



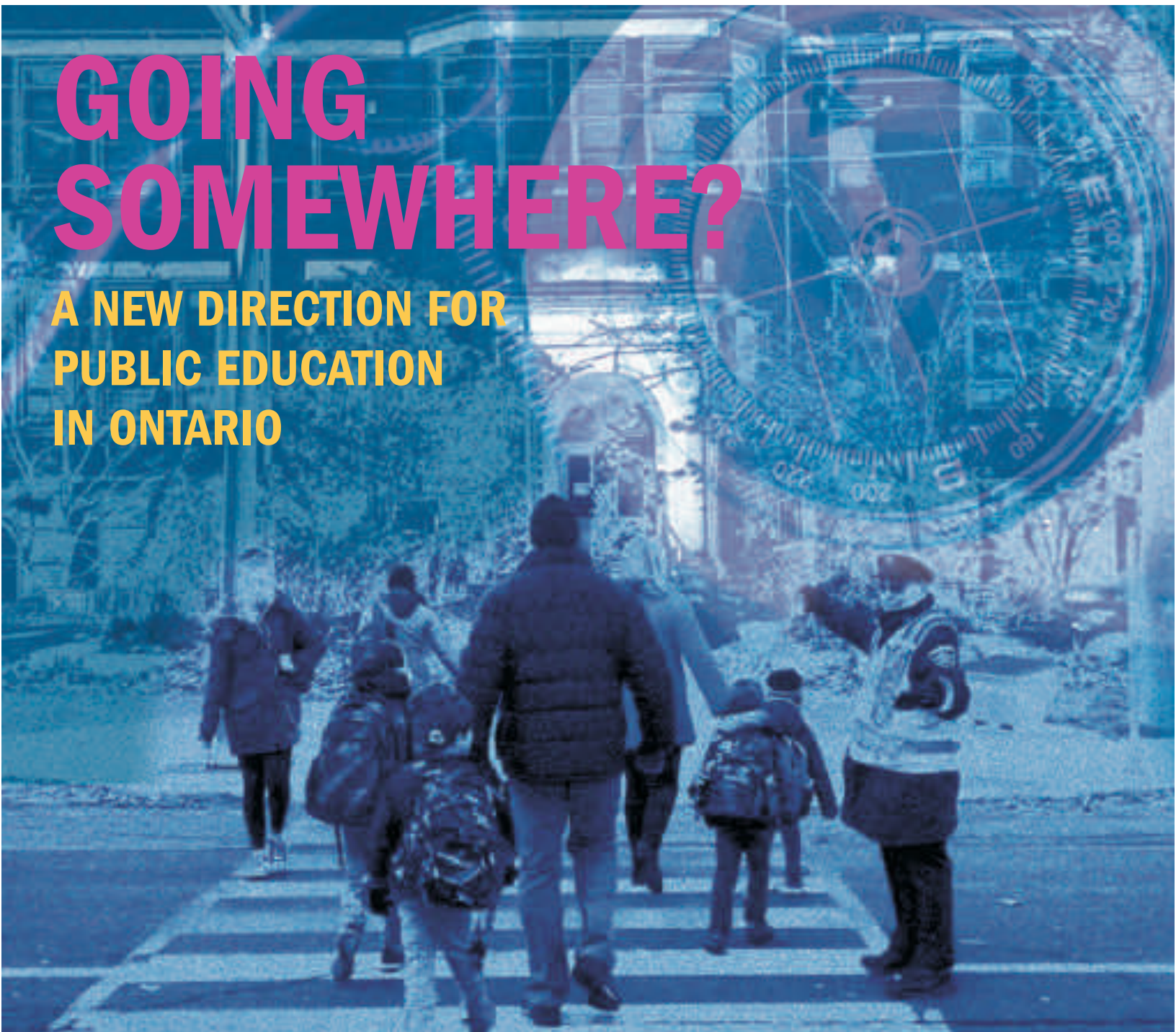
THE VOICE OF
PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION
IN CANADA

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES

FALL 2017/WINTER 2018

GOING SOMEWHERE?

A NEW DIRECTION FOR
PUBLIC EDUCATION
IN ONTARIO



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GETTING BACK ON COURSE



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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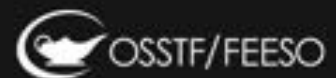
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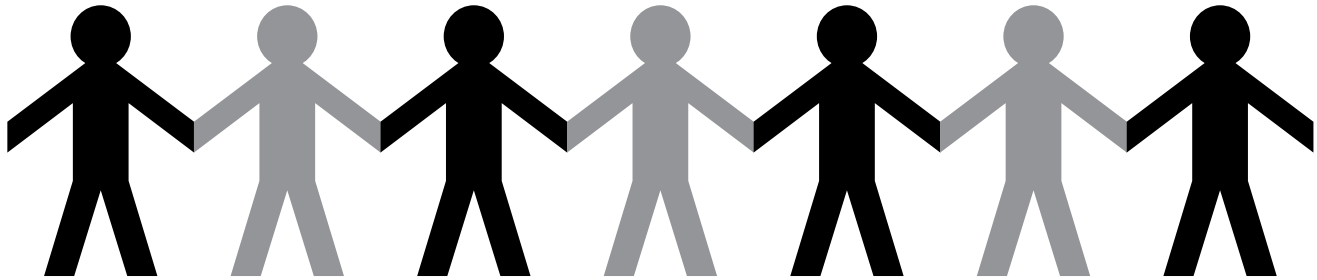
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WHAT SCHOOL DID YOU GO TO?

BY MATTHEW GREEN



When I was growing up in the city of Hamilton, the first question we would always ask when meeting someone new was never “where do you live?” It was always “what school did you go to?” While this question may not have been only Hamilton-specific, I suspect it grew from the fact that most of our communities were built following the urban planning principle that neighbourhoods and public space, and in particular parks, were always planned in conjunction with neighbourhood public schools.

In elementary school we were granted the freedom to roam our neighbourhood — only until the streetlights came on — which was clearly defined by the four square blocks surrounding our local school park. From JK to grade 5, I and all of the neighbourhood kids would spend our formative years connected to and connecting with our neighbourhood and each other. These were the kids I went to school with, played at recess with shared birthday parties with, and, most importantly, became childhood friends with.

There were subtle differences between some neighbourhoods in that not every elementary school went from JK through to 8th grade. For example, my school, Ridgemount Elementary stopped at grade 5 which meant moving on to Westview Middle

School for grades 6-8 on the west end of the Hamilton ‘Mountain’. While this meant new friendships in new communities, it was also the first time I recognized slight differences in class and income.

The wartime bungalows of the central mountain neighbourhood where I grew up had a very working class status, with most families within relatively the same

I REMEMBER US ALL GETTING ALONG BECAUSE WHAT CONNECTED US, AND WHAT WE SHARED IN COMMON, WAS THE SCHOOL WE ATTENDED AND THE COLLECTIVE IDENTITY WE FORMED TOGETHER.

income bracket. The more-recently built upper-middle income West End housed many of the upper city social housing developments, which meant some kids had slightly more money than others. But, for the most part, I remember us all getting along because what connected us, and what we shared in common, was the school

we attended and the collective identity we formed together.

That sense of school community belonging extended past these formative years, into high school ; something I would carry with me into adulthood. And, indeed, when Hamiltonians are asked “what school did you go to?” invariably we respond with our high school. It tells a story. In many ways it says who we are.

So a little over five years ago, when the provincial government undertook the ‘school accommodation review process’ to decide which schools they felt were worth keeping open, it highlighted another, related story: which communities were most vulnerable to the decades of neglected capital reinvestment.

Many of the schools built in the 1950s and 60s are coming to the end of their capital life cycle due to decades of deferred capital reinvestment and maintenance, along with the use of materials like asbestos. This resulted in an actuarial approach to determine the remediation and renovation costs versus the cost to consolidate and build new schools. Quick studies on enrollment trends and future neighbourhood population growth projections were supposed to translate into evidence-based decisions about which schools to close next. The process quickly

became perceived as deeply politicized, rooted in calculations as to which neighbourhoods were worth more, or less.

Within this actuarial mindset, the rich community tapestry of class, religion, ethnicity, race, graduation rates, and future education and employment prospects was reduced to and predetermined by the high school you graduated from. And it became clear, based on these and other social determinants, which schools would be closed and which students would be bused elsewhere.

Although elected during the municipal election cycle and represented by a parallel ward system, and even taxed alongside property tax assessment, the school board is still very much a child of the provincial government from which it receives its educational mandate and, most importantly, its funding formula. And regardless of the fact that trustees are elected as non-partisan and outside the provincial election cycle, decisions like school closures can still be very much motivated by partisan interest, or personal bias and class-based assumptions, or non-education-related concerns like market land values.

I have watched the fallout of these decisions recently play out in the neighbourhood where we chose to raise our family, and where I was elected to proudly serve as city councillor in the heart of Hamilton Centre's Ward 3.

In many ways Ward 3 is to Hamilton what Hamilton is to the rest of the country. In the industrial boom of the 60's and 70's our community forged the steel that built this nation. And when times got tough in the 80's and 90's they got really bad for the blue collar folks living in our neighbourhoods. Yet high schools like Delta, Scott Park, Sir John A MacDonald and Parkview remained anchors of place and public space, as well as communities of identity and belonging for youth and their families facing the precariousness of a post-industrial rust belt economy.

In my ward it was Parkview in particular that drew my attention because it offered special education, vocational pathways and, most importantly, a community for students disenfranchised by mainstream schools and left out of meaningful classroom inclusion. At Parkview, these students found an exceptional principal

who understood the complexities of their vulnerabilities as well as the importance of authentic opportunities for leadership and community engagement. It was here that I first met Jordan, the school council president and host of the daily morning announcements. For Jordan and his peers, Parkview was an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging and value in their contribution to our neighbourhood.

UPROOTING STUDENTS GOES WELL BEYOND THE BRICKS-AND-MORTAR-RELATED ISSUES OF DEMOLISHING OLD BUILDINGS IN FAVOUR OF NEW ONES. IT REACHES INTO AND DISRUPTS THE CORE EXPERIENCE OF EDUCATION AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE FINDING THEIR PLACE OF BELONGING AND IDENTITY.

So when Parkview became one of the first Hamilton schools slated for closure, we rallied together to fight — not simply to keep the school open, but to keep the community of students there together. Jordan led the charge and we followed. What ensued was two years of half-hearted community consults, student walk-outs, rallies, and school board protests. These kids, many in their senior year, were not fighting for themselves — they were fighting the countless other vulnerable kids following behind them.

Sadly, we ultimately lost that fight for Parkview, along with the three other inner-city schools listed above. In their place, a new North Hamilton High School is currently under construction — the charming prospect of a new mega school with students being bused in from all across the inner city.

But what else have we lost?

The safe and supported transition of one stage of schooling to the next

provides kids with a sense of certainty, and assurance that your community is valued and worth keeping together. This is why uprooting students goes well beyond the bricks-and-mortar-related issues of demolishing old buildings in favour of new ones. It reaches into and disrupts the core experience of education and its impact on young people finding their place of belonging and identity.

I can't help but note that those of us making these decisions today to close schools and bus students out of their communities were never disrupted by similar debates while we were growing up. And I think about that privilege — the freedom to explore my neighbourhood before the streetlights came on, and my evolving awareness that, as I grew, my world would gradually grow and extend beyond those few square city blocks — so many of us had in our formative years, leading up to these recent school closures.

I think about Jordan and about all the kids forced to leave the community schools that recognized their uniqueness and helped create for them a sense of belonging and appreciation of their strengths; the kids being sent back to the mainstream schools and classrooms (or to a new "mega school" replacement) that had originally failed them.

I wonder when they are older and are asked "what school did you go to?" how they will answer? ●

Councillor **MATTHEW GREEN** was born in Hamilton. He is a graduate of Political Science from Acadia University, attended McMaster University and received a certificate of Executive Education and Governance for Non-Profits from Harvard. Matthew was elected to City Council in 2014. He has championed workers' rights, dignified housing, has strongly opposed carding and racial profiling, and has made Hamilton the first City in Ontario to regulate and licence payday lenders. Matthew is proud to live in the community he serves with his spouse Jayde and the joy of his life, his son Langston.

ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.chch.com/hamilton-students-rally-around-former-parkview-principal/>
2. <https://www.thespec.com/news-story/4578595-parkview-secondary-calls-it-a-day-a-sad-day/>
3. <https://raisethehammer.org/article/2190/the-parkview-institute-defining-hamiltons-schools-as-community-hubs-model>



HELPING NEIGHBOURHOODS WALK TO SCHOOL

BY SONJA MACDONALD AND PAUL SHAKER

Photo courtesy of Civicplan



THE CHALLENGE

TODAY, FEWER AND FEWER STUDENTS ARE WALKING OR CYCLING TO SCHOOL. FROM 1986-2011, THE RATE AT WHICH GREATER TORONTO AND HAMILTON AREA (GTHA) STUDENTS 11-13 YEARS OF AGE WERE DRIVEN TO SCHOOL DOUBLED, ACCORDING TO A METROLINX STUDY. AT THE SAME TIME, THE NUMBER WALKING AND CYCLING FELL FROM 62% TO LESS THAN HALF.

