultation with the ATA.<sup>3</sup> The Premier often refers to the ATA as “the Alberta Teachers’ Union,” even though it is a professional association with a mandate that goes beyond collective bargaining; the implication is that the ATA is primarily interested in protecting teacher privileges.

In 2019, Education Minister Adriana LaGrange ordered all Alberta school divisions to remove the word “public” from their names,<sup>4</sup> an early indication of the UCP blurring the lines between public and private education. That same year, the Minister ordered an independent financial review of the Calgary Board of Education, the province’s largest

public board. In an interview, the Minister implied significant financial mismanagement on the part of CBE, and stated, “My big hammer is to fire the board.”<sup>5</sup> The review, while making recommendations for improvement, did not find any indication of financial mismanagement.<sup>6</sup> The big hammer had to go back in the toolbox.

While conservative politicians and pundits are often in conflict with unions and public boards, it’s hard not to see these attacks on school boards and the ATA as motivated in part by a desire to delegitimize teacher and board opposition to the draft curriculum, and to tarnish the reputation of public education in support of a privatization agenda.

Privatization of education under the mantra of “school choice” has been a long-standing practice in Alberta, which arguably already offers more privatized options than any other province. Education researcher Curtis Riep distinguishes between “public education” and “provincially funded education” in Alberta.<sup>7</sup> Public education encompasses the regular public, separate (Catholic) and francophone school divisions, which are accessible to all, governed by elected trustees, and entirely publicly funded. The category of “provincially funded education” includes three major types: private schools, home education and charter schools.

Accredited funded private schools in Alberta receive the highest level of public funding in the country, with up to 70% of the funding that would go to those students in the public system “following” them to private providers. Other provinces fund private schools at a lower percentage, with some, notably Ontario, providing no funding to private schools. It should be noted that private schools that choose not to be accredited (willing to use certificated teachers and follow the Alberta curriculum) do not receive provincial funding.

Home education is another area where privatization has taken hold in Alberta; we have the largest number of homeschooled students in the country. Statistics Canada data indicate that in 2019/20, 14,730 Alberta children were homeschooled, compared to only 6,565 in Ontario, the province with the next highest number.<sup>8</sup> The provincial government has made changes to the rules around home education, removing the requirement that such programs be supervised by a school authority.

In his report on home education in Alberta, Dr. Riep raises concerns about the lack of oversight and accountability that this loosening of regulations may bring, as it removes the

**While Minister LaGrange indicated the government was not looking at implementing such a policy, clearly this idea has the support of government backbenchers such as Dan Williams, who has referred to public education as “absolutely backwards,” and mused that if the province could privatize liquor stores, then the same could be done for education.**

**The vast majority of parents in Alberta choose public education; we must be prepared to demand that policy makers support, fund and improve the public system that serves all children, instead of undermining, eroding and privatizing it to serve the interests of a vocal minority.**

opportunity for home learners to be assessed or supported by teachers. This is concerning because the number of homeschooling families in Alberta is on the rise, and the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend. Dr. Riep notes that homeschooling is “intrinsically linked to the ‘school choice’ movement since they both emphasize, above all else, parental choice and control to decide the education of their children.”<sup>9</sup>

Supporting parental choice is also a stated goal of American-style charter schools, which of all the provinces only Alberta has adopted. Charter schools are 100% publicly funded, but essentially function as private schools that receive public

funding. They are governed by their own, non-publicly elected boards, and are accountable directly to the Education Minister. They are not required to hire unionized teachers.

The objectives of charter schools are variously described as some combination of: increasing parent choice by offering specialized programming that the regular public system does not offer; acting as laboratories for innovative education practices that can be translated to the larger public system; and forcing public boards to “innovate” in order to compete for students by offering alternative programs of their own.

Charter schools are not allowed to refuse admission to any student “if sufficient space and resources are available,” but in practice some schools require applicants to complete an academic assessment, often at their own expense. In Alberta, there are charter schools catering to many niches, including but not limited to gifted education, Suzuki music education, “traditional learning,” and youth whose education has been interrupted. Even if a charter school doesn’t have an established admission assessment, charter schools’ marketing language makes it clear what kind of students would be a “good fit” with the school’s philosophy.

Charter schools were established in Alberta in 1994, with an initial cap that constrained their development until the UCP removed it shortly after being elected in 2019. The current government further signaled its support for charter school growth by introducing the Choice in Education Act, which removed the requirement for interested parties to first approach public boards about developing alternative programs

before proceeding with a charter school application.

In the most recent provincial budget, the government provided \$72 million in dedicated funding to support charter school expansion, and has indicated that it is interested in the development of “collegiate” or vocational charter schools, an approach that calls to mind the “streaming” practices of earlier decades. This practice is also being revived in the U.S., often under the label of “career and technical education.”

As charter schools have positioned themselves as attractive alternatives, public boards have felt compelled to compete with an array of alternative programs, ranging from various language options, gender-specific schools, specialized approaches such as Montessori, and faith-based programming. That last item is of particular interest because charter schools may not be religious in nature. Several faith-based alternative programs operating under public boards in fact began their lives as private schools, and continue to charge fees that can amount to several thousand dollars per year for each student. Though (“technically”) boards may not charge tuition for such alternative programs, a number of these schools get around this prohibition by requiring families to pay “society fees” to a nonprofit society affiliated with the school. This is a little-discussed practice, but multiple faith-based alternative programs appear to engage in it, raising the question of how “public” these schools really are.

Despite the array of publicly funded private options described above, the government has demonstrated a clear intention to support more private options in the name of “parent choice.” This stance is clearly popular among the UCP base; if anything it does not go far enough for some. At the party’s 2019 Annual General Meeting, members voted in favour of a policy resolution that called for a voucher system for education, which would provide equal per-student funding for any educational option chosen by parents.<sup>10</sup> While Minister LaGrange indicated the government was not looking at implementing such a policy, clearly this idea has the support of government backbenchers such as Dan Williams, who has referred to public education as “absolutely backwards,” and mused that if the province could privatize liquor stores, then the same could be done for education. He went on to accuse the public education system of “nationalizing the family,” a common refrain of many on the far right who appear to

see public education and the things it teaches as a threat to the supremacy of a certain type of family authority in a child's life.

Another feature of the American privatization movement that appears to be making its way north is the establishment of "parent choice" astroturf (phony grassroots) groups. In May, Alberta parents started receiving marketing materials from the curiously named "Alberta Parents' Union," a group that came seemingly out of nowhere, led by Executive Director Jeff Park. Park is a former executive assistant to Jeff Callaway, accused of running a phony campaign to ensure Jason Kenney's leadership victory over Brian Jean. Park was fined \$10,500 by Alberta's Election Commissioner for irregular contributions to Callaway's campaign.

Park is taking his newly formed organization on the road to over 20 Alberta communities. While the marketing for these events states that the APU welcomes everyone with an interest in education, the group is already beginning to promote vouchers, using very similar language to the UCP's AGM policy resolution.

It is hard not to see a resemblance between this group and U.S. groups like the National Parents' Union, an American "parent organization" that advocates for privatization. The group's status as a grassroots parent organization has been credibly called into question, and its funding appears to come not from ordinary parents, but from funders like the billionaire pro-privatization Walton family. In the case of the Alberta group, it's not clear how they are funded.

It is dismaying as a public education advocate to see the elevation of the rights of parents, no matter how fringe those rights may be considered, over those of children to receive an equitable public education. Such a stance also ignores the long-held social consensus that public education is a societal good from which we all benefit, whether or not we have children in the system.

The fragmentation of school choice in the U.S. has arguably contributed to a breakdown in social cohesion and a political polarization

that appears to be self-reinforcing; the more fragmented education becomes, the more extreme are the demands for even more "parent choice" to protect children from ideas that certain parents don't like. If the public system isn't to people's liking, the private sector is there to provide, and governments can be pressured to send public dollars their way, despite a complete lack of evidence that private providers deliver better results.

We must not view America's failed privatization experiment as an aberration that couldn't happen here, but as a cautionary tale. The vast majority of parents in Alberta choose public education; we must be prepared to demand that policy makers support, fund and improve the public system that serves all children, instead of undermining, eroding and privatizing it to serve the interests of a vocal minority. ●

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# Citizenship education

## It's about more than the curriculum

Codie Fortin Lalonde

It's been a few months since I defended my dissertation on provincial public education policies in Canada (particularly in relation to students and citizenship) and I've had some time to both (not) think about, and reflect on my research with a little bit of distance.

While we seem to increasingly find ourselves in polarized debates and camps on nearly every topic of conversation, something I'd wager most people agree on is that education is influenced by ideals and values. In other words, education, in the form of "schooling," ultimately involves the socialization of young people — by way of particular knowledges, skills, characteristics and values — into society. Given this, schooling in general as well as particular courses such as civics and social studies might broadly be thought of as a form of citizenship education.

What that citizenship looks like in practice has been a longstanding topic of debate, but it has resurged into academic and public discourses as we begin to acknowledge and consider the many pressing social issues (e.g., climate crises, growing inequity, pandemics, science denial) we must address. Most of these considerations focus on curriculum, and all emphasize the need for critical thinking and literacies.

However, in a society that prioritizes profit, to consider citizenship education solely from a curricular perspective is insufficient if we are to meaningfully engage with and address our current and future social issues.

### **Curricula and policy**

It's simplistic to believe that teaching students 'xyz' will de facto beget some grander outcome such as globally-minded or "collectively responsible citizenship"; that teaching a list of predetermined values will solve half a century's worth of and daily exposure to the hyper-individualism reinforced through our organizing systems and institutions, popular media, and advertising. This lens makes it even easier to blame individuals and groups for their perceived shortcomings, especially when they put themselves or others in danger.

It's perhaps less easy to consider how these shortcomings are a symptom of our broader social systems, not just education systems and their curricula. To be clear, I'm not condoning protests over COVID-19 mandates nor the vitriolic and violent behaviour of those opposed to mandates toward others. I am, however, suggesting we consider some of the underlying and systemic issues that may have led us to this point.

**Changing school curriculum could mean better citizenship education, but it is only one link in the chain. Even with the best intentions, it doesn't address the broader issue of neoliberal priorities steering the values that are embedded in public policy and public discourse.**

Curriculum holds immense power and, through its implementation by educators, enjoys a huge audience. But while generally pedagogically- and research-informed, curriculum is driven by education policy, which is steered by provincial governments and influenced by a host of stakeholders (e.g., the OECD, big business, etc.), many of whose interests are profit-driven.

These policies often conflate particular skills such as project management and problem solving with entrepreneurial spirit or culture, which has become synonymous with 'success'. They frame creativity and collaboration as beneficial for economic potential rather than for social or community good. Such

skills are crucial for collective and community organizing and rich civic engagement but they've been co-opted to extract every last ounce of economic productivity (which has contributed to the burnout epidemic).

Furthermore, these policies (and subsequently curricula) tend to emphasize measurable outcomes — for example, math and literacy scores driven by standardized international testing — which are aggregated as predictive economic potential. These measures do not, of course, consider the realities that influence such outcomes (e.g., poverty, racism, discrimination, dis/ability). In sum, the problem does not lie solely with curriculum and the teaching of skills and values, but within a much broader and more complex systemic phenomenon — capitalism, and more recent iterations including neoliberalism, disaster capitalism, and necrocapitalism.

Changing school curriculum could mean better citizenship education, but it is only one link in the chain. Even with the best intentions, it doesn't address the broader issue of neoliberal priorities steering the values that are embedded in public policy and public discourse.

**Government failure and collective citizenship**

In the conflict between public interest and accumulation of profit, the not-so-easily digestible truth is that our governments, at all levels, have increasingly left us to fend for ourselves. Notwithstanding significant cash outlays at the federal level in the first year of the pandemic, for the most part, they have been ineffective and apathetic toward the very real struggles people

are facing. (The experiences of vulnerable populations and front-line workers throughout the pandemic is case in point.) Rather than cooperating with one another to adequately fund social programs, they've removed eviction and rent increase bans, cut funding to education and healthcare, capped cost-of-living wage increases and instead opted to give handouts to corporations, raise police budgets, and wasted tax dollars brutalizing land-defenders and homeless encampments. They've watched as housing costs skyrocketed, the opioid crisis ballooned, environmental crises intensified, and corporations made record profits.

So while yes, curriculum change is one avenue for better citizenship education, it still doesn't address the broader issue of how we make progress, as a society, together. Without a shift in values held by the governments and the organizations that steer policy and curricula, the issues we collectively face cannot be sufficiently addressed. This shift must involve recognition that education — like people — holds value outside of its profit potential and output.

We cannot just leave the burdens of our current and future crises to the generations of tomorrow and those who teach them. Outside of the classroom, today's citizens must recognize the ways our social systems and governments have failed to be for the people and act collectively for change through *critically-minded* social, civic, and political engagement. There are a number of possible ways to do this: getting informed about pressing issues, communities, and organizations; listening to understand and empathize with the experiences of marginalized and vulnerable groups; critical self reflection; looking for connections between or patterns across issues; joining local and grassroots organizing, donating time, resources and/or money to reputable causes and organizations, and so on.

I emphasize critical-mindedness here because the (alt)right have become skillful organizers that often centre or promote subject/issue-specific pundits that spread mis/dis-information, science/expert skepticism (e.g., climate science denial, antivax), and hyper-individualist rhetoric (e.g., individual autonomy or 'freedom' of choice/speech/action over collective/human rights) and fuel fear of progressive change (e.g., inclusivity, socialist policy and practice, climate/eco justice, reparations). It is thus crucially important that we use our senses, brains, and hearts in this process of engagement; that we bring our whole and critical selves to this work.

When considering what it means to educate for citizenship, more holistic and systemic rather than singularly targeted approaches must be taken if meaningful changes are to be made and sustained within and outside education—and we must work together to make them. ●

**Dr. Codie Fortin Lalonde** is a recent graduate of the PhD in Applied Linguistics and Discourse Studies at Carleton University. Her work investigates the discursive construction of and discursive (dis)connections between students and 'ideal' citizenship in public education policy in Canada.

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# The fantasy-fication of Canadian higher education

Marc Spooner

I have a confession: I play fantasy football. In this game, participants “draft” players from any NFL team and gain points for their players’ individual performances; think 1 point for every 10 yards rushing or receiving, points for sacks, touchdowns, etc.

*It’s a lot of fun, but it’s completely distorted how I watch football because I no longer care if my old favourite teams win or lose. It doesn’t matter.*

*Even with only a modest pool of money on the line, I’ve adapted so well to the different rules that I’m hoping my selected wide receivers are losing in the actual game, because there will be a greater opportunity for them to gain points as their team passes the ball in big risky plays to try to catch up.*

*In the end, I don’t care so much about the actual game, just my point totals in the fantasy scoring. The bottom line: it’s just a game — whether fantasy or the real sport — so it’s of no great consequence how much fantasy has warped my sense of performance, objective, or success.*

## **Back to universities**

As democracies around the world, including our own, are revealed to be fragile and resting on unstable ground, the timing could not be

worse for governments to re-narrativize higher education. The new story is that universities exist as a personal benefit to the student, to be valued solely in instrumental terms for their workskills training and capacity to serve labour market and industry needs.

Performance-based funding is a natural continuation of the neoliberal ethos. As famously modelled by Margaret Thatcher, its overarching goal is to weaken the public sector. Operationalized under New Public Management, its technique is to: a) impose private-sector management practices; b) introduce market-style incentives and disincentives; c) introduce a customer orientation coupled with consumer choice and branding; (d) devolve budget functions while maintaining tight control through auditing and oversight; (e) outsource labour with casual, temporary staff; and (f) emphasise greater output performance measures and controls in the name of efficiency and accountability.

In the Canadian context, performance-based funding serves at least 4 functions:

1. it is a cloaked funding cut — all stick no carrot — (no extra funding, just smaller percentages of a shrinking pie where universities just can’t win);
2. universities and faculty blame themselves if they don’t measure up, as they compete

with other groups and institutions, rather than working together in collaboration;

3. it re-defines the meaning of “performance” and success;

4. it acts as an end-run subverting the mission of the university through the back-door, while eroding and sidestepping collegial governance and academic freedom;

To better grasp the profound redesign performance-based funding represents, let’s take a quick tour of what is occurring (or being proposed) in provinces across the country beginning with Canada’s most populous province, Ontario.

### **Ontario**

Under the most recent Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA3 2020–2025), Ontario is the first province in Canada to implement a performance-based funding model that puts a majority of funding on the line. It is a high stakes redux of the late 1990s–early 2000s trials undertaken by Ontario, Alberta and Quebec which involved a much smaller portion of overall funding (under 2%) and which were promptly abandoned.

In Ontario, by 2024–25, 60% of a university’s operating funding will be based on performance as measured against the following 10 metrics: “*Graduate employment earnings*”; “*Experiential learning*”; “*Skills and competencies*”; “*Graduate employment rate in a related field*”; “*Institutional strength/focus*”; “*Graduation rate*”; “*Research funding and capacity for universities*”; “*Research funding from industry sources/funding from industry sources*”; “*Community/local impact of student population*”; and “*Economic impact (institution-specific)*”.

With metrics such as “Graduate employment earnings,” “Graduate employment rate in a related field,” and “Research funding from industry sources”, Ontario universities are being financially coerced away from their core missions (instilling subject matter knowledge, forming critical and creative habits of mind, and teaching collaborative, communicative, and civic engagement skills, while performing and valuing discovery-driven and public-interest research) and directed towards serving the current labour market and performing industry-sponsored research.

### **Graduate employment earnings**

Governments are clearly devaluing lower paying careers that students may find to be more meaningful and fulfilling; many of

which are vitally important to the health of our communities and society. This is not to suggest that students shouldn’t be presented with accurate employment and income data for each program so they may make informed choices, but it is misguided to judge or punish them or universities when students follow their passions in a fluctuating job market over which they have little control.

### **Graduate employment rate in a related field**

The rationale for using current labour-market realities to direct future postsecondary funding is dubious at best; the job-market yo-yo for oil industry workers is a case in point. Moreover, as highlighted by the federal government’s 2017 Expert Panel on Youth Employment, the nature of work is shifting away from manufacturing and towards service and knowledge economies with a greater emphasis on problem-solving, communication, interpersonal, and critical thinking skills. The report concludes, perhaps obviously, that “the world of work is transforming rapidly” and that the key to navigating such a future is to remain flexible and fluid; it goes on to state, “Some of the next job opportunities may not even exist today.”

Consider recent stats on the growth of the gig economy: “...gig workers among all Canadian workers aged 15 and older increased from almost 1 million workers (5.5%) in 2005 to about 1.7 million workers (8.2%) in 2016”. In the current context, it is likely that students will engage with several employment fields during and after graduation. This indicator places the blame on the university for whether graduates are working in the fields they studied, discounts whether graduates are successful in fields *beyond* those of their studies, and conveniently ignores the reality that the job market is not in the university’s control.

Even more alarming, under the headlong rush to “micro-credentialing” that is already upon us, the cost, risk, and responsibility for workplace training and development is further downloaded onto individuals. Such micro-credentials will, in effect, carve off and privilege a subset of narrow, context-specific skills, away from well-thought out programs of study that feature more global critical, creative skills, and democratic habits of thought typical of degree programs. It also lets industry off the hook for worker development and specialized training.

# GUIDING FRAMEWORKS FOR ALBERTA AND MANITOBA

## Alberta

*Excerpted from Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs (April 2021)*

Based on engagement that attracted the input and advice of thousands of Albertans, the *Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs* strategy sets out six goals for post-secondary education, each with clear objectives and initiatives. This strategy will result in a new governance structure that brings our institutions in sync to achieve greater success, and an outcomes framework that aligns performance-based funding and shifts incentives and accountabilities to ensure we are future-focused and achieving improved results. It is imperative that we continue striking the right balance between responsible spending and a well-funded, entrepreneurial post-secondary system that prepares students for jobs today, and well into the future. While these goals may, at first, seem at odds with one another, we believe we can integrate them and advance to meet the challenge. As such, this shared vision for post-secondary education in our province will lead to better outcomes for students, employers, educators, and communities.