As the province reports, this decline in levels of physical activity has significant implications for the health of the region's youth, leaving our students susceptible to diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Encouraging kids to use active transportation at a young age does not just benefit them now; the study suggested that it helps them develop healthy habits that

last through the rest of their lives.

Walking to school also has other, less obvious, positive effects on children and youth. In 2016, Rod Buliung, the lead researcher on the Metrolinx study, told the *Globe and Mail* that walking is also associated with better academic performance and socialization. When kids walk to school with parents or guardians, it provides an opportunity to connect,

to discuss their coursework, and to talk through any challenges they may be facing at school. It is also a chance to talk and socialize with friends outside of the direct school environment.

There is an additional benefit to encouraging more walking and cycling to school. With more students being dropped off at school each day, there is an increase in car traffic around school zones. While drivers arrive from many separate locations, the school is the focal point, where car traffic converges for a brief period each morning and afternoon and then disperses. Research suggests that this increased traffic creates dangerous situations and may lead to more collisions with pedestrians and cyclists.

INCREASING ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION THROUGH SAFER STREETS

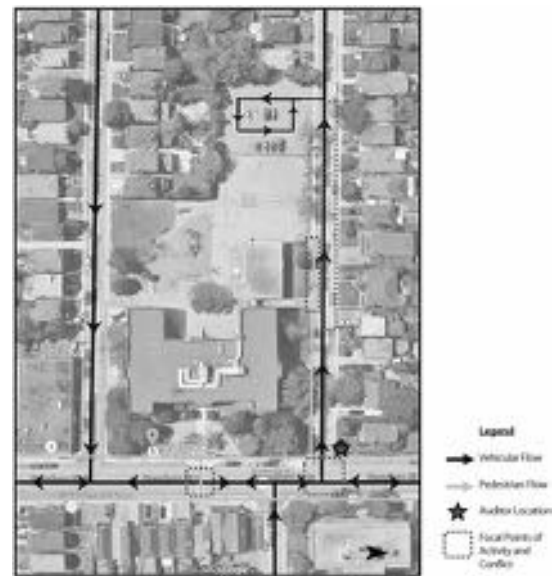
Working with local partners, Civicplan undertook a study of four schools spread across the city of Hamilton — two urban and two suburban — and made recommendations on how to improve active transportation. A key observation across all schools, regardless of location, was an interest by parents and school officials in facilitating more walking to school. However, in all locations the primary factor that needed to be addressed was street safety.

Decreasing danger from traffic congestion is not the only factor at play in encouraging active transportation to school. Promoting a culture of walking and cycling, including walking school

INVENTORY



CIRCULATION



Photos courtesy of Civicplan

buses, bike programs and other initiatives, is important for helping develop active habits. This can extend to kids who are differently abled or who have challenges walking as well. That said, the first step to encouraging students and parents to walk and cycle is ensuring the routes they will take are safe for people of all abilities.

ENGAGE AND OBSERVE

In the Hamilton context, the first step of the active transportation study was to engage with the schools by meeting with each principal to learn about their perspectives on the issues and their areas of concern. This feedback was invaluable, as the principal has the on-the-ground knowledge and perspective that cannot be gained through just a few visits to a school. School populations are diverse and gaining an understanding of some of the special needs of students can help inform an understanding of active transportation challenges. This feedback informed the observation phase and highlighted some of the specific issues facing students.

Observation was the next step, which began with an inventory of the school and surrounding public infrastructure. For example, are there bike racks and bike lanes? What sort of pedestrian and vehicle infrastructure is available (e.g. crosswalks, kiss and ride drop offs)? Once this information was mapped out, the transportation patterns at each school during

the morning drop-off time was observed.

Central to this was observing the flow of students into the school, including pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers. Some surprising and unsafe practices were witnessed: cars pulling onto the sidewalk, double or triple parking, and crossing guards regularly dodging cars. It was clear from these observations that students regularly faced unsafe conditions due to the heavy flow of vehicles into the school site.

In the final phase, a series of recommendations were presented to help increase active transportation to the school. These recommendations addressed the pinch points and problem areas that were observed, often resulting from the nexus of car, foot, and bicycle traffic all using the same points of access to the schools at once. The goal of these recommendations was to provide actionable interventions that reflected the unique conditions of each school.

A general observation for all schools was that a community solution was often required. Different stakeholders, such as the municipality, school board, individual school, and parents, all had a role to play in the community solution. For example, municipalities have the jurisdiction over street improvements on public property, such as cross walks and bike lanes. The schools are responsible for configuring infrastructure on school property to encourage more active transportation, such as providing bike parking and limiting

car parking. School boards can help by changing school start times to allow parents time to walk kids to school before going to work. Finally, parents and caregivers have a responsibility to help make walking to school a daily habit.

CONCLUSION

Increasing active transportation to schools is one concrete way to improve students' levels of physical activity. Addressing issues related to transportation safety around schools ensures that neighbourhoods become healthier and safer for both pedestrians and drivers. In the Hamilton study, regardless of location of the neighbourhoods, urban or suburban, the desire to increase walkability was similar. However, each school in each neighbourhood has its own unique circumstances requiring unique solutions. Through engagement with stakeholders and observing how a neighbourhood comes to a school each morning, the specific needs and conditions of each school and its surroundings can be identified, providing the feedback decision makers need to create safer, healthier communities. ●

SONJA MACDONALD and **PAUL SHAKER** are Principals with Civicplan, which provides innovative community planning, public engagement and research services to the public, non-profit, and private sectors. For more information this school study visit <http://civicplan.ca>



WHAT DOES THE NEW BC GOVERNMENT HAVE IN STORE FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

BY PATTI BACCHUS



THIS FALL, AFTER YEARS OF BUDGETING-CUTTING AND HUNDREDS OF LOST TEACHING POSITIONS ACROSS THE PROVINCE, BC SCHOOLS FACED AN UNFAMILIAR — BUT WELCOME — CHALLENGE. THEY HAD TO HIRE HUNDREDS OF NEW TEACHERS AND FIND CLASSROOMS FOR THEM AS A RESULT OF THE BC TEACHERS' FEDERATION'S (BCTF) LANDMARK SUPREME COURT OF CANADA WIN IN ITS LONG-RUNNING BATTLE WITH THE FORMER BC LIBERAL GOVERNMENT OVER CONTRACT STRIPPING.

But that was just part of the major shift for BC's public schools — the summer saw a change in government from the Christy Clark Liberals to John Horgan's NDP, and a promise to make investing in public education a key priority.

DIFFICULT DAYS FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION UNDER THE BC LIBERAL GOVERNMENT

When the Liberals swept to power in BC under Gordon Campbell in 2001, they wasted no time passing essential-service legislation that made it difficult for teachers to strike. Campbell appointed a brash, young education minister named Christy Clark. The province legislated a new teachers' contract in early 2002 that stripped previously negotiated contract clauses dealing with class size and

composition and specialist teacher ratios, and prevented teacher unions from negotiating these issues in the future.

The legislated contract included a 7.5% salary increase over three years — but the province didn't fund the increases. That left the province's 60 school boards to figure out how to cover the cost out of their already-stretched operating budgets that rely on — you guessed it — provincial funding. BC school boards do not have any taxing authority so, aside from revenue from fee-paying international students and renting out buildings, they depend almost completely on provincial government funding.

That enabled — or depending how you look at it, forced — cash-strapped school boards to cut teaching positions and create larger classes with more students with special needs, and to reduce “non-enrolling” specialist teachers, including school librarians,

counsellors, English language learner teachers and special education resource teachers to balance their annual budgets. Under the BC School Act, school boards must submit balanced budgets to the Minister of Education each year. If they don't, the minister can fire them.

That happened twice under the BC Liberal government. The first time was 2012, when the Cowichan School Board on Vancouver Island refused to pass a balanced budget due to the cuts required. In 2016, the Vancouver School Board refused (by a five-to-four vote) to approve a budget that contained millions of dollars of cuts that directly affected students, but cutting programs and teaching positions. In both cases the boards were replaced by government-appointed trustees until new boards were elected.

The result was 15 years of budget cutting by school boards across BC, the closure of hundreds of schools, the accelerated deterioration of aging and often seismically unsafe school buildings, and overcrowded schools in growing communities where funding for new schools was grossly inadequate to keep up with the need for new classrooms. As parent groups were left to fundraise to fill gaps, inequities between schools grew: some were able to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars and secure grant funding, while schools in lower-income communities struggled to raise small amounts. This period also saw three teachers' strikes, including the longest one in provincial history, in 2014.

In addition, this marked the beginning of a long and expensive legal challenge by the BCTF against the legislation — a challenge finally resolved in the BCTF's favour by the Supreme Court of Canada in November 2016.

The outcome of the union's landmark victory was an agreement between the former Christy Clark government and the BCTF requiring school districts to abide by the contract language that existed prior to the 2002 legislation. (That language varies among BC's 60 school districts, as it used to be negotiated locally.)

The BC Liberal government promised to fund that agreement with an additional \$330 million for more teachers in the 2017/18 school year, and up to another \$30 million for overhead costs associated with adding additional staff and classrooms.

Other BC Liberal policy changes — like the adoption of school-choice legislation that allows students to enroll in schools outside of their communities — left schools in some lower-income neighbourhoods struggling with declining enrollment and the resulting risk of closure, while schools in more affluent communities filled up.

A COURT DECISION AND A NEW GOVERNMENT HERALD A HOPEFUL ERA FOR BC'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

BC voters sent a conflicted message when they went to the polls on May 9th to elect a new provincial government. They elected 43 Liberals, 41 New Democrats and three Green party candidates to serve as their members of the legislated assembly (MLAs).

Premier Christy Clark tried to hold on to government, but lost a confidence vote in the legislature in late June. She asked BC Lieutenant Governor Judith Guichon to call another election in what some described as a desperate attempt to cling to power. Guichon declined and invited NDP leader John Horgan to form a government.

With the support of the Green party and its three MLAs, via a deal called a "confidence and supply agreement," Horgan took office in July, ending 16 years of BC Liberal government. He moved quickly to signal a change in direction for BC's public school system, where per-student funding has fallen to among the lowest in Canada since the Liberals took office.

THE BCTF RESPONDED POSITIVELY TO THE BUDGET UPDATE: "...THE GOVERNMENT IS FULFILLING ITS COMMITMENT TO FUND THE THOUSANDS OF NEW TEACHING POSITIONS THAT FLOW FROM OUR SUPREME COURT OF CANADA WIN. THE BUDGET ALSO INCLUDES NEW FUNDING FOR IMMEDIATE SPACE NEEDS IN SCHOOLS AND A PLAN TO INJECT EVEN MORE FUNDS INTO PUBLIC EDUCATION AS ENROLLMENT INCREASES."

POSITIVE STEPS

Both the NDP and Green party made K-12 education a priority in their election platforms leading up to the May election. The NDP promised to "properly fund classrooms and school equipment" and provide stability in classrooms. The Green party pledged large funding increases over several years. Both said they'd make adult education courses fee-free — a promise they've already kept. They also both promised a review of BC's per-student education funding model (a complex process that won't happen quickly, but is long overdue).

Just weeks after taking office, Horgan announced the elimination of tuition fees for adult basic education courses and English language learning (ELL) programs for "adult" students 16 years old and up. Those courses had been free for all adult students until 2014, when the previous government cut funding for students who had graduated. That meant students who needed to upgrade their high school credits to get into post-secondary programs had to pay as much as \$550 in tuition fees per course.

Horgan's first throne speech, which coincided with the first week of school, promised to "restore proper funding to schools to give students the resources and supports they need to succeed." Shortly after, the September 11 provincial budget interim update (a full budget is expected to be tabled in February) pledged a \$681 million increase for kindergarten to grade 12 education system over

three years, which the government says includes “\$521 million to improve classroom supports for children for up to 3,500 new teaching positions, \$160 million for enrollment growth and other pressures, along with \$50 million in capital funding to provide the resources needed to help all children succeed.”

The BCTF responded positively to the budget update:

...the government is fulfilling its commitment to fund the thousands of new teaching positions that flow from our Supreme Court of Canada win. The budget also includes new funding for immediate space needs in schools and a plan to inject even more funds into public education as enrollment increases.

For too long, BC schools struggled under the weight of a BC Liberal government that underfunded rising costs and never met the financial obligations they downloaded onto school districts. After 16 years of cuts and conflict, BC teachers will be heartened to finally see a budget that makes public education a priority.

The provincial group that represents parents — the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC) — was more measured in its response, calling the update a positive step forward but cautioning that more needs to be done. “District parent representatives from across the province tell us that their districts need additional flexible funding to fulfill other local needs such as more educational assistants, custodial services and occupational and physio therapist,” BCCPAC president Jen Mezei said in a prepared statement on September 19. “Too many students with special needs are being scheduled for a shortened day due to the lack of support staff; support staff play a vital role as part of the team that works with students who have special needs to create an environment of inclusion for fair and equitable education.”

SOME DISAPPOINTMENTS

There’s a tremendous pent-up demand for billions in capital spending. Despite the former government’s 2005 promise to seismically upgrade all of BC’s “high risk” schools by 2020, the Clark government failed to fund dozens of schools that are still at high risk of significant structural failure in an earthquake. Districts like BC’s largest — Surrey — are living with overcrowded schools and thousands of students being taught in portables as provincial funding for new schools has failed to keep pace with population growth.

There also a massive backlog of deferred maintenance work that accumulated under the BC Liberals as cash-strapped boards put off repairs and upgrades to their aging school buildings. More than half of provincial school districts have unsafe lead levels in their drinking water and many have resorted to trying to flush their pipes by running the water each day — a less than ideal solution.

Despite the NDP and Green’s pre-election promises of money for seismic upgrades and new schools, the BC budget update didn’t have much to say at all about capital funding for new schools or upgrades to old or seismically unsafe ones though, in fairness, these are early days for the new government.

The provincial organization that represents public school boards, the BC School Trustees Association (BCSTA), responded lukewarmly to Horgan’s interim budget update. In a statement released on September 12, president Gordon Swan said “BCTSA sees promise in this initial budget from the new government, even though it falls short of addressing all of the concerns we raised during the spring election.”

Swan adds in the BCSTA statement that there needs to be further investment in 2018 operating and capital budgets if government is to fulfill its election promises. The BCSTA has been advocating for funding for school construction to provide new schools, replacements and seismic upgrades and an increased to school board operating budgets to address local issues, including special education, the unique needs of rural schools and adequate funding for learning resources.

NO CHANGE TO PRIVATE SCHOOL FUNDING POLICY

In BC, private schools get per-student operating grants that range from 35 to 50% of what public schools receive. (Schools that spend the same or less per student as public schools get 50%, while elite schools with higher tuition and higher per student spending are eligible for 35% of the public schools’ amount.) That rankles many, as private schools can screen and select who they admit, and exclude students. Some of the elite schools boast lavish, country-club like campuses, small class sizes and a rich range of academics, athletics and fine arts programs that are the envy of many in the public system.

It’s a political hot potato the parties tried to steer clear of during the campaign to avoid alienating voters who send their kids to private schools and large faith groups that may vote based largely on this issue. As a result, BC’s 40-year-old policy of giving public funding to private and faith-based schools looks like it’s here to stay under the Horgan government, despite pressure from the BCTF and some education advocates to stop it. Horgan’s September budget update included a \$40.4 million boost to private school funding that brings their 2017/18 school year total to \$398,500,000 to keep up with growing private school enrollment.

But some are more optimistic: Michelle Stack, an associate professor in the University of British Columbia’s Department of Educational Studies, says she’s very hopeful about the new government overall and would like to see it at least stop funding elite, expensive private schools that have admissions tests and exclusive application processes.

In its 2018 BC budget consultation brief, the BCTF calls for the phase-out of private school funding, starting with the elite schools in the funding category that receive 35% of the public school per-student grants.

SCHOOL CHOICE POLICY

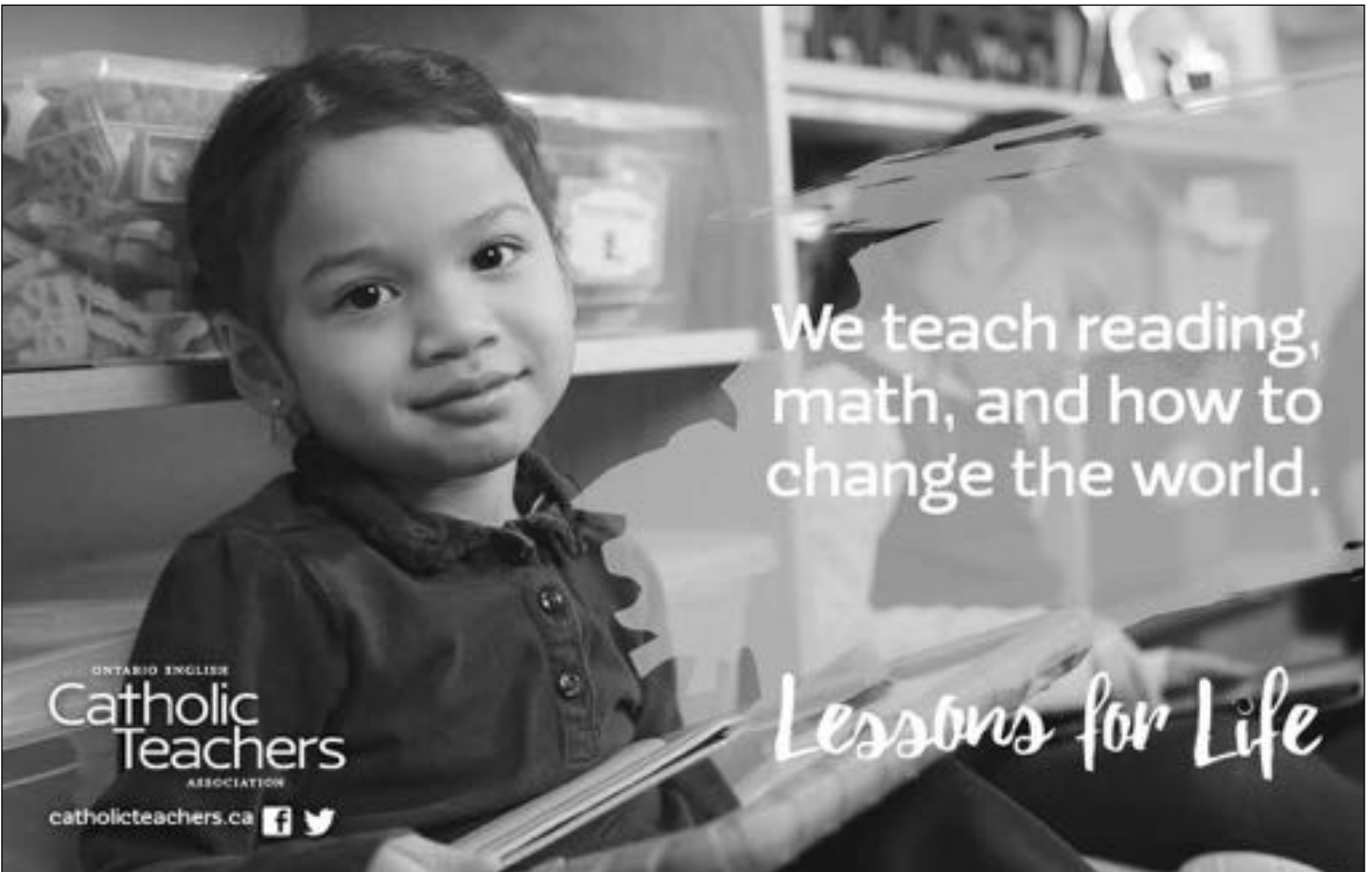
In 2002, the BC Liberal government brought in school choice policy changes that allow students to attend any school they want so long as the school has space for them. Previously, students were required to attend their “catchment” school in their neighbourhood,



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unless they had specific permission to attend a school in another catchment. While priority is given to “in-catchment” students, this has resulted in enrollment declines in schools in some lower-income communities in Vancouver, and more students attending schools outside their neighbourhoods. This existing school choice policy didn’t get much attention at all during the election campaign, but it is viewed by many public education advocates as something that needs to be revisited because it increases inequities between public schools.

CHILD CARE

Child care was a key issue in last spring’s BC election campaign, and the BC NDP promised to bring in a publicly-funded \$10-a-day child care plan. Affordable, accessible, quality public child care could also help close the readiness gap between students of different social classes, and it would enable parents to upgrade their education and enable them to get better-paying employment, which could result in less financial stress for BC families. “We know that when parents improve their financial situation there are positive effects on kids and their educational and health outcomes,” says Stack. “We pay at one point or another. It makes more sense to invest in kids when they’re young than to pay later in the form of health and other social costs. When kids grow up in a society that cares about them, they are more likely to care about society.”

With so much evidence that providing access to quality early care enables children to make a smooth transition to school, BC families and child care advocates are anxious to see how quickly the new government can move forward on this file after it was left out of the September interim budget update. There is some uncertainty, though; while the BC Green party supports universal, affordable, quality child care, Green leader Andrew Weaver indicated in September that he will be looking for some compromises on how it’s rolled out, as his party does not specifically support the \$10-a-day plan.

OPTIMISM AND IDEAS

Horgan’s appointment of Judy Darcy as Minister of Mental Health and Addictions is an early sign the new government is committed to taking meaningful action on key issues that impact children and their families. Stack says she is also pleased to see the new government show strong signs of recognizing that education is interconnected with issues like housing and poverty, noting it’s

well-established that hunger and housing instability make it hard for kids to learn, no matter how good their teachers are. “Taking family poverty seriously and taking steps to address it will have a positive impact on the outcomes for students in public schools,” Stack says. “Government needs to connect the dots on how what happens to children outside of school affects them when they’re in school.” Meanwhile, discussion — and measured optimism — continues.

There’s no question that one of the new government’s biggest challenges will be managing the public’s expectations, particularly on the public education file, which has suffered greatly under the BC Liberal government. It will take time to change direction and there will be difficult decisions to make along the way. Almost all the new funding committed to education so far will go to covering the costs of the teachers’ contracts that were restored by the Supreme Court of Canada.

Parents are already speaking out about the need to do better in terms of supporting students with special needs and are urging the new government to accelerate the seismic upgrade program and build new schools after years of the previous government’s funding delays. The BCCPAC’s October brief called for stable, adequate and predictable funding with increases in operating funding, increased, targeted funding for students with special needs, increased capital funding to accelerate seismic upgrades, build new schools where needed and maintain aging buildings. The parent group is also calling for a review of the per-student funding model that was brought in by the BC Liberal government — something the Horgan government has also promised to address.

It’s expensive stuff and it’s important to get it right. The promised review of the funding formula will require extensive public and stakeholder consultation and could take a year or longer. Meanwhile parents and educators want to see improved teaching and learning conditions sooner rather than later. It’s an exciting and hopeful time for public education in BC — but progress may not come quickly enough for some...and not at all for the generation of kids who went through school under the previous administration. Here’s to better days ahead. ●

PATTI BACCHUS is a long-time public education advocate who chaired the Vancouver School Board from 2008-2014 and is a member of the Broadbent Institute’s Board of Directors. She writes about K-12 education for the Georgia Straight newspaper.

CORRECTING COURSE

A BLUEPRINT THAT MEETS ONTARIO'S
(AND ONTARIANS') EDUCATION NEEDS

BY HUGH MACKENZIE





FALL 2017 MARKED THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FUNDING FORMULA FOR ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ONTARIO, WHICH WAS INTRODUCED IN 1997 AS ONE OF THE SIGNATURE PIECES OF LEGISLATION IN THE FIRST TERM OF THE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT LED BY THEN PREMIER MIKE HARRIS.

FOR THE HARRIS GOVERNMENT, THE CONTROL THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT GAINED IN BILL 160 WAS NOT AN ABSTRACTION. IT WAS CONTROL WITH PURPOSE. AS WAS THE CASE WITH MANY OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES IN ITS FIRST TERM, THE OVERRIDING OBJECTIVE OF EDUCATION FINANCE REFORM WAS TO FREE UP FISCAL CAPACITY FOR ITS CENTRAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN PROMISE: A 30% REDUCTION IN ONTARIO'S PERSONAL INCOME TAX.

IT ALSO SUPPORTED OTHER KEY POLICY GOALS AND PRECONCEPTIONS. BY LIMITING AVAILABLE RESOURCES, IT DROVE THE SYSTEM TOWARDS A NOSTALGIC VISION OF A SIMPLER APPROACH TO EDUCATION DIMLY RECALLED FROM THE 1950S, AND FOCUSED ON THE BASICS OF READING, WRITING AND ARITHMETIC. IT CONSTITUTED A FORCEFUL ARTICULATION OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S LACK OF RESPECT FOR LOCALLY ELECTED SCHOOL BOARDS AND DISTRUST IN THEIR DECISIONS. AND ITS EMPHASIS ON EQUALITY IN FUNDING ADDRESSED THE POLITICALLY IMPORTANT ISSUE OF RESOURCE DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN RURAL

AND URBAN SCHOOL BOARDS AND BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND CATHOLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS.

EVEN AS WE ARE APPROACHING 15 YEARS OF A LIBERAL PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT, REMARKABLY LITTLE HAS CHANGED IN THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE HARRIS GOVERNMENT'S VISION FOR THE FUNDING AND CONTROL OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM. THE REVISED APPROACH TO FUNDING PUBLIC SCHOOLS WAS PREMISED ON AN EDUCATION FUNDING FORMULA THAT WAS FLAWED FROM DAY ONE AND, WHILE SUBSEQUENT GOVERNMENTS MADE MINOR TWEAKS TO THE FORMULA, EDUCATION IN ONTARIO REMAINS WOEFULLY UNDERFUNDED.