## Manitoba

*Excerpted from Manitoba's skills, talent and knowledge strategy (February 2021)*

- Universities and colleges will meet the challenge of becoming more nimble and responsive, and identify ways to shift programming more easily and quickly. The Manitoba government will modify its program approval process. Post-secondary institutions will be tasked to identify and shift programs that oversupply the labour market, as well as program opportunities in high demand areas. They will work in partnership with industry to re-balance programs and resources to align with industry needs.
- Implement an outcomes-based funding model for colleges and universities to promote positive outcomes for students and alignment with industry needs.
- Employers and employment service organizations will expand demand-led training, and customize training opportunities that lead to jobs.
- The expansion and modernization of apprenticeship and trades will enable more skilled journeypersons to meet our skills needs. This will include changes to supervision of apprentices that will enable greater skill development, expanding the number of high school apprentices through the High School Apprenticeship Program, as well as high school technical vocational programs, especially in identified areas of unmet need.
- Engage with institutions to design a new centralized data model to track student success, and create a new post-secondary funding model based on outcomes and performance.

### **Research funding and capacity for universities (AKA “Research funding from industry sources”)**

Perversely, this indicator ties public funding to private funding, doubly incentivizing the further commercialization of university research. It ignores important issues such as non-disclosure agreements, potential for delayed dissemination of findings, and questions surrounding who owns the data. It rewards targeted, industry research in the private interest and downgrades research in the public interest.

This emphasis impacts society by devaluing less costly but no less important scholarship, including risky, yet innovative research; community-engaged research; and other valuable research endeavours that cannot easily be measured or reflected by a simple financial calculus. Rather than uncovering ground-breaking new ideas, following uncertain but innovative paths that become potential game-changers, or working in the service of the communities in which they reside, Ontario scholars are now financially coerced to seek out corporate research contracts, and universities are all but compelled to favour inter-institutional competition over collaboration.

### **Alberta and Manitoba**

To date, Alberta has revealed that it will soon make 40% of a university's total funding contingent on three indicators: “domestic enrollment”, “% of programs that offer work-integrated learning”, and “% of recent graduates employed within two years in fields very or somewhat related to program of study”. While Manitoba has officially stated it will implement a performance-based funding, it has not yet announced the details of its model.

Though not as developed as Ontario's in terms of having determined, and made public, the final set of metrics, Alberta and Manitoba's guiding framework documents suggest the direction their performance-based funding models will take, as indicated in the sidebar, which demonstrates a clear focus on labour market, industry, and economic returns.

It is telling that neither document mentions democracy or citizenship, and

the few mentions of critical and creative thinking skills are always in the context of serving the labour market and industry.

### **Performance-based funding status in other provinces**

Not as far along, but on a similar path, New Brunswick and Quebec have both openly mused about implementing performance-based funding, while Newfoundland and Labrador's *The Big Reset: The Report of the Premier's Economic Recovery Team* proposes austerity for public services, and specifically outlines drastic cuts to its post-secondary sector coupled with significant tuition increases and greater university accountability.

Meanwhile, with the passing of Bill 61 Saskatchewan has already roughed in the pipes and conduits for performance-based funding's future implementation further down the road. Sometimes a fad, no matter how damaging and dysfunctional, looks appealing to governments casting about for their own ideas.

### **Consequences for equity, diversity and inclusion**

Research by Ortagus et al. confirms what many of us feared: tying student enrollments and their future employment to specific outcomes skews rewards towards institutions that enrol students with the most social capital and the best chances of being employed at the highest pay immediately after graduating. This comes at the expense of prospective students from marginalised groups, since equally qualified, but racialized Canadians are hired with less frequency and less pay than their non-racialized counterparts. Clearly, this sabotages goals set for equity, diversity, and inclusion.

### **Growing administrative costs and red tape**

Imposing performance-based funding systems is impossible without the addition of another layer of costly bureaucracy at both institution and ministry levels. Universities will need to create new or re-classified management positions whose sole purpose will be to assess, report, target, and, ultimately, game the new metrics. On the government side, bureaucrats will be needed to gather, evaluate, monitor and, in the longer term, respond to the manipulated metrics and their unintended consequences.

### **Inter-generational theft of opportunity**

With the performance-based funding malware introduced into many universities by provincial governments attempting to reprogram them

towards a narrow labour-market and industry focus, youth are robbed of radical imagination and possibility; of something greater than getting a high paying job, of being part of something beyond oneself and a market, of being part of a community and a healthy democracy that exists outside a financial calculus.

Under higher education's new mission, there is no need for policy-makers and politicians to fret about the inter-generational theft of opportunity they are creating through rising tuition fees or for them to worry about entire cohorts of students graduating with a mortgage on their house of knowledge. Each student will be encouraged to view themselves as an atomized *learner-economicus*, to be upskilled at their own expense and risk. Via narrow career paths and clusters of stacked micro-credentials, they can shadow-box for marketplace success against a gig economy and the caprices of an unpredictable labour market. There is no society here, just a marketplace, where to be a citizen, to be permitted a vote, requires money.

We are now approaching Thatcher country.

As much as I wish all this was just another set of indicators to be gamed for fun, in spite of whether it distorts my sense of performance, objective, or success — unlike fantasy football, this isn't a game at all. The true cost to our communities as well as our democracy is simply too grave.

But university administrations *will* almost certainly try to game the new metrics, though they should instead be fighting their imposition with every weapon they have. That is why it is up to Canadians as a whole to stop the reprogramming.

It is beyond time to call on governments to continue to value and uphold universities for their core missions, which go far beyond serving as entrepreneurial training centres for industry and labour. Rather, universities must continue to be valued for their important vital role in developing critical and creative graduates prepared to take up the challenge of meaningful work and democratic engagement; where they not only have the skills to prosper today, but can imagine and implement a better tomorrow where all can thrive. ●

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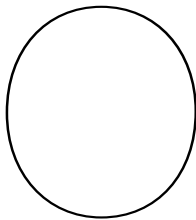


# Privatizing Ontario's colleges

## Part of the neoliberal agenda

Diane Meaghan

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Ontario colleges have been chronically underfunded for decades. Provincial funding declined for operational expenditures from 75% in 1967 to 30% in 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2021), begging

the question of whether colleges should be considered part of the public domain. Not only has the community component been substantially removed from the college mandate, but a more accurate description of Ontario colleges might currently classify them as private/public institutions.

Underfunding of Ontario colleges was recently highlighted by the provincial Auditor General, Bonnie Lysyk, in her annual report. She estimated that grant-based funding for 2020 was \$1.6 billion while tuition fees, ancillary services and donations accounted for \$5.1 billion. Of particular importance was the fact that Ontario colleges rely on international student tuition to support domestic students, administrative costs and capital expenditures. Lysyk noted that in 2020 international students accounted for 30% of enrolment in Ontario colleges, but 68% of tuition fees of \$1.7 million (Lysyk, 2021:20). She spoke of the risk of dependency of Ontario colleges on 62% of international students originating from a single country (in this case, India). Should a decrease

occur from this single source of funding, Lysyk maintained that it would leave Ontario colleges in a precarious financial position.

The Auditor General's report speaks volumes to the priorities of the current provincial government, making it clear that colleges are not one of them. Large funding cuts are part of the most recent attempts by the province to privatize colleges based on a business model. The corporatization of colleges has shifted the emphasis from intellectual, social and cultural functions to financial imperatives. Decreased funding and an increase in student enrolment created a financial crisis for colleges which were compelled to seek funding from sources other than the provincial government.

Privatization tactics are not limited to post-secondary institutions, nor to COVID-19: prior to the pandemic, neoliberal restructuring resulted in a significant increase in investments of elearning projects in Ontario colleges, in part from the governmental interest in cost reduction. In 2019 NDP Education Critic, Marit Stiles, spoke about the provincial government's fascination with on-line learning, and the plan to make four on-line, secondary, school courses mandatory and to remove 10,000 public school teachers from the classrooms. The then Education Minister, Lisa Thompson, remarked that "Ontario is already leading the way (with) on-line courses...in a need to



**Although the current government did not initiate the practice of replacing full-time with contingent faculty, neither has it taken substantial steps to ameliorate the problem.**

embrace technology for good.” (*Blog Toronto*, March, 2019).

Similarly, the utilization of contingent faculty in Ontario colleges is another example of privatization by stealth during the past few decades. Neoliberalism has resulted in contingent faculty being placed at the bottom of a highly stratified workforce in colleges. Part time, partial load and sessional faculty are the three groups of adjuncts who comprise the faculty teaching in Ontario colleges. Although the current government did not initiate the practice of replacing full-time with contingent faculty, neither has it taken substantial steps to ameliorate the problem. It is estimated that currently the ratio of full-time to contingent faculty is approximately 1:4 in large, urban colleges (Muzzin and Meaghan, 2019).

Representing 15,000 professors at 24 Ontario colleges, together with counselors, librarians and instructors, members of the Ontario Public Service Employees’ Union (OPSEU), voted in March 2022 to engage in strike action and then settlement through arbitration in order to draw attention to a number of grievances. Prime among their concerns were issues of unpaid overtime, uncompensated work and job security of partial-load faculty. According to JP Hornick, then the Chair of the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT) bargaining team, during the past five years the college system has benefited from these trends with profits of \$1.65 billion (Akrit and Chong, 2021).

Organizational changes have resulted in this precarious segment of the academic workforce being utilized to alleviate declining revenues resulting from government underfunding.

Finally, although Ontario’s pre-election budget appears to favour developers, particularly those who build highways, there is the promise of some additional spending for colleges (amount yet unspecified), due to the precarious nature of international students who are able to support themselves in Canada while attending college. There have been a number of reports from Ontario colleges concerning international students being unable to find employment or working at jobs that pay less than minimum wage, leaving them economically stranded and unable to fully turn their attention to their studies. ●

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# Universities and colleges harming vulnerable workers with reliance on contracting-out

Chandra Pasma

What do post-secondary institutions (PSIs) owe to Canadians and to their communities as recipients of public funding? That's a question that

needs to be asked after a recent report by the Canadian Union of Public Employees revealed that universities and colleges are harming vulnerable workers by contracting-out services to third-party providers, often large multinational corporations, leaving these workers with poverty-level wages and very low benefits.

Using publicly available information, CUPE mapped contracting-out, unionization, wages and benefits in food and custodial services at publicly-funded Canadian universities and colleges. Our data reveal that the majority of Canadian PSIs engage in contracting-out: 83.7% have contracted-out some or all food

services, while 61% have contracted-out some or all custodial services. Half have contracted-out both food and custodial services.

Contracted-out workers receive significantly lower wages than in-house workers, with contracting-out taking more than \$1,000 a month out of workers' pockets on average. Food and custodial workers are some of the lowest paid workers on campus, which makes the wage gap even more significant. The majority of in-house workers are receiving a wage at or above the living wage for their region, but most contracted-out employees are earning wages below the living wage.

This remuneration gap continues into retirement. Nearly all in-house workers have access to a pension plan, with many eligible for a defined benefit pension. On the other hand, half of contracted-out food services and one-third of contracted-out custodial services offer no retirement contribution to their workers.

**The pandemic has highlighted the importance of access to paid sick leave for all workers. However, contracted-out workers are less likely to receive paid sick days than in-house workers and receive considerably fewer days on average.**

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of access to paid sick leave for all workers. However, contracted-out workers are less likely to receive paid sick days than in-house workers and receive considerably fewer days on average.

This gap extends to other benefits as well. Despite the fact that food and custodial services are female-dominated sectors, only two contract food service providers offer a maternity leave top up, while none of the contract custodial service providers offer any support for maternity or parental leave. Mean-

while, nearly all post-secondary institutions offer a maternity leave top up to their in-house workers.

There is also a significant gap in union representation between in-house and contracted-out workers. Nearly all in-house workers are represented by a labour union, compared to one-third of workplaces with contracted-out services and half of workplaces with contracted-out custodial services. This is due in large part because most provinces and territories lack legislation protecting successor rights in cases of contract flipping. This means that when administrators make the decision to contract-out services or to re-tender a contract, the union certification is lost, along with jobs, wages, benefits, and seniority. In fact, sometimes contracting-out is used as an end-run around collective agreements.

In light of the difference in wages, benefits, and pensions, it is clear that outsourcing

is not about cost savings but about cost downloading. Outsourcing shifts costs from PSIs to workers, who must make ends meet on significantly lower wages now and reduced pension benefits in the future, and must also choose between going to work sick or staying home without pay.

It's essential to ask who is paying the costs downloaded by PSIs. Census data shows that workers in food and custodial services are more likely to be women, more likely to be Black or racialized, and more likely to be a newcomer to Canada. These workers are already earning lower wages on average. By outsourcing services, PSIs are undermining their stated commitment to anti-racism and gender equity.

In addition, there are costs borne by our community. When workers are making less than a living wage, this increases demand for social supports such as social housing, rent supplements, child care subsidies, food banks, Employment Insurance, and social assistance. The lack of retirement support also means that more workers will collect the Guaranteed Income Supplement in the future, shifting the costs of retirement from the employer to the public purse.

To end the harmful downloading of costs onto vulnerable workers and our communities, post-secondary institutions must stop the privatization of services and bring workers back in-house. ●

**Chandra Pasma**, at the time of writing, was a Senior Researcher with the Canadian Union of Public Employees, focusing on issues relating to post-secondary education, and the author of CUPE's report *Who Pays? The cost of contracting-out at Canadian post-secondary institutions*.



# Unearth this buried treasure

## Adult education in Manitoba

Jim Silver

When she was 34 years old and a single mother of four living on social assistance in a large public housing complex in Winnipeg's North End, Aja Oliver saw a sign at a community centre for an Adult Learning Centre. She had not finished high school, had struggled, as did everyone in her family, with the many complexities of life in poverty, and was fed up with being on social assistance. She ventured in. Her life has not been the same since.

Less than a decade later, Aja is a highly-skilled counsellor at the North End Women's Centre, and is well on her way to an undergraduate degree at the University of Winnipeg. Her younger sister, inspired by Aja's success, will soon graduate as a health care aide and hopes to go on to the Licensed Practical Nursing program at Red River College. Some of her cousins have returned to high school, her daughter has graduated high school, and Aja says, "in our house it is now an expectation to graduate high school." At least for her family, Aja has broken the cycle of intergenerational trauma and complex poverty that had long been, for them, the norm.

Adult education works. It is a buried treasure. We need more of it.

### Poverty and adult education

Manitoba has suffered for decades with a particularly high incidence of poverty. Data from 2018, the most recent available, show that 87,730 children in Manitoba were growing up in families living in poverty (SPCW 2020)—the highest rate of any province. The situation is worse for Indigenous children. Macdonald and Wilson (2016) found that in Manitoba, 76% of First Nations children on reserve and 42% of Indigenous children in Winnipeg were growing up in families living in poverty. In 2019 the northern Manitoba federal riding of Churchill-Keewatinook Aski had the highest rate of child poverty in all of Canada (SPCW 2021: 3).

Poverty is a key factor — perhaps *the* key factor — in producing poor school outcomes for children and youth, because children growing up in poor families are more likely to do poorly in school. This has been documented repeatedly in detailed studies prepared by the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy, but studies conducted for decades and in all parts of the world have found the same. Children growing up in poor families are less likely to succeed in school, and are then more likely themselves to experience poverty, creating a vicious cycle that can ripple across generations.

Evidence of this is the astonishing fact that in 2013/14, a Manitoba study found that there were at that time 192,600 people in Manitoba

between the ages of 18 and 65 whose literacy levels were so low that they could not fully function in society.

Part of the solution — admittedly not the whole solution — is adult education. By adult education I mean what is sometimes called adult basic education — educational activities aimed at achieving sufficient levels of literacy, numeracy and other essential skills so that it becomes possible to obtain employment, or to qualify for further education and/or training. In Manitoba this means both the mature high school diploma offered by Adult Learning Centres, which requires that students complete eight high school credits (including grade 12 English and Math), and Adult Literacy Programs, which work to improve literacy and numeracy skills to the level necessary to be able to succeed with high school credits. We need more of this in order to pull more families out of poverty in the way that Aja has managed to do with her family.

### **Reconciliation and adult education**

Adult education is also a crucial part of reconciliation. Justice Murray Sinclair has often said, “Education got us into this mess, and education will get us out of it.”

Manitoba has a particularly large Indigenous population; Winnipeg has the largest urban Indigenous population in Canada; and education is a crucially important Indigenous issue. Indigenous youth are doing less well in high school than non-Indigenous youth. Michael Mendelson (2016: 25) found that 71% of Indigenous people aged 20–24 and living on reserve in Manitoba did not have a high school diploma. Provincial data reveal that there is more than a 30 percentage point gap between the percentage of non-Indigenous students who graduate high school on time, and the percentage of Indigenous students who graduate on time. There are reasons for this: the intergenerational damage caused by residential schools and colonialism generally; the higher

than average rates of poverty experienced by Indigenous Manitobans; the relentless experience of racism.

On the other hand, Indigenous adults participate in *adult* education at a rate approximately two and a half times their proportion of the province’s population. Many who have not completed high school return later in life, and it is adult education to which they return.

As an anti-poverty initiative and as a part of reconciliation, adult education really matters.

### **Abysmally underfunded**

Adult education ought to be an important part of the education continuum, funded equitably with K-12 and post-secondary education. And yet it has, for decades, been treated by Manitoba governments as the poor cousin of education, scarcely worthy of consideration; an afterthought, and abysmally underfunded.

Funding has been frozen for years, at a level that does not come remotely close to meeting needs. In 2009/10, combined funding for Adult Learning Centres (ALCs) and Adult Literacy Programs (ALPs) was \$19.2 million; in 2019/20, the latest year for which data are available, it was \$19.9 million. This was an increase in nominal terms of less than half of one percent over 10 years, which represents a decline in real terms.

ALPs have been particularly hard hit: in 2009/10 there were 42 ALPs in Manitoba; in 2019/20 there were 30. More than a quarter of all ALPs were forced to shut their doors for want of funds. This despite the fact that there were 192,600 adults in Manitoba with literacy levels so low that they could not fully function in society. There is a huge unmet demand.

The number of adults enrolled in ALCs declined from approximately 9700 in 2003/04, to 7200 in 2019/20; the numbers who graduated with the mature grade 12 diploma declined from about 1250 to 920 over the same period. These are declines of just over 25%.

### **Cost comparisons**

In 2021 the total budgeted expenditure for education in Manitoba was approximately \$3 billion. The total investment in adult education was under \$20 million (Manitoba 2019/20). In other words, Manitoba invests a mere two-thirds of one percent of its total education budget in adult education.

Saving public money by cutting public expenditures on adult education is penny-wise, pound-foolish. A senior economist with the Toronto-Dominion Bank has estimated that for Canada as a whole, high levels of illiteracy were costing Canada “hundreds of billions of dollars in lost opportunity” (Gulati 2013:4). Cost-benefit studies of educational initiatives have found them to be cost effective — as is the case with childcare, the broad economic benefits significantly outweigh the costs over time (Hajer and Loxley 2021: 45–50).

**Adult education is also a crucial part of reconciliation. Justice Murray Sinclair has often said, “Education got us into this mess, and education will get us out of it.”**

# ADULT EDUCATION: A COST COMPARISON

**\$115,000**

Federal incarceration  
(2016) per inmate

**\$69,000**

Provincial incarceration  
(2016) per inmate

**\$45,565**

Homelessness in  
Winnipeg (2017) per  
person

**\$13,284**

K–12 per student  
(2018/19)

**\$2,240**

Adult education  
per student (2019/20)

Why then are we investing so little in adult education in Manitoba, when the need is so great and the potential benefits so obvious?

## **Poverty, power and adult education**

Part of the answer is the continued commitment to neoliberal ideas, which have it that the role of government should be reduced, and that of the for-profit market increased. While this works well for the wealthy, as CCPA studies have shown repeatedly, it does not work well for adult education in Manitoba, because there are no profits to be made in educating those who are poor.

Another part of the answer is that such a high proportion of the beneficiaries of adult education, and of those who *could* benefit from adult education, are poor. They are among those in Manitoba with the least power — economic, political and social power. They are the precariously employed, the colonized, the racially targeted and those struggling with life in poverty. We can see this by considering the demographics of those taking adult education programs. In ALCs in 2019/20, for example, 45% of students self-identified as Indigenous, 18% declared that English was their second language, and 19% said they were employed on a part-time basis (Manitoba 2019/20) and thus were almost certainly among the precariously employed. They are, by definition, among the ranks of the marginalized, the poor and the “othered.” They are not relatively powerful. They are, in fact, among the relatively powerless. What is worse, those living in poverty and without a high school diploma are typically stigmatized and blamed for their educational “failures.”