THIS IS NOT TO DENY IMPROVEMENTS. REDUCTIONS IN CLASS SIZES IN PRIMARY GRADES, THE PROVISION OF ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS, AND THE INTRODUCTION OF FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN HAVE HAD A MATERIAL POSITIVE IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

IN OTHER AREAS, NOTHING HAS CHANGED. THE MARGINALIZATION OF SCHOOL BOARDS IN EDUCATION GOVERNANCE HAS EFFECTIVELY BEEN CODIFIED IN THE CURRENT COLLECTIVE BARGAINING REGIME. THE HARRIS GOVERNMENT'S INSISTENCE ON EQUALITY RATHER THAN EQUITY AS THE BASIS FOR FUNDING CONTINUES ESSENTIALLY UNCHANGED. AND WHILE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IS NO LONGER A PRIME SOURCE OF REVENUE FOR TAX CUTS, THE FUNDAMENTAL

FISCAL GAP CREATED BY THE HARRIS GOVERNMENT'S TAX CUTS IN THE FIRST PLACE PERSISTS.

IT'S TIME FOR A NEW FUNDING FORMULA – ONE THAT PRESSES THE RESET BUTTON ON WHAT THE OBJECTIVES OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM SHOULD BE. IT'S TIME TO ARTICULATE A NEW SET OF GOALS FOR ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ONTARIO THAT LAYS OUT A UNIFYING VISION FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS – ONE THAT STARTS BY ASKING: WHAT DOES A SCHOOL NEED IN ORDER TO FULFILL ITS FUNCTION?

NEW OBJECTIVES FOR FUNDING ONTARIO'S EDUCATION SYSTEM SHOULD INCLUDE MORE TRANSPARENT AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY; ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY EDUCATION, NO MATTER WHERE YOU LIVE; GREATER SUPPORT FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS IN SCHOOLS; HEALTHY SCHOOLS THAT ARE THE CENTRE OF THE COMMUNITY; ELIMINATION OF THE SCHOOL MAINTENANCE DEFICITS; ADEQUATE FUNDING TO MEET THESE OBJECTIVES; AND EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING – THAT IS, REGULAR REVIEWS TO ENSURE THE NEW FUNDING FORMULA IS WORKING TO MEET THESE OBJECTIVES.

IT'S TIME FOR A COURSE CORRECTION. ●

HUGH MACKENZIE is an economic consultant and CCPA Research Associate and the author of Shortchanging Ontario Students: An overview and assessment of education funding in Ontario.



NOT A PLATITUDE ON A PLACARD

THE LINK BETWEEN TEACHING CONDITIONS AND LEARNING CONDITIONS

BY SETH BERNSTEIN

If you visit enough education picket lines, or view enough education memes, you'll notice one of the more frequent slogans that appears around crisis time — “Teachers’ Working Conditions = Students’ Learning Conditions”. In the media narrative that foments conflict in these moments, any suggestion that “greedy teachers” want something more than money and benefits is typically dismissed. But what does that expression really mean? How do teachers’ working conditions — class size, support staff numbers, and salaries — connect with the student experience, and how is this represented in bargaining? Can the learning experience for students actually suffer due to a lack of bargaining?

CLASS SIZE

Public education is the single most important element in the maintenance of a democratic system... If... it [is] difficult to capture and hold the attention of students, then what and how they are taught is of little importance. What matters is the intensity of teaching put into them. We could do worse than to reduce classes from the typical twenty to thirty students down to ten. This would mean hiring more teachers and our public budgets tell us there is no money. A more important point is that there'll be even less money in a society of functionally illiterate citizens.

— John Ralston Saul, *The Doubter's Companion*

Though governments in Canada have tried to remove class size and composition (a reference to the range of student special needs) from the bargaining table (see the BC Liberals in 2002), the Supreme Court has recently affirmed teachers’ rights to bargain both. This is a critical decision. It is in

this space that unions can best counter austerity measures desired by governments, as it is much easier to find public support for smaller class sizes than it is to find support for a salary increase. In Ontario, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) recently successfully bargained down class caps for the Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK) program and, like other education unions, has been instrumental in establishing reduced caps at the grade levels.

As a parent of a kid who went through the Full Day Kindergarten program, ETFO’s recent cap deal came too late for my family. Left to the Ontario Liberal government, the FDK program featured essentially a limitless cap on class size as long as there were proportionate educators in the room (typically a teacher and an early childhood educator). Though we were grateful for the seamless day, the class size of 34 small children had clear, negative impacts throughout the year. We heard stories from other parents that included urinary tract infections due to their child not bothering with long bathroom lines, violent incidents, and overextended staff asking for assignments other than FDK. When ETFO entered into negotiations, one of their priorities was a hard cap on the FDK classes, and they managed to win a limit of 30.

As a high school teacher, I know what kind of impact class size can have on many different factors. But this anecdotal yet common understanding amongst educators has been clouded in the public eye over the past couple of decades by research that has called into question the impact of class size on achievement outcomes. Research by New Zealand professor John Hattie has been widely cited to suggest that class size does not matter...though he was actually suggesting that it matters less than a few other factors. Famously, Malcolm Gladwell suggested an inverted U-shaped relationship, where class size reductions can have a benefit if the class size starts large, but too small a class may be detrimental.

Recent research has supported teachers' implicit understanding: class size does impact achievement. But, missing from this discussion is the narrow measure of achievement that Hattie and Gladwell use (typically standardized test scores), and the holistic aspects of public education not captured by these measures. People for Education has called for "measuring what matters", including health, citizenship, socio-emotional skills, creativity, and quality learning environments. Without delving into whether or not it is necessary to attempt to quantify every aspect of education to satisfy the current technocratic paradigm that deems that only what is measured is what matters, it seems reasonable to assume that smaller class sizes would help with these aspects.

I'll offer an example; I teach at a non-semestered school where I see students for two periods of an average of 1 hour and 20 minutes each week. In my audio production classes, where students work on creative projects from their workstations and studio, this leaves me with a maximum of about five minutes per week per student in a class of 31 (that's the current cap. Rules permit up to 34 with

"flex factors" used by some boards — 10% of a school's classes can exceed cap by 10%). Cut the number of students in half, and I can get up to five minutes more per lesson, or 10 minutes more per week. This is time where I can sit with the student, listen to what they are working on, offer immediate feedback, check in with them and get a sense of how they are doing emotionally, and have a chance to really forge a connection. I can, and have, managed class sizes of over 30.

Don't get me wrong — students will generally learn and get their credit. With or without that extra 10 minutes per week, their achievement scores may be comparable...but this comes at a cost. The creative aspect of their projects may not be as strong. They may not feel as connected to me or to the classroom community. Some with higher support needs may not get as much of my personal attention as I would have liked to give them. And the pace that I have to maintain to engage with them at that minimal time budget can be punishing. It is hard to have that many micro-interactions in a workday, where every word you say matters.

With larger classes, not only am I not physically available to them as much, but I'm also at risk of being less emotionally available to them. And of course this assumes that all of the technology we use in the course is running smoothly. Schools used to have onsite technology support, but that was phased out years ago, and we now submit work tickets centrally that get fulfilled within an unpredictable time window.

Class size makes a huge difference in areas that are perhaps less visible during the school day. In high school, where a teacher's maximum student cap is 180 across six courses, 30 minutes of marking per month per student (roughly three assessments) totals



Ronda Allan, OSSIF/FEESO

90 hours per month. Lesson planning, meetings, mark inputs and extracurricular supervision take place during other times in the day. In theory, preparation time — always a point of tension in bargaining — provides 1 hr and 20 minutes per day to plan lessons (and, as a side note, the stereotype of a veteran teacher who recycles lessons is not one that I've come across in schools very frequently). This time can be eroded by on-call supervisions for teachers who need coverage, often to supervise extracurriculars.

These interruptions and daily realities explain why, for most, an intact preparation period is not enough time to prepare for three lessons the next day. This is why, in the late 90s, when Mike Harris attempted to have teachers teach seven out of eight periods, instead of six of eight, there was outright rebellion. It is also why bargaining on-call coverage language is so critical.

Bargaining class size is a critical mechanism for frontline workers to increase the intensity of the teaching and support that students receive.

SUPPORT STAFF

Education unions do not only represent teachers. Schools have office, custodial, and support staff, and all are critical to the functioning of a school not just as a location that provides services, but as a community hub as well. While decision-makers have bent to some pressure at the bargaining table to meet federation demands about teacher/student ratios, the lure of austerity budgeting has tended to hit other school-based staff hard over the past decade, with impacts that vary from region to region. Management's rationale of cutting non-classroom staff in order to "protect the classroom" grossly misrepresents the interwoven fabric of a school. Within the Toronto District School Board, it is not uncommon to hear of office staff reductions in schools of about 40-60% over the past 15 years.

At our school, and at others, the office staff are the frontline connection point for our at-risk students. They are the ones who can often flag a student in crisis. Fewer caring adults in the building, and workplace attrition forcing us to adopt "robo-calling" for student absences, impacts how we can support students who are in crisis. Phone calls home by an office staff member to communicate or investigate an absence offered clearer insight to help with school-based support, and often created a human connection between school and home.



There is another spillover effect: with fewer staff in the office, workload is downloaded to teachers, and uploaded to principals and vice principals, who in some cases may effectively act as office administrators, even answering phone calls and collecting school-based forms. These consequences are visible, but it is the invisible ones, with their impact on wellness of the community, that cut the deepest.

Support staff consist of the psychologists, social workers, early childhood educators and education assistants who support our students in the school (public health nurses were cut). At our school, we see our psychologists and social workers for a half-day a week. They often rotate through from year-to-year, creating a stream of new faces with little continuity for the student support team or students. Cutting these positions at a time when mental health awareness is at an all-time high betrays the core motives of decision-makers.

In an applied classroom at the secondary level, it is not uncommon for many students to have individualized education plans (IEPs). To meet some of the stipulations of those legally-binding IEPs, like 10-minutes of one-on-one time each class, a teacher would need to have three full-time education assistants (EAs) in the class with them. Instead, there might typically be two EAs per school.

Custodial staff have also been cut. Most schools are operating with a fraction of the caretakers they used to have a decade ago. Though they do their best to cover the shortfall, there are daily gaps that simply don't get met, with implications for the school as both a building, and as a learning space.

Bargaining support staff levels is integral to student well-being. In Ontario, some of the cuts have been slowed or partially reversed during recent bargaining sessions that have seen the education unions focus on this issue at the table.

WAGES AND BENEFITS

How much does an unemployed teacher or an unemployed, university-educated potential teacher really cost the state if integrated accounting methods are used? There are the direct social costs; the loss of a long-term investment in their training; the removal of their powers of consumption from the economy, and of their contribution to property values. Does all of that add up to less than the salary of a teacher? This is not a question which our systems of public accounting can entertain.

— John Ralston Saul, *The Doubter's Companion*

Education workers can internalize neoliberal narratives so as to not "upset" the public; this has been reflected in the past by coming to the bargaining table with pre-emptive offers of a wage freeze, and going to great pains to establish that "this [bargaining] is not about the money". I believe it's a mistake to operate within this paradigm; for one, bargaining is *almost always* about the money, even when not a salaries' issue — reducing class size costs money, for example. It also feeds into the race-to-the-bottom that austerity drives.

Most (though by no means all) of us are relatively well-paid. Other workers should have good remuneration, too. Neoliberal governments have been so effective at creating a disingenuous zero-sum bargaining framework, where any raise “must come out of the funding for students & classrooms”, that we collectively forget to question how a general suppression of wages and cutting of public service budgets is supposed to in any way benefit us. Education workers need to be active in the anti-austerity fight, and offer pervasive solidarity to workers in their communities, for the neoliberal plan to be countered effectively.

Teachers who are paid a good wage are able to focus on their jobs. In California, where teachers’ salaries have been relatively stagnant, and where housing costs can be high, reports have emerged of teachers moonlighting as Uber drivers, and Uber directly recruiting teachers to work, during evenings and weekends. In Ontario, salaries are a bit higher, and housing costs are generally less cumbersome, though some education workers lower on the grid, especially those in support staff bargaining units, might find the stories coming out of the States resonating with their experience if they live in areas with higher costs of living.

Bargaining good salaries and benefits as part of working conditions enables education workers to focus on their jobs without having to take on other work. And, contrary to the corporate discourse job security and a seniority-based grid step salary system can be quite motivating for staff: it is easy to find creative energy and patience when not stressed about money and precarity, and it is much easier to work collaboratively — essential in education — when not competing with colleagues for salary increases.

POSITIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Department Heads used to be senior, experienced staff who were paid a significant stipend and given a period in their timetable to support their department. In the early 2000s, what used to be Department Heads became Positions of Responsibility (POR), whose working terms are still bargained locally. If there was an area of education where a window into a world of management rights-only is possible, the POR model would be it.