These are almost certainly major parts of the explanation for the fact that adult education is allocated two-thirds of one percent of the total Manitoba education budget.

And yet, as Aja’s story reveals, adult education works. It works well. We have an opportunity to make major gains in fighting poverty and promoting reconciliation by dramatically expanding adult education in Manitoba. Abysmally underfunded, it is a buried treasure. ●

**Jim Silver** is Professor Emeritus at the University of Winnipeg. One of three co-founders of the CCPA-Manitoba 25 years ago in 1997, he has written extensively on poverty and poverty-related matters, including housing and education. He was also directly involved in the creation of Merchants Corner, the University of Winnipeg’s off-campus site in the city’s low-income North End. His report, *Unearth this Buried Treasure: Adult Education in Manitoba*, along with all references in this article, is available at [policyalternatives.ca](http://policyalternatives.ca).



# How public funding for private options reinforces school segregation in Quebec

Erika Shaker, in conversation with **Anne Plourde**,  
researcher at l'Institut de recherche  
et d'informations socioéconomiques (IRIS)

**B**ack in 2006 the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives co-published the report *Who's Calling the Shots?* which assessed the presence of commercialization and private money in public education. It also noted what, if anything, provincial governments had done to either encourage or limit the corporate presence in classrooms. One thing we identified was that there was less marketing to kids in Quebec because of limits placed on direct marketing, and restrictions on incentive-based commercial programs in schools.

But we still identified lots of school fundraising, often to purchase things like desks and school supplies. And certainly no shortage of products that were definitely commercial in nature, though arguably not “actually” targeting kids (the sale of products in school like Coke and Pepsi, for example).

However, in the rest of Canada, there seems to be the lingering sense that, on the whole, there is greater public investment in Quebec, at least in education and child care. I graduated from McGill in the early 90s, when tuition — even for out of province students — was still \$19/credit, and international students from French-speaking countries paid the same low domestic fees. Of course, that changed to a two-tier system shortly after I left, and now fees for out of province students hover above the Canadian average, and have been rising for in-province students as well.

It may come as a shock to people that Quebec's level of public support for private schools (elementary and secondary) is second only to Alberta — and not by much. To find out more I spoke with Anne Plourde, author of an upcoming report from l'Institut de recherche et d'informations socioéconomiques (IRIS), which

looks at the current way in which public (and private) education is funded in Quebec, and the impact of this on school segregation in the province.

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**OS/OS:** Can you give us a quick lesson about how education in Quebec is funded?

**Anne Plourde:** As in the other Canadian provinces, in Quebec there are two parallel education networks at the elementary and secondary levels: a network of public schools and a network of private schools.

In theory, public primary and secondary schools are entirely financed by public funds, and free education is guaranteed by the Public Education Act. Their main sources of funding are public funds paid by the Ministry of Education and school taxes collected by school service centers (former school boards). However, despite the principles of free education, part of the revenue of the public school network comes from certain fees charged to parents (school supplies and materials, supervision of students during lunch hours, daycare services at the elementary level, etc.). In 2021, these fees represented 6.5% of the revenues of the Centre de services scolaire de Montréal, the largest in Quebec. Public schools also fund part of their activities and materials

through fundraising campaigns very often involving private companies specializing in philanthropy.

Moreover, one of the peculiarities of Quebec is very high levels of funding for the network of private schools. Two-thirds of these schools are approved to receive public funds from the Ministry of Education. These grants amount to about 60% of those paid to public schools for educational services (they are higher in secondary than in elementary schools). The rest of the income for private schools comes mainly from fees paid by parents, but also from other private sources of funding such as donations or the sale of other goods and services.

**OS/OS:** Can you tell us more about your work in education generally?

**AP:** Over the years, IRIS has produced many publications on education. We have been very

active in the debate on university funding and free education, and we have also been very interested in the commodification of higher education and the influence of neoliberalism in the way universities are managed.

We have also published several research reports on preschool, elementary and secondary education, with a particular interest in the links between social inequalities and educational inequalities, as well as the place of the private sector in education and its consequences.

**OS/OS:** What trends were identified in 2017 when you did your earlier report?

**AP:** The 2017 report allowed us to measure the extent of the phenomenon of school segregation in elementary and secondary schools in Quebec, which effectively separates students based on their socioeconomic status and academic performance. This school segregation reproduces social inequalities and causes a homogenization of schools and classes which is particularly harmful for disadvantaged or struggling students.

School segregation is mainly caused by the competition between public schools and private schools for students (“market share”), competition which is much stronger in Quebec than in the other provinces. This is explained by the significant public subsidies enjoyed by private schools, which makes them accessible to a larger portion of the population. Moreover, by attracting the best-performing students from privileged socio-economic backgrounds, private schools encourage public schools to develop specialized or boutique-type programs in an attempt to retain these students. These particular programs accentuate segregation even within public schools since they too are reserved for the most successful students and often involve significant costs for parents.

Our study first showed that the phenomenon of school segregation experienced significant growth between 2001–02 and 2013–14. It also revealed that, while this phenomenon is present at the elementary level, it is particularly marked at the secondary level, which is consistent with the fact that private secondary schools are more subsidized than primary schools.

**OS/OS:** Did the analysis confirm your suspicions, or were you surprised by what you found?

**AP:** We knew that school segregation existed and that it was particularly relevant in Quebec because it had recently been denounced in



a report published in 2016 by the Superior Council of Education. We also knew the negative consequences of these trends on student success, on social cohesion and on the reproduction of inequalities.

Nevertheless, the extent of the trend surprised us, particularly with regard to secondary schools. We observed that at the secondary school level, 21% of all students attended a private school in 2013–14, and 18% were enrolled in a particular program (private or public). In total, we estimated that more than 35% of secondary school students are enrolled either in a private school or in a particular public school program. And if we add to this the students enrolled in “special projects”, this proportion reaches 40%. Cut off from the best-performing students, public secondary schools and their so-called “ordinary” classes therefore find themselves with an ever-increasing concentration of disadvantaged or struggling students.

**OS/OS:** Why did you feel you needed to update the report, and what’s changed with/in this latest version?

**AP:** Five years after our 2017 study, we wanted to know if the phenomenon of school segregation had increased or if, on the contrary, it had diminished in Quebec. Our preliminary results demonstrate that it has not improved. In some ways it even got worse. Indeed, the proportion of secondary school students attending a private school remained the same, at 21%, while that of students enrolled in a particular program increased from 18% in 2013–14 to 21% in 2020–21.

We also carried out an analysis of the differences between private and public schools in the care of students with disabilities or with learning or adaptation difficulties. In this regard, our results confirm our hypothesis that private schools choose the “best” students, leaving out

students with difficulties, who are thus concentrated in greater proportion in public school classes. While the number of private school students represents 11% of total students (elementary and secondary included), these schools only accommodate 8.5% of students in difficulty or with disabilities. Conversely, public schools accommodate 90% of students in difficulty, while their students (with or without difficulty) account for 79% of the total. The result is that only 17% of students enrolled in the private network are students with disabilities or learning challenges, while they represent a quarter of students in the public system.

**OS/OS:** In a number of provinces, there’s significant concern that COVID-19 has facilitated the rise of privatization in schools. What, if anything, has the pandemic done to these trends in Quebec schools?

**AP:** The data analyzed does not allow us to know whether the pandemic has reinforced the phenomenon of school segregation in Quebec. However, considering the school closures and the many upheavals it has caused in schools and families, it can be expected that it has worsened educational inequalities.

It would be interesting to see how the success rates of young people have evolved in the private network and in the public network, as well as in specific projects. We already know that they are systematically higher in private schools since they select their students, but we can expect the gap to have widened in 2020 and 2021 compared to previous years. ●

*School Segregation in Quebec: The state of the situation* will be published in September 2022, when the province’s school year begins.

**Anne Plourde** is a researcher at IRIS and a postdoctoral fellow at York University. Her areas of research focus on the relationship between capitalism, the State and social policies.



# Starting school in the middle of a pandemic

Lauren Jervis

It's a school day, in April 2022, and a work day for my partner and me. Our four-year-old daughter is a junior kindergarten student enrolled at our neighbourhood public school in Toronto. But today, she's at home with us.

The COVID-19 pandemic first shut down her daycare, along with many other parts of society, over two years ago. Back then, it never occurred to me that I'd be keeping her at home, once again, this long after the beginning of the pandemic. And yet, the decisions made by the Ontario government ahead of this sixth wave left her school unsafe, especially for a child who is too young to be eligible for COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>1</sup>

For the last month and at the time of writing (April 2022), masks have not been mandatory in Ontario in most public settings, including schools. Other protections, such as PCR testing, cohorting, and contact tracing are long gone. The list of daily reported COVID-19 cases in schools recently grew alarmingly. We don't yet have the whole picture of how illness from COVID-19 affects children in the long term.<sup>2</sup> And so, because we can, my partner and I keep our daughter home from school until something changes for the better — the case rates, the policies, or hopefully both.

Becoming a parent had already given me new insights into the complexities of having responsibilities for the care and education of children — a topic that figures prominently in my research.<sup>3</sup> Now, I would get first-hand experience being a parent of a public school student.

On the other hand, being immersed in research documenting the many contradictions and failures of public education systems, particularly in the context of privatization and underfunding, made me worry about what kind of experience my daughter would have. My ambivalence was further complicated by the fact my daughter was starting school in the middle of a global health crisis. Like so many parents, I had to put my trust — and my child — in an unfamiliar institution.

How, then, would I handle this transition? The only way I knew how. I got involved. I read a picture book to my daughter's class on Zoom. I joined parent council and attended every meeting. I chatted with staff and family members at pick-up and drop-off times, trying to learn names, make friends, and learn more about this school community housed in a building in which I myself have never set foot.

As someone who has worked from home since the pandemic started, I have benefitted from the opportunity to meet new people and

participate in the life of the school community during an exceptionally isolating time. I am glad that my daughter attends a program open to any child who lives within the geographical catchment area. Neighbourhoods are, undoubtedly, stratified by class,<sup>4</sup> but as someone who rents my home in a region where house prices are astronomical,<sup>5</sup> it's no small thing to have access to a solid education for my daughter, regardless of my household income.