When Curriculum Leaders (CLs), who were once Department Heads, were created, they worked for less money, and without the extra preparation time. Today, Curriculum Leaders are becoming Assistant Curriculum Leaders (ACLs), who work for half of the money of CLs (approximately \$2,500/year), with no extra preparation time.

Management likes this model for a variety of reasons: it gives them access to a significant percentage of their teaching staff with collective agreement language that allows for administrative direction. It also allows them, to a certain extent, to circumvent seniority hiring and hand-pick candidates. Additionally, an ACL may be tied to multiple departments representing a large number of staff who perform various duties: principals will often use them to absorb some of the other school-based cutbacks, such as tech support and specialized program administration.

In short, ACLs are full-time teachers with a very busy core job, and a demanding part-time job that pays very little. It is hard to see how students are well-served with this model.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

There are a range of future challenges that connect with supporting students that will end up at the bargaining table. Here are just a couple of them:

E-Learning: Though there is no evidence suggesting that e-Learning is best for meeting a diverse range of socio-emotional, active citizenship and wide-outcomes academic goals, the province and boards have signaled intent to expand access to e-Learning in Ontario. The lure is two-fold: current collective agreements often have a two-tiered wage system that incentivizes the lower cost-per-credit delivery of e-Learning in summer and night school; and decision-makers envision larger class sizes and reduced physical school space requirements.

Classroom integration and high school destreaming: There is plenty of evidence that suggests that classroom integration at the elementary level, where students with special needs are integrated into regular classrooms, can be more beneficial than creating standalone special needs classrooms. Likewise, there are equity-based and pedagogical reasons for getting rid of streaming into Applied or Academic programs that happens at the high school level. However, there is little evidence that suggests the province and boards are willing to fund the staff numbers required to make integration and destreaming truly work. There is also fear that the raised class caps for destreamed classrooms would result in an overall increase in class sizes across the province.

CONCLUSION

Because of the impact on students, the public can often view bargaining as a process by which education workers are acting out of complete self-interest, to the detriment of their children. Bargaining, however, provides a powerful forum for the expressions of the collective insights and wishes of frontline workers in a place where that collective action can be harnessed to win improvements that have a direct impact on student well-being in the classroom. It’s a connection that education unions need to work on making, via an honest assessment of political action and communications strategies, so that the anti-union public discourse that emerges from power brokers and the media can be effectively countered in our communities. Teachers and support staff who are well-supported, well-resourced, and working in clean, safe schools are best able to support the learning of students in their care.

It’s not just a platitude on a placard during crisis moments: teachers’ working conditions really *do* equal students’ learning conditions. ●

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MISMATCH: SPECIAL EDUCATION LEARNERS AND EQAO

BY LAURIE MENARD

“... standardized testing, while bad news across the board, is especially hurtful to students who need our help the most” .

— Kohn, *Education Week*, 2000

In our schools today, assessment and evaluation of students is the result of a carefully integrated process of “planning, acting, assessing and reflecting” on student progress and achievement. Teachers are expected to plan for student learning based on principles of differentiation and focus on inquiry based learning. The Ministry of Education describes a teacher’s responsibility to their students:

Differentiated instruction is based on the idea that because students differ significantly in their strengths, interests, learning styles and readiness to learn, it is necessary to adapt instruction to suit these differing characteristics. One or a number of the following elements can be differentiated in any classroom-learning situation:

- The content of learning (What students are going to learn, and when);
- The process of learning (the types of tasks and activities);
- The products of learning (the ways in which students demonstrate learning);
- The affect/environment of learning (the context and environment in which students learn and demonstrate learning).

(*Learning For All*, 2013, pg. 17)

For students with special learning needs, it is critical that teachers know the learner and understand how they demonstrates understanding. Rarely is this demonstration optimally shown through a one-time paper and pencil assessment given over hours on consecutive days.

But with EQAO testing, students are usually expected to engage in this test for an extended period of time throughout the day and for a number of days working in both mathematics and literacy. This format does not correspond to how teachers are expected to teach or how students learn and are assessed. Despite school staff working to reduce the impact of this high stress situation, students are significantly affected by the situation, and the expectations that don’t match their daily educational experience.

Teachers assess the learning of the whole child (ETFO, 2010). Based on their understanding of the individual’s learning profile they use the assessment information gleaned to formulate next steps for each learner. The sterile, standardized EQAO test format and its results are not useful in the support of special education students, and can have adverse effects.

First, EQAO is not an inclusive form of assessment, and unfairly disadvantages students who have learning challenges. Teachers need to develop a healthy relationship with their students where students can predictably expect assessment measures that align with classroom practice and that consider their learning needs. When assessment measures match student learning needs,

then we provide a level playing field for all. When students are not able to access the type of assessment — and therefore cannot demonstrate their learning satisfactorily — the important relationship between teacher and student is defeated. For students with special learning needs, their trust in the teacher is key in building their confidence, encouraging them to continue engaging and in knowing they can have an impact on their environment — and that they are being successful.

Second, it's important to ask whether it is possible for a standardized assessment such as EQAO to measure what students learn if it does not match how they learn and demonstrate their learning throughout the year in class. If the answer is no, we need to question the stated purpose of this “test” — to provide data to inform teachers in next steps for their students. So, we have a test that not only does not provide an opportunity for special education students to appropriately demonstrate what they have learned, but it also does not give teachers authentic data to direct where to make their next best move to support progress and achievement. It seems that for many special education students the opportunity to demonstrate what they know is largely not possible through the EQAO format and therefore not inclusive.

Third, let's look at the potential effects of both the anticipation of and participation in the test on special education students. Test anxiety affects a student's ability to access information and to express their ideas. When anxiety is high, emotion regulation diverts important cognitive resources needed to respond to test questions (Hirsch, 2016). Worry, fear of failure, and dread are emotions that consume working memory and reduce a student's ability to maintain attention, to think and respond (Hirsch, 2016). Students with special learning needs often already have difficulty with issues such as planning, organizing, and sequencing information (executive functions) and capacity for holding and using information. Add the anxiety from not only the anticipation of the “test” but also actually trying to complete test questions, and the result can be no work production or weak work production that does not demonstrate what they have learned — and does not respect the integrity of the learner.

A fourth concern of significance that relates to each of the former points is that during EQAO testing, students are not able to access the accommodations they typically have during assessment activities. It's true that during the EQAO test they have certain accommodations that pertain to use of technology (voice to text and text to voice for some questions), a quiet space if needed and scribing when appropriate, but they are not able to have support for clarification of questions, repeated instructions, and redirection when they struggle with attention. Accommodations that do not affect curriculum expectations are a right that students have and

this stance is supported by our education system. Essentially for those students who have Individual Education Plans, standardized testing does not align with their accommodations or learning goals.

Finally, teachers of grades 3 and 6 spend considerable amounts of time preparing students throughout the year for the test and, as the time draws nearer in the spring, to understand the test format and answer questions posed in this way. The focused time spent for this purpose takes away from precious time needed to engage in differentiated instruction to help all learners meet their learning goals. It is already challenging to find adequate amounts of time in the instructional day to instruct, coach and shape each learner's experience. The time consumed by test preparation activities would be better used to cultivate rich learning opportunities for all students and to enhance the learning of those who struggle with curriculum expectations.

In summary, EQAO testing has little relevance to how students learn and demonstrate their learning in today's classroom where inquiry-based instruction and differentiation are hallmarks of good practice. For many special education students, the EQAO creates anxiety that can clearly affect their state of mind and result in poor performance. Moreover, it leaves them “out of the loop” in terms of an inclusive approach to assessment and evaluation. That time spent by teachers in test preparation is better spent focusing on developing learning and assessment measures that actually lead to a healthy classroom experience and authentic data to direct next steps for students.

Unless assessment for students with special education needs reflects what is happening in the classroom, the message to students is unclear and unpredictable. This is likely to lead to anxiety and poor performance — and we are left with a standardized assessment tool that does not support our education system in understanding how to create changes that meet the needs of special education learners. ●

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ARE BEING SUCCESSFUL.**

Laurie Menard, a special education consultant with the Waterloo Region District School Board, is passionate about supporting students with special education needs and promoting inclusive education that serves all students.

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THE CONSEQUENCES OF A NEOLIBERAL FUNDING FORMULA

TIME TO TEAR IT UP AND START AGAIN

BY DAN CROW

Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12 education in Ontario is funded through the Grants for Student Needs (GSN) — more commonly known as the Funding Formula.

The Funding Formula consists of a variety of allocations, each of which has its own formula for determining how much money school boards will receive to educate students and maintain buildings. Some of the grants, like the Special Education Grant, must be used exclusively for the purposes set in regulations. Regulations for other grants, such as the Learning Opportunities Grant (which is intended to provide assistance to students at risk of lower academic achievement), allow boards greater flexibility in how the money is used.

The GSN is accompanied by a technical paper (of more than 150 pages) outlining the benchmarks, models, and formulae used to calculate the allocations that will go to school boards. However, the complexity of the GSN makes school board funding incredibly opaque, denying most people the ability to examine how funding is determined, much less the underlying values and goals that underpin how schools are funded—and why that funding is insufficient to meet students and staff needs.

At its core, the GSN is premised on a neoliberal model of cost containment that has not changed since its inception 20 years ago, and consequently has had a very real and negative effect on virtually every aspect of the learning environment.

In 1997 the Mike Harris Progressive Conservative government restructured school board funding, removing it from a model based on local property taxes to one based on direct provincial funding. This move had the potential to create more equitable funding for all school boards, eliminating income disparities between affluent boards and those with a lower property tax base. That *potential*, however, was negated by the neoliberal underpinnings of the PC government's approach to education, which included fiscal restraint, attacks on education workers and their unions,¹ and a limited view of what public education should be, precisely because equality was not the goal of the new funding formula.

The new model of education funding was premised on a “back-to-basics” approach to public education, focusing on core skills of reading, writing, and math. Curriculum that fell outside of this basic approach would not be funded by the province.²

A hard-line neoliberal approach to the education sector included an assault on education workers' unions as a necessary component of shutting down dissent and disempowering organizations that had the power to challenge the drastic shift in direction in education policy.³ The model was premised on cost containment and predictability of government financial obligations. Premising funding primarily on enrollment helped achieve that goal as it removed from the calculations consideration of costs that are insensitive to enrollment changes.

When funding is tied primarily to enrollment, declining student numbers puts pressure on budgets for all staff positions (including office and library staff, maintenance and custodial workers, etc.) even though a minimum level of support is needed in schools regardless of enrollment levels. It was estimated at the time that the Harris government had cut more than \$2 billion from the education budget.⁴

Many people expected the election of the Dalton McGuinty Liberals in 2003 might have signaled a change in direction, especially considering McGuinty's professed desire to be known as the “Education Premier”. Such expectations were bolstered by the Rozanski Report (2002) — the only review of the funding formula to date. Rozanski identified several problems with how education is funded, including arbitrary and low benchmarks, and proposed that the funding formula be reviewed regularly.⁵

SINCE 1995 THE GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO, IN BOTH ITS TORY AND LIBERAL FORMATIONS, HAS DEVELOPED AND REPRODUCED A NEOLIBERAL APPROACH TO THE EDUCATION SECTOR THAT HAS INVOLVED AUSTERITY AND UNDERFUNDING, AND HAS INCLUDED ATTEMPTS TO LIMIT THE FREE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING RIGHTS OF EDUCATION WORKERS. THE FAILURES OF THE SYSTEM NOW ARE ROOTED IN THE FAILURES OF THE FUNDING FORMULA AT ITS INCEPTION.

Based on a desire for a different direction, and evidence that the existing formula is flawed, it was reasonable to expect change. Practically speaking, however, the Liberal government has presided over a consolidation of the Conservatives' neoliberal approach to education. Despite some modifications to funding, and the extension of full-day kindergarten, the funding formula, at its core, remains fundamentally unchanged.⁶ The underlying premise of cost containment through arbitrary and low benchmarks for funding, and the continued use of student enrollment numbers as the central driver of funding continue.

Much like the Tories before them, the Liberals — after a brief flirtation with stimulus spending after the 2008 global economic crisis⁷ — also engaged in curtailing trade union freedoms, limiting the right to collectively bargain and strike in 2012 through Bill 115, the so-called Putting Students First Act.⁸ The stated goal of the Bill was to get costs under control by imposing a wage freeze on education workers, and stripping provisions (such as sick leave banks) from their collective agreements.

Ultimately Bill 115 was repealed after McGuinty resigned as premier (and was replaced by Kathleen Wynne), but the damage had already been done as collective agreements with education worker and teacher unions contained provisions that were broadly similar to the template that the government imposed.

The point to be made here is not that the PC and Liberal governments are equally “bad” in terms of their treatment of education workers and school board funding. Such an assessment is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, the point is that since 1995 the government of Ontario, in both its Tory and Liberal formations, has developed and reproduced a neoliberal approach to the education sector that has involved austerity and underfunding, and has included attempts to limit the free collective bargaining rights of education workers. The failures of the system now are rooted in the failures of the funding formula at its inception.

To be fair to the current government, there has been an increase in GSN funding of approximately \$8.6 billion since the Liberals took office in 2003. This translates to a real increase of 23.4% as of 2017.⁹ While a not-insubstantial sum of money, it did not completely cover the costs of new programs,

like full-day kindergarten (fully implemented by 2014-15).

Because the basic model of the 1997 funding formula has not been fundamentally changed and there continues to be insufficient funding for programs and infrastructure, the new money can only be understood in the broader context. Had the Liberals reversed the Harris era cuts by immediately increasing education funding by the \$2 billion the Tories had cut, the additional funds the Liberals *did* add since 2003 would only account for a 9.1% increase in real terms. Moreover, the benchmark funding for many of the allocations in the GSN are much lower than the actual needs of school boards. This makes the funding shortfall for new programs even more significant, and clearly underscores how the neoliberal trajectory of education funding established by the previous government was not going to be reversed.

The fallout is tangible and far-reaching:

- Deficiencies in funding allocated to school boards includes special education, which is not funded based on actual needs of boards, but instead on a predictive model based on demographic indicators.
- There is no building standard used in the assessment of the physical quality of schools, which at least in part accounts for why, according to the Auditor General, the government allocates insufficient money to cover basic maintenance needs.
- Benchmarks for funding staff are standardized, and do not reflect the actual costs of providing services. For example, the government provides \$1,669.97 per early learning student in 2015, but the program costs the TDSB \$2,066.97,¹⁰ leaving some boards underfunded for early childhood educators.
- Insufficient funding for transportation puts a strain on parents and students. Boards are not funded for the real cost of transportation (which would also include funding for total distances traveled, and fuel costs).¹¹

It is common for people to focus primarily, or even exclusively, on teacher-student relationships as the barometer of the quality of education. But the problems with the GSN are responsible for

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deficiencies in *all* aspects of public education, including in-class and broader school supports. Underfunding of building maintenance and custodial services, office and library staff, education assistants, early childhood educators, professional and paraprofessional staff, and others, negatively affects students' ability to get the highest quality education. Fixing these problems is key to improving education outcomes and student experiences' in the system, which also necessitates fixing the funding formula.

A closer look at some of the funded areas will help develop an understanding of how underfunding affects the system on the ground. Comments will be restricted to building maintenance and direct supports to students through special education, psychological services, and behavioural supports, and specific examples of the direct impacts on work and learning environments.

BUILDINGS/INFRASTRUCTURE

The Auditor General of Ontario has estimated that maintenance of the physical infrastructure of schools costs \$1.4 billion per year (as of 2015) and, as more than 50% of schools in Ontario are at least 40 years old, the cost of maintaining buildings will only grow.¹² Already, the accumulated deferred maintenance deficit is more than \$15 billion.¹³ Despite this need, the government only spent between \$150 million and \$500 million on school maintenance from 2011 to 2015.

It should be noted that the repair backlog is likely greater than \$15 billion because the province uses a physical assessment that is "limited to a visual inspection, and rarely involves any destructive or intrusive testing to make a better determination of the state of the building component."¹⁴ In fact, there is no standard for assessing building quality, meaning that there is actually no way of knowing, using current practices, how much work needs to be done over and above the repairs needed to fix deficiencies, let alone to reach an acceptable basic level of building quality.

To be fair to the current government, the 2017-18 GSN did increase funding for school maintenance to \$1.4 billion, \$200 million of which is intended to be used on environmental upgrades. This is a laudable goal, and allocating funding to reduce the environmental impact of schools is important. However, deducting this money leaves only \$1.2 billion, which is short of

what the Auditor General stated was necessary to properly maintain schools in 2015, and does not account for inflation or further deterioration due to aging buildings. Nor did the government make an allocation to address the existing deferred maintenance backlog. Ongoing failure to properly fund this need means that the more than \$15 billion in deferred maintenance will continue to grow.

Students' learning environments are directly impacted by the underfunding of maintenance. Schools regularly face temporary shutdowns, or loss of use of space in schools due to failing infrastructure. It is not uncommon to hear stories of water main breaks that lead to school flooding and a loss of potable water in school,¹⁵ or a lack of adequate heating or cooling.¹⁶ Only 29% of schools in TDSB have air conditioning (and this is not unique to the TDSB), making many classrooms unpleasant and unproductive environments during the heat waves that are becoming more common and occurring later in the year. Poorly maintained buildings are a health and safety risk for students and staff, and are hardly an ideal learning environment.

DIRECT SUPPORTS TO STUDENTS

Funding for classroom staff is insufficient to hire enough education assistants (EAs), early childhood educators (ECEs), and professional and paraprofessional staff¹⁷ to meet student needs. Ultimately this has a deleterious effect on the individual students who rely on these services. But understaffing in these areas also harms students who are not directly utilizing these services because classroom staff are stretched to the limit trying to address all student needs. A socially just education system is one that allows all students to learn in the same environment, and participate fully in all classroom activities. Achieving this goal requires the acknowledgement that students have a variety of different needs, and a commitment to provide necessary resources to meet them.

Special education funding is used to cover the cost of hiring EAs for classrooms, as well as to provide assessments of student need. The Special Education Grant is broken down into a per-pupil amount, designed to provide baseline funding based on average daily enrollment, and an allocation based on demographic factors that is essentially a predictive model. It is not based on actual needs reported by boards. Ultimately

BUT THE PROBLEM IS NOT SIMPLY THAT THERE IS NOT ENOUGH MONEY. THE FUNDING FORMULA ITSELF IS FUNDAMENTALLY FLAWED. THE ARCANE SYSTEM OF CALCULATIONS FOR THE GSN MAKES THE LOGIC BEHIND FUNDING DECISIONS IMPENETRABLE TO THOSE WHO DO NOT HAVE THE TIME TO PORE OVER THE INTRICACIES OF THE FORMULAE USED TO CALCULATE ALLOCATIONS.

this has meant that school boards' needs are greater than the funding that they receive. In fact, the majority of school boards report that they spend more on special education than they receive for it through the GSN.¹⁸ This does not mean that boards spend an adequate amount on special education, merely that they *spend more than the allocation*. The result of such decisions is that money originally allotted for other purposes is diverted, leading to shortfalls elsewhere in board budgets.

Underfunding in special education creates many problems. In its annual survey, People for Education (2015) found that approximately 44,000 students are on waiting lists for Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) meetings, or for special needs services.¹⁹ IPRC meetings are the tool used to determine what services students in need of special education require, and the failure to provide access to these meetings denies students' their right to an accessible education. Some families can pay for assessments, but this kind of queue-jumping disadvantages students from lower income families, and is antithetical to universal and equal public education. The same study found that there is a lack of staff for the delivery of special education, so even those who get access to the system through the IPRC meeting might still not have their needs fully met.

In addition, the 2017 People for Education survey found that "61% of elementary schools and 50% of secondary schools report they do not have sufficient access to a psychologist to adequately support students. 47% of elementary and 36% of secondary schools report that child and youth worker services are not available."²⁰ The problem of insufficient funding is exacerbated by the fact that the money for these services is not "enveloped", meaning that it can be used for other purposes if school boards so decide. The result is that students who need mental health services, or who need help with behavioural problems or a personal crisis are left without professional assistance. Other school staff are then left to fill the gaps to the best of their ability while still trying to do their primary job of providing other services for students.

CONCLUSION

Underfunding harms all job classifications in the school system, and that harm extends

directly and indirectly to students. Resources and staffing levels are not set high enough to meet the actual student and infrastructural needs. More money would certainly help remedy this situation.

But the problem is not simply that there is not enough money. The funding formula itself is fundamentally flawed. The arcane system of calculations for the GSN makes the logic behind funding decisions impenetrable to those who do not have the time to pore over the intricacies of the formulae used to calculate allocations. Without clarity on how funding is calculated it becomes all too easy to hide the inadequacies and underlying intent of the GSN and, consequently, there can be no real accountability.

This leads to the next essential problem with the funding formula: it has values baked into it that are not necessarily the values we would want to have underpinning a high quality, socially just, inclusive, and dynamic education system. As it stands, the current formula is premised on cost containment, the cousin of austerity. It does not fund based on actual need, but rather on average costs (benchmarks) and predictive modeling, and lacks any standards for outcomes (e.g. in building maintenance).

It is time for a complete restructuring of the education funding formula. The current model does not meet needs of students, staff, or communities. Hugh Mackenzie suggests that “Rather than provide funding on an arbitrary, top-down basis, foundation funding should be based on an assessment of what people expect to find in a properly functioning school. Funding would then be driven by the cost of providing that standard of service in real-world school facilities.”²¹

Some costs cannot be subdivided based on a student headcount: administrative costs (principal, VP, secretary and other office staff), library, custodial, to some extent EAs and ECEs are needed on a per-school or per-classroom basis, not purely on a per-student basis. As Mackenzie notes, “the formula fails to take into account the fact that many central services provided by school boards to support the learning environment do not vary in response to changes in enrollment at all.”²²

A progressive funding formula would abandon the narrow focus on education adopted in the Harris years, and incorporate guaranteed funding for arts, physical education, field trips, and programs to meet local needs and enrich the education of all students. Funding should be built from the ground up, based on the actual needs of schools. It must be sensitive to real drivers of the costs of education, and to differences of geography and demographics. To a significant degree, it would be driven by calculations made at the school board level.

There is no question that a model predicated on full funding as opposed to austerity might be difficult for the government to accept. However, this would be the most effective way of identifying the real needs of schools, and meeting the real needs of students. ●

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HOW ‘JOBS THAT DON’T EXIST YET’ SHAPE EDUCATIONAL ‘REINVENTION’

BY BENJAMIN DOXTATOR

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2016), education systems have failed to keep up with our “accelerating” world of “disruptive changes” and, in particular, the “widening skills gaps” in the labour market. The WEF uses the following factoid to frame their report: “By one popular estimate, 65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in completely new job types that don’t yet exist.”

The WEF’s use lends the factoid legitimacy, propelling it into national and local discourses on education. In the *Globe and Mail*, Vanessa Federovich of Roche Canada draws on the factoid to argue that the education system must prepare flexible and adaptable, lifelong learners, ready for a job market characterised by the “survival of the most adaptable”. She suggests that “recruiters need to probe candidates about more individual experiences: their travel adventures, the books they’ve read and the times they’ve pushed themselves outside their comfort zone and tackled the unknown.”

While the neoliberal skills agenda’s emphasis on creativity and innovation may feel like the kind of fresh air that education needs in contrast to the neoconservative reformers who call for a ‘back to basics’ kind of education, both movements promote education as an investment in human capital. Even our vacationing habits are an investment in ourselves. The other side of the human capital coin is the 65% factoid which works as a bet on the structure of future labour markets.

But is it true that 65% of human capital (or to use the technical term, children) will work in jobs that don’t exist yet? Where does this factoid come from?

WHILE THE NEOLIBERAL SKILLS AGENDA’S EMPHASIS ON CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION MAY FEEL LIKE THE KIND OF FRESH AIR THAT EDUCATION NEEDS IN CONTRAST TO THE NEOCONSERVATIVE REFORMERS WHO CALL FOR A ‘BACK TO BASICS’ KIND OF EDUCATION, BOTH MOVEMENTS PROMOTE EDUCATION AS AN INVESTMENT IN HUMAN CAPITAL.

The WEF cites *Shift Happens* (2007), which was originally made by Karl Fisch as a presentation to his staff, and then turned into its viral form by Scott McLeod. However, that video makes a substantially different claim:

The top 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 did not exist in 2004. We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t exist yet, using technologies that haven’t

been invented, in order to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet.

Unmoored from research and the basics of citing information, the factoid functions to stand in for neoliberal ideology, much as catchphrases like ‘back to basics’ and ‘no excuses’ rally neoconservatives. And while progressives have learned to be vigilant about what ‘back to basics’ signals, we also need to be aware of how words like ‘creativity’ and ‘flexibility’ mask precarity in Thomas Friedman’s ‘flat world’.

In recent history, Cathy Davidson made the ‘65%’ version of the factoid popular. Since her footnote directed people to a U.S. Department of Labor study, the factoid gained credibility, *despite the fact that it does not actually appear in the report*. Michael Berman and the BBC have provided a solid de-bunking of the idea that the factoid might be true.

Though I’m less interested in the idea of an ‘original source’ than in the shifting context in which people imagine the future of work, I traced several versions of the more general idea behind the 65% factoid idea back to the 50s. While the claim is often presented as a new and alarming fact or prediction about the future, Devereux C. Josephs said much the same in 1957 during a Conference on the American High School at the University of Chicago on October 28 — less than a month after the Soviets launched Sputnik:

We are too much inclined to think of careers and opportunities as if the

oncoming generations were growing up to fill the jobs that are now held by their seniors. This is not true. Our young people will fill many jobs that do not now exist. They will invent products that will need new skills. Old-fashioned mercantilism and the nineteenth-century theory in which one man's gain was another man's loss, are being replaced by a dynamism in which the new ideas of a lot of people become the gains for many, many more.