Except when we don't. At the beginning of January, Ontario schools closed for two weeks<sup>6</sup> in response to community rates of COVID-19 so high that the basic functioning of the province's hospitals was threatened.<sup>7</sup> At other times, the schools have been open, but the government has been unwilling to maintain the types of protections that would limit the spread of disease in school buildings.<sup>8</sup> Because of historic and ongoing policies of austerity, Ontario public schools entered this pandemic with large class sizes, overcrowded classrooms,<sup>9</sup> and aging school buildings overdue for repairs<sup>10</sup> — legacies of neglect that now hamper our ability to keep children in school without turning in-person classes into super-spreader events.

While my daughter is being let down by Ontario's education policy for the first time, I recognize that many families with school-aged children know this feeling all too well. While many children, including my own, struggled with virtual classes during school closures,<sup>11</sup> pandemic pivots to online learning have proved to be a silver lining for other children. It has become clear that some students are learning better at home in a space that may be more welcoming than the one provided in their school classroom, where students may experience racism, for instance, or an environment that is unaccommodating of their exceptional learning needs.<sup>12</sup> Even before the pandemic, some Black families in Ontario were turning to homeschooling because their children were experiencing anti-Black racism at school.<sup>13</sup>

Ontario's education system was created to be a force for societal control,<sup>14</sup> and has been complicit in reproducing social inequalities. At the same time, a robust public education system provides vital opportunities for learning, relationship building, and community support. The very idea of quality public schooling pushes back against neoliberal impulses towards the valorizing of individual responsibility,<sup>15</sup> the prioritizing of personal success, and the undervaluing of collective flourishing.<sup>16</sup> In my case, I have been working with other parents on anti-racism organizing and an initiative to redistribute some

of our parent council's fundraising monies in resistance to the inequalities perpetuated by our school system's reliance on fundraising<sup>17</sup> in the face of inadequate public investment.

My community school may be part of an under-resourced system, but it is still a place that is, at its best moments, child-centred and striving to support all the students who walk through its doors. Imperfect as it is, I don't want to lose it. Instead, I will keep agitating for sufficient government funding, responsible public health policy, and the kinds of transformational system changes demanded by members of marginalized groups. I do this in the hope that Ontario's public education can better live up to its potential to support all the province's children, their families, and their communities. ●

**Lauren Jervis** is a critical educational policy researcher who studies policy controversies and parent advocacy. She is currently a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Faculty of Education at Western University. She can be reached at [ljervis@uwo.ca](mailto:ljervis@uwo.ca).

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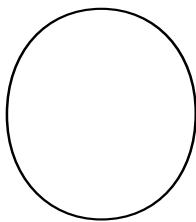


# Lessons on critical thinking

## **Kicking the tires of the “freedom” convoy**

William Paul

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ne of my favourite teachers was Keith Kenmare who taught grade 7 and 8 and was principal of Laura Secord PS in the heart of downtown Queenston. The village was guarded by a monument of Isaac

Brock — hero of the War of 1812 and everything colonialist and British. It was the height of the Cold War, the escalation of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement in the U.S.

Mr. Kenmare had an engagingly caustic sense of humour, introduced good books, especially science fiction, and liked to spark arguments about “current events” as we called the bewildering mess of information that appeared on our TV sets.

But what stays in my mind, after nearly 60 years, is Mr. Kenmare asking uncomfortable questions like: “Where did you get that information?” “How do you know?” or “How would you like it if someone told you to get out of their store because of the colour of your skin?” And most of all: “Support your ideas.” He was the first teacher I ever knew who was truly interested in what we thought and why.

While this role of ‘educator as debunker’ has always been important, it’s arguably even more critical today.

As I read about the self-titled Freedom Convoy that took over downtown Ottawa for three weeks in February, the wasp nest that passes for public discourse was buzzing hard: basic rights trampled under the guise of public safety! As Jordan Peterson fumed about “how rapidly we stampeded to imitate a totalitarian state,” politicians like Pierre Poilievre welcomed the Convoy to Ottawa from an overpass, and Conservative leader Erin O’Toole lost his job. Ottawa police chief Peter Sloly quit. Ottawa mayor Jim Watson declared a state of emergency. And all in response to a demand from the convoyers that seemed disarmingly simple: no masks, no vaccine mandates — Freedom!

But this simplistic framing concealed a story that was a lot darker: “F... Trudeau banners targeting the Prime Minister, Confederate flags, swastikas, people in Ottawa being harassed while trying to go about their business, the desecration of national monuments, the demand for an elected government to drop all health mandates or be removed from power, the three-week stand-off with Ottawa police... all to publicize a grievance, the details of which seemed to change based on who was asked.

Shortly after a national emergency to end the occupation was declared, provincial governments started to lift mandates and open up

public spaces just a few weeks after the country had been hit with the virulent Omicron variant of COVID-19. Convoyers were still at it at the end of April when the “Rolling Thunder” biker rally came to Ottawa.

Kids must wonder if the adults in the room have the slightest idea what they’re doing or if they’re just making things up as they go. Who do governments listen to? Whose views count? Whose safety matters?

As troubling as many of the ideas it transported were, the Convoy offers a terrific learning opportunity to consider fundamental questions about the real meaning of freedom, civil disobedience, power, misrepresentation, language and so much more. The challenge for teachers is to help students understand this and similar events — mired as they are in social media and punditry that often masquerades as news.

### Context and a critical eye

It’s good to take a few steps back from events and look at what informed them. Sarah Vance, a politics and history teacher, spoke to me about preparing kids with a basic grasp of media literacy: distinguishing between high and low-quality journalism, who gets written about and how they’re portrayed. As Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman explain in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy and Mass Media*, critical journalism takes second place to the profit incentives of the corporations that operate media, the advertisers who pay for our attention and the institutions who guide and control access to the stories we read and decide who will be the common enemy. Armed with that basic understanding, teachers can guide their students in asking questions about the reputation (and ownership or consolidation) of sources, the type of reports, who is listened to, what interests the players have, and the commercial value of hyperbole and demonstrable falsehoods.

### From vertical to lateral reading

Both Ms. Vance, and her colleague Melanie Willson, use *lateral reading* as a tool to help students get to know the source of the information they read. This comes from the work of the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG), which found that undergrads and professors tended to read a web site *vertically*, as if it was printed text, and were influenced by its appearance — an official looking organization logo, nice layout or the official-looking “.org” at the end of the **url** — not realizing that anyone can buy a .org domain registration.



Fact checkers, on the other hand, spend less time reading an article and more time researching its sources. This is lateral reading — searching elsewhere for information about the site or organization behind it to better understand the background of the source making the claim or being used to validate it. Take the Freedom Convoy Facebook post from March 7, 2022 about one of the organizers: “Tamara Lich, Canada’s political prisoner, released from jail: Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms”. It links to a piece of the same title on the JCCF webpage. Rather than spending much time studying the content of the page, a lateral reader would look for more information about the JCCF.

Teachers can also use the fact checking website Snopes to help students negotiate the

wildness that is social media. For example, Snopes exposed that the following widely circulated message, supposedly posted by PM Justin Trudeau (cobbled together with his picture) on his Facebook page, was fake news:

Please help do your part to make [The Ottawa Occupation] stop. If you have family or friends that still haven't been vaccinated, do not allow these to family dinners, do not speak to them on the phone, do not reply to their texts. You need to do everything you can to make life difficult for them until they comply.

Snopes also addressed rumours about the size of the Convoy, a number of miscaptioned videos showing global support for it, and several doctored clips from "The Simpsons"

that were used to suggest the show had predicted the Convoy.

### Checking claims, deconstructing language

Why do players in a story — in this case, supporters of the Convoy — say what they say and how do they back it up? Here's where teachers can draw from news specifically. In mid-February, a visually appealing site, Common Sense, outlined "What the truckers want". The piece is a lesson in misdirection: extol the courage and fortitude of the protesters, add a quotation from a man who emigrated from Ukraine "...to be free — not slaves," report on unfair treatment of those who refused or feared vaccination. (Nothing explaining that the Canadian Trucking Alliance condemned the actions of the Convoy.) Teachers could use information from the site to ask questions like: Does this story have information that supports what Canadian truckers want? How could vaccine mandates possibly be considered (and by who) equivalent to slavery?

The convoyers' demands, as outlined in a letter posted February 17 on Facebook — to end vaccine passports and masking requirements and "respect freedom of choice without discrimination" — provides teachers with an opportunity to help kids examine that statement critically. Does the statement give any details about what is meant by *freedom* beyond ending mandates? Is this freedom unconditional? What about the consequences to those around you? What about community responsibility not to infect others? When is it right or wrong for governments to restrain freedoms — something they do every day?

How does "freedom" come to be associated with anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers? asks teacher Deborah Buchanan-Walford, a member of Ontario Education Workers United (OEWU) who also correctly points out that there's no way her group or any of the other Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, Muslim or other less privileged groups can expect even a tiny portion of the coverage and money the convoyers and their fellows attracted.

If you're an English teacher and you want kids to consider the manipulation of language you could initiate some discussion on the "freedom" claimed by the convoyers versus the freedom sought by Civil Rights workers in the U.S. or the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa or the freedom sought by Indigenous people to simply live, to escape the horrors of residential schools — freedom from genocide. What does this say about the sense of entitlement and real



power of those demanding an end to mandates? Ms. Buchanan-Walford asks why media even use the term “freedom convoy” — another good question to help students understand the power of language.

False dichotomy and exaggeration are other rhetorical devices that coverage of the Convoy provided ample opportunity to teach about. In 2020, Vaccine Choice Canada and others sued politicians, public officials and others to get them to overturn mandate provisions like lockdowns, wearing masks and vaccinations. Toronto lawyer (and Executive Director of the Constitutional Rights Centre Inc.) Rocco Galati told CBC news:

We have the testimonies of 43 Canadian and international experts who maintain that these measures are not corroborated by any scientific fact, that they have not previously been the subject of any clinical trial which could have proven their effectiveness and that ‘they are extreme in the circumstances.’

There is a lot to check here: What 43 experts? What are their areas of expertise? What about “not corroborated by any scientific fact?” Kids can pop “*research on use of masks and COVID-19*” into their favourite browser to get plenty of hits, including from the Center for Disease Control.