But, ironically, Josephs was envisioning a different kind of economic future; one where we *share* in increasing prosperity, much as John Maynard Keynes' (1930) did decades earlier. They imagined the future of work — and leisure — before the great divergence between the GDP and median hourly compensation, before neoliberal globalisation, before precarity came to define the lives of most workers, and before CEOs began to claim such an outsized share of compensation.

Today, 'skills' are the answer to nearly all the economic and education problems that have emerged in the intervening decades: why can't people find good work? How can we better educate our children? Why do CEOs make so much money?

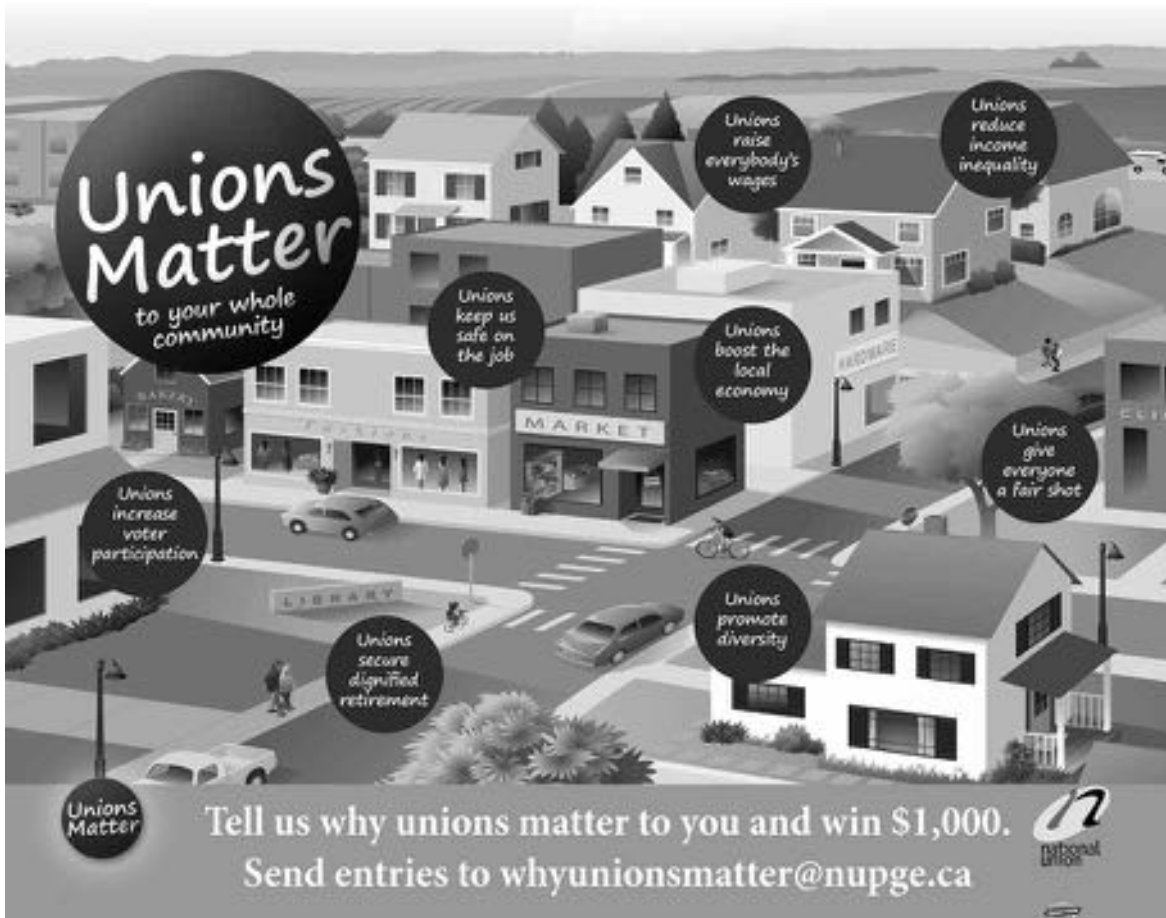
To answer these and other burning questions, the WEF's "popular estimate" of 65% provides us with a statistic that is — according to Maxim Jean-Louis' 2017 report, *An Apprenticeship Skills Agenda – Executive Summary* ("requested by the Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance") — "widely accepted". The report focuses on "exploring innovative ways of closing the skills gaps that exist in the province."

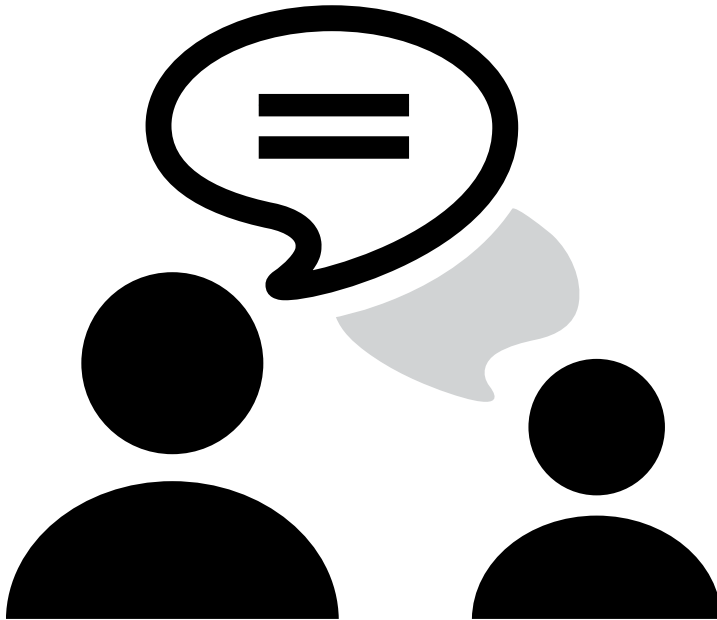
The 'skills gap' is a zombie idea that chases education, though it keeps being debunked, much like 65% factoid chases education ever farther into the future: a quantifiable uncertainty, a cliché designed to explain increasing precarity, an ultimatum from Capital. Killing these zombie ideas will only make room for more. The longer project is always one of vigilance and resistance. ●

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THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS TO QUALITY SPECIAL EDUCATION

OPINIONS FROM THE FIELD

BY ELIZABETH MITCHELL AND THOMAS WIDSTRAND

It's been a good day. Only two people crying in the special education office — one parent and one teacher.

As teachers working in special education, we navigate a tricky road with families. As they come to understand their children as learners with challenges, a few tears aren't unusual while they confide their worries for their child's future. For the teachers ... you might well ask why a professional would find themselves brought to tears by a day at school, but it's all too common, and it demonstrates how professionals have been caught between a flawed system and the needs of the students and families they serve.

There is no question that Ontarians place a high value on education. It's why there is so much coverage in the media about our education system — how it is thriving and on top of the world (as the government touts our international standings) or failing children all over the province (a viewpoint sometimes heard from the public or in the media). And in the midst of this, it seems that there are few issues more polarizing than special education. The primary values of the system seem to be the conflicting ideas that everything must be done to maximize the potential of the most

vulnerable students, and that it must be done at bargain basement prices.

With decades of experience between us, we've had the opportunity to examine how students with exceptional learning needs are served by our system. Whether as a classroom teacher, an in-school resource teacher, a special education board consultant/co-ordinator, or a special education parent, between the two of us we have occupied a variety of roles. We'd like to think that, over the course of our careers, Ontario schools have become a more welcoming place for students with disabilities and that we have moved closer to an inclusive environment that values the contributions and meets the needs of the great variety of students that walk through our doors.

There certainly are shifts in attitudes, and both pedagogical and technological innovations that should allow this positive transformation. But there are also limitations, most specifically a government that wants to point to excellence in education, and simultaneously to a frugality that often seems to work against it. The Ministry is there for the press release, but the hard work of

implementing those promises falls to the educators. And paying for those promises? In special education it often seems that we're using a "promise first–pay later" approach.

The advance of another provincial election (and relative peace with the teachers' unions, thanks to a recent contract extension) provides us with an opportunity to have a debate that can focus on issues in special education. From the front lines, the primary issues are coming into focus:

1. Inclusion: The province continues to shift towards a philosophy of 'inclusion', a blanket approach being clumsily applied to a vast and diverse demographic of tens of thousands of students with special needs. This proves to be a great difficulty in a province that does not lend itself to one-size-fits-all solutions and has logistical challenges that vary from one school district to the next. The fact that this is being implemented as special education budgets fail to keep pace with needs suggests that the powers that be have never understood the true cost of inclusion.

2. Funding: The funding formula, fundamentally flawed and inequitable, allows some "flexibility" for school districts. This encourages the flow of money between competing priorities, so that some special education funding is always at risk, and supports are inconsistent across the province's 72 districts. Parents are the monkey-in-the-middle in this game of pass-the-buck between districts who bemoan the lack of funds, and the Ministry's insistence that it has provided the money for the district to allocate as they see fit.

3. Support: For a classroom teacher, access to the education workers who support the development and delivery of programming (whether specialist special education teachers or educational assistants) has been reduced for financial reasons. Teachers are left to try to implement programming without the proper support; educational assistants are there to maintain health and safety. In other words, unless one is in imminent danger as justified by lengthy and bureaucratic processes, there will be no extra support provided.

4. Training: As students are integrated into classrooms and school communities, their teachers must, by necessity, become specialists in every exceptionality represented in their classrooms. The time and training to do this is limited, and the average teacher is so run off their feet that they may even decline the training offered to them. Even the best planned day may go off the rails if a student has a crisis. Teachers and administrators are often reluctant to leave students and colleagues in that difficult situation.

5. Equity: Without enough funding, sufficient staff, or the training to help staff do their jobs, some students will receive better services than others. Aside from the fact that students with special education needs are already at the ends of a bell-curve that favours the middle, within special education there

are still haves and have-nots. Access to support and services is more likely to come to families with the skills to advocate or the funds to employ professional advocates. Throw in a language barrier, a socio-economic struggle, or systemic biases that may underestimate the potential of the students, and that advocacy is less likely to happen or to be successful.

EDUCATORS RECOGNIZE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF INCLUSION, AS ONE OF A RANGE OF OPTIONS THAT WILL ALLOW US TO MEET STUDENT NEEDS. HOWEVER, IT'S IMPORTANT TO EXAMINE THE MOTIVATIONS BEHIND WHAT APPEARS TO BE A POSITIVE SHIFT IN SOCIETAL ATTITUDES.

What does all of this mean for a family trying to navigate the system, and for their children? For starters, it means that being included in a classroom of their same aged peers is held up as the revered ideal. It also means that in a system that gives parents a great deal of power over decisions of how and where programming will be delivered, parents often choose and even insist upon an inclusive setting in spite of the limited resources available to make it successful. It would seem that the promise of inclusion is the rare area where the school districts and families can consistently agree. Educators recognize the potential benefits of inclusion, as one of a range of options that will allow us to meet student needs. However, it's important to examine the motivations behind what appears to be a positive shift in societal attitudes.

As children of the 70s we did not share our classrooms with students who had significant learning needs. Children with intellectual delays, significant behaviour concerns, physical exceptionalities (including loss of vision and hearing) were streamed out of the "typical" classroom, often in different schools altogether.

The understanding that our schools should reflect the diversity in our community and that all students benefit from the opportunity to learn from one another was not something that was initiated from within the system — it was the work of dedicated parent advocates. They insisted that a high quality education that pushed their children to reach their potential with and among their peers, in their community, was the right of all children. That advocacy led to an understanding of the range of abilities among children with disabilities, an emerging awareness of autism spectrum disorders, and contributed to a society that has expanded the definition of human rights to include the grounds of ability. Inclusion became recognized as the enlightened option, but certainly not the easy way out given the resources required to do it responsibly. This has been the challenge to which the system has not yet risen.

Somewhere along the line the message was lost that students with a greater diversity of learning needs in a single classroom would require an infusion of support to build capacity and ongoing funding to ensure the programming was at a consistently high level. It is clear: inclusive models of education (where students with a range of needs learn in the same setting) cost more, not less, than specialized (and segregated) classes.

As boards around the province promote and implement inclusion, the increase in funding has not been forthcoming. Special education monies are allocated or “sweated” by the province with funding meant to address a range of the financial requirements of supporting students beyond the per pupil amount given for all students. From the perspective of an educator in the classroom struggling to meet the exceptional needs of a variety of students, funding is always insufficient. The ever-tightening belt affects special education services in two significant ways. Instructional support costs money. Training costs money. And both are essential.

Nowhere are the funding shortfalls more evident than in the provision of educational assistants. Classrooms can have students with diagnoses of intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, giftedness, autism, physical exceptionalities, but another educator, in the form of an EA, is typically only available if there are concerns about safety (e.g., behavioural needs that may require that the student be apart from their classmates or continually supported in order to keep them safe) or health (e.g., students with intensive medical needs, or requiring other major physical supports).