There is another way in which this suit's rhetorical framing helps to teach healthy skepticism. It rests on false dichotomy, the notion that a situation is either all one condition or all another.<sup>2</sup> Mandates like masking are dichotomized as a necessity for everyone vs. no one; lockdowns as either absolute and indefinite vs open and unlimited. But it's false to say that the *only* recourse is to drop all mandates immediately.

The discussion and research for students here could be: Masks vs. no masks — is it all one way or the other? What steps had to be taken for governments to start lifting restrictions? Did they always do the right thing? It is really important for kids to understand the limitation of options posed by false dichotomy and how misleading they are.

### **Context**

In the *Toronto Star*, Justin Ling examines the background of the Convoy leaders to better understand their roots, connections

and affiliations, including with far-right and white supremacist organizations. Convoy organizers downplayed the swastikas and Confederate flags held up by some protestors, but organizer BJ Dichter said he welcomed “unacceptable opinions because I want to challenge them” as though flying symbols of genocide and slavery might spark useful debate. The obvious discussion question of course is: “What’s to challenge?” What were Nazi symbols and Confederate flags doing amongst a crowd self-described as being full of joy and support — and what do they have to do with freedom? Why couldn’t authorities seem to do much about the occupation of Canada’s national capital?

So, a good research question for kids is: Compare and contrast treatment of the largely white convoyers with that of the 890 people — many of whom were Indigenous — protesting old-growth logging in Fairy Creek B.C. who were pepper-sprayed, tackled and arrested by the RCMP in 2021. Consider the arrests of Wet’suet’en people blocking the Coastal Gaslink pipeline project from crossing *their* lands. Look at how decisively Toronto police moved in to clear homeless people from downtown parks like Lamport stadium last summer. Check out the excessive force and detention of 1,000 peaceful protestors, journalists and onlookers at the Toronto G20 summit in 2010. What made the convoyers so special?

The point here for students (of all ages) is that there is so much more to a story like this than slogans about freedom and togetherness. We need to teach them to look behind simple, catchy phrases and claims.

In a time when truly incredible information is being hurled, kids (and adults, for that matter) need help developing research skills, critical lenses and bullshit detectors: dig, practice lateral reading, check facts, debunk. The February Convoy provided an opportunity — and limitless content — to enable students to practice critical thinking and healthy skepticism. ●

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# Mindfulness in schools

## **A self-reflection on a trending practice**

Jasmin Stoffer

In my mid-twenties I joined an international community of mindfulness practitioners out of a desire to lower my stress levels associated with work and life and found some success with the practice for some time.

As a public school educator who wanted what I perceived as a “calm” class, I tried dutifully to help my students come to mindfulness practice as well. But over time, and as I left the mindfulness community, I started to reflect on my reasoning for bringing these practices into my classroom. I wanted students to feel safe, welcome, and successful and, slowly but surely, I began to realize that what I was doing — forcing them to sit quietly and breathe — was not helping them like I thought it would. I would eventually realize how truly ableist and trauma un-informed this was, not to mention, culturally unsafe.

This reflexive inquiry has been at the centre of my teaching and my current PhD research. Early in my profession, I perceived success as the silence of students sitting in chairs, answering questions when prompted, and always remaining calm. I had believed that compliance was the surest sign of academic achievement. I know better now.

Too often, I have witnessed and, in the past, participated in teaching mindfulness as a tool for compliance and obedience that is introduced to staff and students to primarily improve academics. We need to reverse this idea of “math and reading first, wellness second.” Well-being and social-emotional learning goes beyond the 10 minute Youtube “brain break” videos and should be understood as the foundation on which academic learning and education can flourish because students with a confident sense of self become strong self-advocates, community advocates, and critical thinkers. Mindful educators, who practice compassion and patience, understand this. Mindful educators understand the importance of culturally responsive and safe pedagogy, are trauma-informed educators and are pro-actively working to create barrier-free learning communities. Mindful administrators support educators in this endeavour, and understand that academic excellence cannot be cultivated without cultivating a holistic sense of well-being first.

Mindfulness is non-competitive — a lifelong practice that takes grace, patience, and compassion for self, in order to manifest these values for others. We turn inwards in order to eventually turn our good work outwards to the



community. I would add that an attitude of love, of self, others, and community is also central to becoming a mindful educator.

According to John Kabat-Zinn (USC, *Resilience Project*), there are seven key attitudes of mindfulness:

1. non-judging (yourself or others),
2. patience (inner and outer),
3. beginners' mind (being okay that we can't and don't know everything),
4. trust (it is okay to make mistakes),
5. non-striving (it is not a competition, the goal is to remain in the present moment),
6. acceptance (that we learn and grow at an individual pace, and that should be respected — see things as they are),
7. letting go (be whatever you are right now).

Over the years of practicing mindfulness solo, I have realized it is so much more than simply lowering stress levels, and certainly not about obedience or compliance. It has helped me manifest a desire to help my community, and begin to understand how “community” is not simply the people who share a space together, but the spiritual, emotional and mental desire to create a profound understanding that I am not safe unless you are safe, I am not well unless you are well, and I will not succeed unless you feel you can succeed too. No grit required, just patience and love.

The ‘capitalized’ version of mindfulness that I willfully presented to my students did not consider their emotional, spiritual, cultural, and physical needs to simply be themselves and feel their feelings. It did not make me an anti-oppressive educator; in fact, it made me more stressed and less self-aware as I focused on compliance rather than compassion. This outward action eventually would turn inward, as I was finally diagnosed with ADHD and suffered from burnout, the latter being a result not of the stress of teaching but the stress of masking my neurodivergence for over 30 years. I had tried my best to comply as a student, and it hurt.

Compliance is not evidence of a successful, loving, and safe learning community. I had to stop being an authoritarian figure in my classroom and start being a guide who not only facilitated the learning of their students but who validated, affirmed, and nurtured their students. That has been how the students I serve, and I have found success in our learning community.

A truly inclusive and equitable classroom *is* a mindful classroom. When teachers centre

the well-being of their students, they are practicing mindfulness. It looks like asking about and honouring student identities and intersectionality in the classroom. It starts with setting up the classroom as a transparent, safe and compassionate place to be ourselves giving students the space to share how they're doing if they need to. I share my pronouns first when I introduce myself before asking students to share. I pre-teach about why celebrating our identities is important. We create a mind-map, a word association of what “honouring identity” means as a group. Words like “safety,” “love,” “kindness,” and “joy” are commonplace. I also use a daily exit card system, universally designed so students can draw, write, type, or verbalize what they'd like to share; at the end of each class (before the backpack rush), I give several questions from which they can choose to answer. These questions are like check-ins for me (and them) to better assess their understanding of course content and how they feel about being in class. These exit cards are seen only by the individual student and me; they are a private conversation about their thoughts and feelings in the learning community. Setting up the classroom as a transparent, safe and compassionate place to be ourselves gives students the space to share how they're doing if they need to.

Frequent check-ins mean actively listening to students. I try my best to know at least one personal fact about each student, so when they walk in the door, I can say something like, “how's the Pokemon game going?” or “how's your grandma?” Knowing our students ensures that our pedagogy and practice are founded on compassion and, therefore, mindfulness. Educators should be given the time to learn about their students as humans, and not simply be compelled to “get them through it”. As a former principal once told me “we are not making widgets, we are teaching people”.

Finally, mindfulness looks like care for the community and family. Connecting with families before you need their help to intervene sets a foundation of mindfulness rooted in compassion. I make introductory phone calls at the start of each semester, send emails with good news updates about students regularly to keep guardians in the loop, and ensure that parents have all the communication they need to understand the process of individualized programming, transitioning to post-secondary programs, and connecting with organizations in and out of the school that will support both them and their child when necessary.

**Mindfulness is not a synonym for compliance, as much of the current neoliberal structure would want us to believe. It is about strengthening our ability to be reflexive, compassionate, and patient — with ourselves first.**

Human to human connection is mindfulness. If I am supposed to be *in loco parentis*, then I, the students, and their families are a community. It takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to raise a village — every member of the village has to feel like what they can offer matters to the growth and success of every other member. As a teacher, my job is to understand my role as a member of the proverbial village to help affirm every member within it, colleagues, students, and families included. When integrated into the

culture of care that teachers centre within the learning communities, these practices can help educators nurture student well-being while respecting and celebrating student achievement based on the understanding that every student can succeed.

Mindfulness is not a synonym for compliance, as much of the current neoliberal structure would want us to believe. It is about strengthening our ability to be reflexive, compassionate, and patient — with ourselves first. It is a pillar of community building; it is a way to connect our body, mind, and spirit and analyze how we are doing, what we are thinking, and why we are thinking those things. Adopting a mindful practice cannot simply end at feeling peaceful; it has to motivate us to go out into our communities and ensure that the peace we think turns into actions that promote equity, justice and accessibility for all. Mindfulness creates room for doubt, fear, and anxiety to be handled with care in a safe and loving space (internally and externally within our communities).

### **Conclusion**

Commodifying the lives of our students devalues and disregards their intersectionality and disregards and devalues the push towards a more inclusive education system. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen how a neoliberal capitalist value of human lives has done serious harm to the dis/ability community and has motivated dis/ability activists and community leaders like Imani Barbarin to create the hashtag: #mydisabledlifeisworthy. The

valuing of human life based on the systemically ableist views of productivity not only guarantees that mindfulness will never work in schools, but it also prevents school leaders from becoming truly anti-ableist and anti-racist. We cannot deny the interconnectedness between ableism and racism. Mindfulness can be a tool to dismantle systemic oppression, but like the “anti” in anti-ableism, mindfulness must compel us to act. As philosopher Linda Alcoff has said, “exclusion is a practice, not an absence”. As educators we should constantly be self-reflexive in asking who are we including, who are we excluding, why and how can we improve?

A mindful learning community thrives if supported by a school community where all stakeholders (administration, families, department of education, etc.) understand that prioritizing wellness is paramount to creating successful, validating, nurturing and anti-oppressive learning environments for students; that human value has to be more than simply economic contribution. I, for one, support educators practicing mindfulness regularly in and out of their learning communities to foster wellness within themselves and the people they serve.