Those teachers in tears at the end of the day? They could be developing programming for a non-verbal student with a developmental disability, and coordinating the delivery of the program with an educational assistant. Or struggling to address the needs of a young child who hasn't yet been diagnosed but whose behaviour requires that the rest of the students be evacuated from the classroom on a regular basis. Or trying to plan instruction that meets the needs of a gifted student with an anxiety disorder who can't work independently, or students working several grade levels below their peers, who one day may be diagnosed with learning disabilities. Or juggling recommendations made by speech & language pathologists, occupational therapists, and resource teachers (all of whom are desperately needed but never allocated enough time to provide meaningful interventions). These teachers are at their wits' end because of the disconnect between their students' potential and the limitations of what one person can accomplish in helping them reach that potential.

Those teachers with the range of students they support? They are often not special education specialists, or experts in the myriad of special needs they may find themselves supporting over the course of their careers. Certainly some of them become specialists, through experience, through courses they take on weekends, in evenings, and in the summer, and through the training provided by their school district. A professional with such a variety of needs to meet and new knowledge to acquire on such a regular basis doesn't stand much chance of staying current across the entire spectrum of special education needs.

Just as your family doctor must stay well-informed, but will ultimately call in another doctor with a more narrow field of

expertise, teachers need access to the guidance of an educator who has studied and practiced within a particular field of special education. More belt-tightening means those educators are thinner on the ground and more likely to be generalists rather than having a detailed skill set.

What do these generalists who are often in school-based support roles do? They ensure that paperwork is done, run to support students in crisis, develop professional learning to help class teachers program for all of their students and assess students to help guide their programming. Of course this goes along with advocating for students, meeting with students and ensuring they learn the skills to be as successful as they can be.

Teachers at the system level, consultants, coaches, instructional leaders or coordinators who are responsible for implementing policy, guiding system-wide programming, and consulting on the most challenging cases are often so busy that they can only provide a list of suggestions before they are off to the next school.

As advocates for students, for their families, and for the teachers on the front lines, we can predict which students are more likely to be successful. Parents with the skill, the will, and the resources to insist upon the education to which their children are entitled, often get it. They may try to find a home in the catchment area of a school that has been recommended to them (or with high test scores — a misleading tool for all parents especially for those trying to find a place for the students whose needs are never considered by those tests). They may attend meetings, request more meetings, appeal decisions — insistence breeds success. Others, entering a system that is already operating in the red, may believe it when they are told that the limitations of the systems are inflexible, and the odds for success plummet. Either way, this is not the picture of a welcoming educational community.

That colleagues and the families of the students most vulnerable in this system trust us to help support and guide their way through elementary school is an extraordinary privilege and responsibility. There is so much possibility in the students — students with needs that once would have limited their ability to succeed and flourish are now recognized as having the potential to soar beyond the dreams of previous generations. And for the students whose needs mean that they will always receive support from society, they will live in a society run by adults who once shared their classrooms and have developed empathy for peers with special needs. The hope in the eyes of these parents as we discuss their children is a sacred trust ... and the knowledge that the system has the promise to meet the challenge could bring you to tears. ●

ELIZABETH MITCHELL and **THOMAS WIDSTRAND** are members of the Special Education Standing Committee of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. Elizabeth works as a special education resource teacher in the Halton District School Board, and Thomas is a special education coordinator with the Toronto District School Board. Their reflections in this article represent experiences from the different roles they have had over the years, and the input they receive from colleagues around the province.



“WE BUILT A LIFE FROM NOTHING” WHITE SETTLER COLONIALISM AND THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY

BY SHEELAH McLEAN

As a young white girl growing up on the prairies, I recall hearing stories of the hardships my grandparents endured when they first arrived in Canada. One narrative that stands out as particularly important was that my grandparents immigrated to Canada with very little money or goods. It was not until many years later that I came to understand these stories as narratives that reproduced the idea that our collective family wealth and status as white settlers was earned through ingenuity.

These family stories are national texts that position white settlers as having earned our social and political status in society through intelligence and hard work alone, erasing the colonial policies that enforced differential access to resources, such as land. The story that my family built a life from nothing works to make economic inequality between white settlers and Indigenous people seem natural and normal.

Like most Canadians, my identity as a white settler was formed through various national narratives that reinforce the myth of meritocracy. Meritocracy is the belief that success in life can be attributed to personal merit such as hard work and natural talent. Subsequently, lack of success is then attributed to lack of intelligence and work ethic, low morals, and the inability to know “how to get things done” (Schick & St. Denis, 2003).

The myth that Canadian society is created on individual work ethic ignores how racially dominant groups gain access to social and political power. This discourse also masks how racialized groups are denied access to these same resources and opportunities. The myth of meritocracy reinforces liberal individualism, providing the public with racist explanations for the vast inequalities that exists between Indigenous people and white settler society. While my grandparents certainly worked hard to provide for their families, it is essential to understand how government policies secured my family’s social and political status.

THE MYTH OF WHITE SETTLER SUPERIORITY

I am a third generation white settler with Norwegian grandparents on my mother’s side, and a Scottish grandfather and Swedish grandmother on my father’s side. My parents, aunts, and uncles all spoke English and assimilated into the British culture through institutions such as church, community gatherings, and public education or what was then aptly termed Normal School, a one-room schoolhouse where students completed several grades. When I asked why my family spoke only English, I was told that my grandparents wanted their children to “do well at school”, and to “get good jobs”. This is just one example of how white settlers from various European countries worked to assimilate into the dominant white culture in order to gain access to social and political power (McLean, 2016).

In 1908, my grandfather (my mom’s dad) bought 160 acres of land in northern Saskatchewan for \$10.00 plus the promise of 10 acres of improvement. This meant that in order to secure his title he had to ‘prove up’, or till and use the lands for farming. He sold wheat, oats and barley freely on the market and could travel throughout Canada without any regulation from the federal or provincial government. As a white settler and Canadian citizen my grandfather could vote in elections, and was an important organizer for the CCF in his rural community. My grandmother could not vote until 1916.

My mom was born in 1930, during a particularly difficult time for people across the prairies. The government supplied farmers like my family with relief such as canned meat and other goods. This policy was enforced so that families would not abandon farms, securing the federal government’s national dream of a white settler state. My grandparents were successful enough to hire two or three farm workers at a time, and eventually seek bank loans to buy modern farm equipment.

The access my family had in the early 1900s to land, citizenship, public education, mobility rights, bank loans, and government relief during famine secured their upward mobility and our middle-class status. The political economy of white settler status has been handed down from one generation to the next.¹

dispossession of lands, racist and sexist Indian Act legislation, the violence of residential schools, the regulation of Indigenous bodies through the Pass System (Williams, 2015), disenfranchisement, and government enforced starvation (Daschuk, 2014). This accompanying chart is only a brief snapshot of a much longer list of policies that upheld white settler colonialism while violating Indigenous rights (Thobani, 2011; Simpson, 2014; Manuel, 2015). These racist policies have not disappeared, but rather take shape in contemporary forms of racial oppression today.

I use the accompanying graphic as a teaching tool to analyze inequality in a colonial context and invite students to create a *Roots* assignment that explores their own family history. Through photographs, interviews with family members, and historical research, students come to understand their social positions in a colonial context, and analyze how large group inequality is created and maintained. It is also important to include the interconnections of differential policies based on sexuality, gender and other identity markers.

The machinery of Canadian nationhood has produced racialized inequalities that appear to be natural and normal, particularly for those of us that benefit from it. Nation-building practices have advanced the social and economic power of white settlers, in particular those who were male and owned property, while dispossessing Indigenous people and subjugating groups marked as outsiders. These stories of white settler ingenuity need to be met with historical research on 150 years of racist, sexist and homophobic colonial practices. ●

SHEELAH McLEAN (PhD) is a high school teacher, researcher and scholar in anti-racist anti-oppressive education. Sheelah is also an organizer with the Idle No More network. As an educator, scholar and community organizer, Sheelah's work has focused on projects that address inequality, particularly focusing on the legacy of oppression experienced by Indigenous Peoples within a white settler society.

This piece is a brief introduction to her research and teaching in anti-racist anti-colonial education.

ENDNOTES

1. Details collected through interviews with my family.
2. S. McLean, Family Chart, Anti-Racism lecture & workshop.

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**POSITIONING MYSELF:
TEACHING MY FAMILY HISTORY²**

White Settlers / Indigenous People

Voting rights / No vote until 1960

Public education / Residential schools

Title to land / Theft of land

Free Mobility rights / Pass system 1882-1936

Run for public office / No representation

Sell wheat freely / Limits on market

Support for famine / Mass starvation

Low cost loans / No personal loans

In the same historical moment that my family benefitted from their position as white citizens, Indigenous people faced policies of genocide. This included (but was not limited to) the ongoing theft and



RECOMMITTING TO PUBLIC EDUCATION IN ALBERTA

BY CAROLYN BLASETTI AND BARBARA SILVA

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

BRIEF HISTORY OF ALBERTA EDUCATION

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

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

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

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



ALBERTA EXPERIENCE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONFRONTING INEQUALITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

**THE SLOW, DELIBERATE, CALCULATED
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PRIVATE SCHOOLS

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

CHARTER SCHOOLS

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

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

REDRAWN BATTLE LINES

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



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

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

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

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

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

RECOMMITTING TO PUBLIC EDUCATION

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

PUBLIC EDUCATION IS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHT EVERY CHILD DESERVES. WHEN WE MARKETIZE IT, WE DO A DISSERVICE TO OUR MOST MARGINALIZED STUDENTS AND SOCIETY AT LARGE. THE GOOD NEWS IS, WE DO NOT HAVE TO BUY INTO THIS MARKETING: WE ARE NOT OBLIGATED TO SUPPORT THIS NARRATIVE.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

ENDNOTES

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SETTING A HIGHER BAR FOR ONTARIO COLLEGES



BY JP HORNICK

Throughout the fall, Ontario college faculty, represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), were on strike for five weeks over issues of equal pay for work of equal value, the move from full time to part time, temporary and contract work by college management as part of their business model, and academic freedom for faculty. On November 16, the results of a forced vote by management (represented by the College Employer Council) of faculty were announced: of the 95% of membership who voted, 86% rejected management's offer (incidentally, this was significantly higher than the 68% strike mandate members gave to the bargaining committee).

Comments from the November 16 press conference made by JP Hornick, head of the faculty negotiating committee, have been excerpted, lightly edited, and reproduced below. Less than 12 hours after this press conference, the Ontario provincial government announced it would introduce back-to-work legislation. College classes resumed Tuesday November 21.

Our goal throughout this round, our mandate from our 12,000 members was to improve conditions for contract faculty and improve the decision-making processes in the colleges so that there was a balance between faculty and administration. And the administration has been resoundingly opposed to these fairly straightforward concepts.

I think [our work action] challenges the notion that the so-called gig economy is a done deal. What we are doing now is drawing a line in the sand around that and trying to set a higher bar for all workers, not just college workers. We have an immense amount of privilege within our system to be able to make this stand and to pay it forward in a sense. And just for context, there are other colleges in Alberta, in BC that have full-time to non- full-time ratios as high as 90% full-time to 10% non full-time embedded in their collective agreements.

So this isn't some pie-in-the-sky idea that kills systems. It's actually about what kind of college system do you want to have your students

enrolled in for the next 50 years, and then extending that to other facets of the economy. We are the economic engine of Ontario and we should be treated with the respect and fairness that we deserve in those roles.

[Academic freedom] is inherently linked to precarious work as well, because academic freedom in the college system is about making those decisions in your classroom that you know are good for students and that can't be overturned by your Chair — or your Dean — who may or may not have any expertise in your area of study, right. [W]ith your nursing faculty, do you want a nurse who's actually designing the course, setting the evaluation, telling you if the student has met the learning outcomes? Or do you want a Dean who may or may not even have had experiences as a nurse or in the health sciences...[S]imilarly, who do you want: the paramedic professor making those decisions, or do you want somebody who has never set foot in the sector? Those are the key issues.

We have thousands of examples of grades being overturned; of the

resources that you use being dictated and those not being appropriate for the field or being outdated; being directed to use canned content that's supplied by publishers rather than — that relies on the expertise of the faculty. So really, when you boil it down, academic freedom is about who should make decisions in a classroom: the professor or the administrator? We're not telling them that we need to make all the financial decisions at the college; what we're telling them is we need to make those academic decisions. It's honestly, logically the only thing that makes sense and it's a no-cost issue. So for them to be holding out on this last little peg is reprehensible in a system that is trying to grow to meet the modern needs of our students.

To the students that are still out; one, thank you for your support; two, you have shown amazing ability to advocate for yourselves and your faculty stand with you on all of those struggles; and [three], call your college president and tell them to tell Council to get back to the table now and we will settle this thing and have you back in classes next week. ●

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