While I also recognize that academic achievement is essential, I want to, have to, focus my teaching practice on my students’ well-being and continue creating a learning community that supports both students and fellow educators to become empowered and liberated human beings. The work, as always, continues. ●

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# A national school food program for all

## Towards a social policy legacy for Canada

Amberley T. Ruetz, Alicia Martin and Eric Ng



In the 1930s and 1940s, the United States, the UK, and many other countries developed a National School Lunch Program in response to the Great Depression — the biggest economic crisis of the last century — however, Canada did not choose this path.<sup>1,2</sup> In the spirit of building back better in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have the opportunity to create a social policy legacy for Canada: a world-class, universal, healthy school meal program for all children and youth. We should not let this moment pass us by.

### What does school food look like in Canada?

When it comes to national school lunch programs, Canada is an outlier. Internationally, school meals are the norm: 83% of all countries provide free or subsidized school meals, according to the World Food Programme.<sup>3</sup>

While over 35% of Canadian elementary and secondary schools offer one or more school food programs (breakfast, lunch and/or snacks), most are only partially funded by provincial or territorial governments.<sup>4</sup> The lack

of coordinated and adequate funding inhibits universal access for all junior kindergarten to grade 12 students.<sup>5</sup> School food programs in Canada are abysmally under-resourced by a patchwork of funders, including governments, and non-profit and for-profit organizations. In 2018/19, most provincial and territorial contributions only accounted for a small portion of resources required to provide meals to children and youth — an average of \$0.48 per student per school day.<sup>6</sup> As a result, programs rely heavily on the goodwill of volunteers, who are often already busy teachers and parents from the school community juggling many responsibilities.

The (neoliberal) shifting of responsibilities for food provision and health promotion from governments to communities or individuals/households also means that programs have to apply for funding every year and compete with other schools to support these programs. Program coordinators are not only tasked with preparing and buying food in the most cost-efficient ways possible but are also continuously seeking out charitable sources of funding to

sustain their programs.<sup>7</sup> The reliance on volunteerism has depoliticized the problem of school food and nutrition, leaving the responsibility of such programs to the private realm and reinforcing short-term charitable responses.<sup>8</sup>

Systemic solutions for providing access to food and nutrition for all children and youth are required. In 2017, UNICEF raised the alarm about the state of child nutrition in Canada, ranking us 37 out of the 41 wealthiest nations for children's access to nutritious food; below the United States and just above Bulgaria.<sup>9</sup> We can and we must do better.

### **School food: A public good with holistic impacts**

Along with other important income-based solutions for increasing food security, school food solutions can strengthen our social safety net while also supporting health and well-being in the long term.

Why is it that the school libraries and computers are seen as an essential public good to support students' learning, but food is not?

Food plays an integral role in enhancing people's ability to work productively, which is beneficial for society more broadly.<sup>10</sup> While *what* individuals choose to eat might be viewed as a private matter, food is an integral part of how we relate to each other in society in our social, cultural, economic, and ecological systems. As such, we argue that since education is predominantly seen as a public good and being well nourished is a prerequisite for positive socio-educational outcomes, school meals should also be considered a public good.

School food advocacy organizations and other advocacy groups agree with this position. According to the Coalition for Healthy School Food, Canada's largest school food network, "the COVID-19 crisis has revealed that school

food is an essential public good, just like K-12 education and healthcare".<sup>11</sup> The School Meals Coalition — a global coalition advocating for school meals — also highlights the importance of school food for nutrition, health, and educational outcomes. They also go beyond this to say that school meals do more than simply provide food, as they can support local agriculture and can help in improving global food systems.<sup>12</sup>

The impacts of school food are far-reaching.<sup>13</sup> Much like education, school meals nurture our future

generations to become engaged citizens that can drive positive change in our national food system as healthy, food literate leaders.<sup>14</sup> But even beyond our schools, school food programs are integral to our local economies. Through the implementation of a national school food program, the federal government can create jobs<sup>15</sup> that support small food producers and schools through sufficient funding and local procurement policy.<sup>16</sup> Public investment in school food would ensure that essential food sector jobs are integrated into the school's workforce and that this is maintained beyond the pandemic. In addition, schools are food hubs where regional food producers and community stakeholders work together to provide local foods to our children. For example, in Brazil's School Food Program 30% of the food provided comes from small family farms.

Given the multiple positive outcomes of such programs, a holistic, expansive, and food systems approach to school food programming<sup>17</sup> should be considered by the Government of Canada when designing our National School Food Policy and Program.

### **What could it look like? How could it work?**

Here are some examples of what school food programming looks like in other countries. In France, students eat a four-course meal around a group table with their peers and a supervisor who teaches them about nutrition, healthy eating, and table manners.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in Finland, where school meals are free, approximately 95% of JK-12 students participate. In Scotland, access to universal free school meals was expanded to more students, aligning with their proposed legislation to incorporate the right to food into Scottish law.<sup>19</sup> Scottish schools' adoption of the Food For Life program, furthermore celebrates programs' continuous improvement to implement sustainable food practices, including sourcing from local businesses, among other holistic aspirations.

Within Canada, there are some recent trends in how school food programs are operating that policymakers could consider. One option is a sliding scale or 'pay-what-you-can' school food program model where all students receive the same meal, but parents contribute the amount that best suits their budget. This model has been operating in Canada since the late 1980s in St. John's, Newfoundland, and has been recently adopted by Prince Edward Island during the rollout of their provincial school lunch program. Proponents of pay-what-you-can

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programs claim that it increases students' access to food by reducing student stigma and financial barriers to participating; however, limited research has been conducted to confirm if this is the case.

Another rapidly-growing trend is the 'free for all' model. California and Maine have legislated permanent free school meals for all students regardless of income through additional state investments that top-up national funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. At least seven more states — Massachusetts, Colorado, Minnesota, Vermont, New York, Wisconsin, and Maryland — are now considering similar legislation

that would make free school meals universally accessible to all students, moving away from the 3-tier stigmatizing system that has ingrained student school meal debt among other challenges. In response to the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Agriculture granted a series of waivers<sup>20</sup> to increase program flexibility including allowing school food authorities to serve meals to all students at no cost. These waivers helped eliminate the stigma around participation in school meals and meant that school nutrition services could focus on meal quality, knowing that every meal was fully reimbursed.

With the development and implementation of a National School Food Policy and Program on the horizon for Canada, this is an opportune moment for the Government of Canada to carefully consider school food as a public good for all children and youth. Building on the recent federal commitment to child care and early childhood education, this is the opportunity to create another Canadian social policy legacy supporting children and youth for generations to come. ●

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## Notes

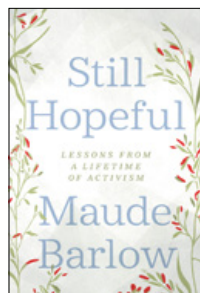
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# A moral imperative

## **A review of Maude Barlow's *Still Hopeful: Lessons from a Lifetime of Activism***

**Paul Moist**



In June 2019 activist and author Maude Barlow was participating in a panel on the Green New Deal in Ottawa with noted climate activists David Suzuki and Avi Lewis.

There was anger and frustration in the air over the worsening climate crisis and the slow pace of meaningful government response. Maude Barlow's message was that citizens should not give up hope, that building a broad-based coalition to advance the Green New Deal was possible.

At the end of the event, a high school student approached Barlow in tears and thanked her for her message. The student told Barlow that she and her friends were afraid for what the future held. That conversation was the impetus for this book — Barlow's twentieth.

Over her several decades of activism, Maude Barlow has been the voluntary chairperson of the Council of Canadians and senior water advisor to the United Nations General Assembly, among countless other roles within the national and international global justice movement. *Still Hopeful* outlines the major lessons she has learned from a lifetime of activism, which began in the women's movement.

Barlow outlines the many achievements of women and the challenges that remain for them. She also acknowledges her own white privilege and the whiteness of the movement she became active in more than 50 years ago, saying, "the only way to build a healthy women's movement is to honour the perspectives of diverse women."

The early 1980s saw Barlow on the frontlines of the labour–civil society opposition to free trade. Here she clearly outlines the combined effects of deregulation, privatization and free trade, which she terms “the cornerstones of globalization.”

In Canada this agenda led her to high-profile roles in the formation of the Council of Canadians in 1986, and in the 1988 federal election, which was fought over the Canada–U.S. free trade agreement.

Barlow writes in a clear and concise style that makes the often-complicated world of global trade easier to understand. She explains the so-called “Washington consensus,” the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the successful pushback against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI).

Barlow’s descriptions of her front-line activism in Seattle in the 1999 WTO protests and in Quebec City at the 2001 Summit of the Americas, and elsewhere around the globe, provide an informative snapshot of the broad-based opposition to globalization.

In September 2003 she attended the WTO ministerial gathering in Cancun, Mexico. South Korean farmers were present in large numbers protesting their way of life being ended by new foreign import trade rights. Barlow witnessed their leader, Lee Kyung-hae, publicly kill himself while surrounded by colleagues wearing signs that read “WTO Kills Farmers.” Barlow says it was a scene that “...will haunt me to the end of my days.”

A couple of key themes emerge from Barlow’s accounts of global activism. One is that building coalitions, bridges between different groups,

is hard but necessary work. Another is that success can’t be measured by the numbers of campaigns that are waged, or whether they’re won or lost. The true test is whether ongoing linkages between civil society groups, labour, faith-based communities and indeed all progressives have been created.

Barlow’s work on the water file, in both national and global campaigns, is impressive but also daunting. The scope of the challenge here is staggering. She writes about two billion citizens drinking contaminated water each day, and by 2025 two-thirds of the world’s population will live in water-stressed areas. She outlines how even if climate change was somehow solved overnight, these critical water issues would remain.

Fighting the commodification of water has been a lifelong battle for Barlow, and her justified celebration of the UN General Assembly’s July 2010 vote to recognize water and sanitation as “essential for the full enjoyment of the right to life” is a moving testament to the global water movement she has been at the centre of.

*Still Hopeful* does not sugar-coat the magnitude of the challenges that social justice activists face around the globe. But it is a refreshing take on the power of people-based movements and how, as Barlow puts it, “hope, is a moral imperative.”

A worthy message from an iconic Canadian social justice activist. ●

**Paul Moist** is a retired labour leader.

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