

# Our Schools/Our Selves

**The Voice Of Progressive Education In Canada**

Canadian Centre For Policy Alternatives

Summer/Fall 2020



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*Our Schools/Our Selves* is published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives  
1000-141 Laurier Ave W  
Ottawa, ON K1P 5J3

*Our Schools/Our Selves* is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association. It is indexed in the Canadian Magazine Index and the Alternative Press Index.

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**ISSN 0840-7339**

**Design and layout**  
Tim Scarth

Publications Mail  
Registration No. 8010.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives would like to thank the following organizations for their support of *Our Schools/Our Selves*: Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation, the National Union of Public and General Employees, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation.

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# Editorial

## Rising Tides

Erika Shaker

Context is everything. And in this case, the articles in this issue of *OS/OS* have taken on additional significance and resonance because of the overlapping and unprecedented contexts in which we are currently existing.

The COVID-19 shutdown of the economy has forced a rethink of the institutions, jobs and decision-making mechanisms that are pivotal to keeping people safe and provided for.

The brutal murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis on May 25 sparked a massive civil uprising across the continent, condemning state violence and systemic anti-Black racism.

While inequality and racism have long infected our public and democratic institutions, economy and society, these two events made longstanding injustice and inequity impossible to ignore. Even for those well-insulated from the effects of injustice in “normal” times.

At its best, and when it is properly resourced, public education can provide a basis from which we can all, collectively, address and overcome the inequity and injustice woven throughout our society. But at its worst, public education can reflect, reinforce and normalize those oppressions — reinforcing the inadequate status quo that brutalizes far too many.

I edited this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* while working at home, alongside my kids who are learning remotely. The articles herein were provided by contributors who themselves are navigating this remarkable situation as researchers, educators, parents and students. I

want to thank them for being so generous with their time and knowledge.

The subjects they write about, while magnified by COVID-19 and the anti-Black-racism uprisings taking place across the continent, have long been areas of concern in classrooms and communities. Recent events and renewed awareness, however, provide for the possibility of a radical rethink of how our schools are equipped and supported to meet society’s needs much more justly, equitably and compassionately than they have been.

Standardized testing can undermine a love of learning and curiosity among kids who do not do well on this type of assessment, or reinforce class- and race-based assumptions about schools (and the neighbourhoods where they’re located) that “score poorly.” The postponement of these tests due to provincewide job action, and their eventual cancellation as a result of the shutdown, provides an opportunity to examine how better to assess whether kids’ needs are being met, and where we can do better. Much better.

Online learning has been a topic of heated debate across the country, due in no small part to the surge in edutech companies keen to capitalize on this profitable learning frontier. The shutdown of schools due to COVID-19 heightened the discussion, as it soon became evident that online learning — or, rather, crisis learning — was not the panacea that had been promised.

Shuttering the physical school buildings revealed even more starkly the inequities

between students and communities that a “regular” school day partially camouflaged. Schools and boards scrambled to provide families with access to devices and Wi-Fi, and parents quickly learned that supporting their kids’ learning from home was perhaps more challenging than anyone had anticipated. For others, it exposed the emotional toll school had taken on their children, whose educational and emotional needs were not being met, sometimes with devastating consequences.

Concerns were also raised about online privacy and surveillance, not to mention increased screen time given reduced opportunities for kids to find alternative or outdoor activities. Many parents themselves had to work and couldn’t supervise 24/7, or were simply exhausted by daily arguments about doing schoolwork.

A return to “schooling as usual” is simply not an option if we are to honour the promise of public education for the students and communities it serves and the knowledge and experience of the professionals who work in those schools and classrooms.

The shutdown has revealed the degree to which we are connected by services and institutions, and dependent on the labour of those whose work is often disrespected or even treated as invisible. Even if their own workplaces are safe and they can get there without risking exposure, parents cannot return to work if their children have no schools or daycares to go to.

And those facilities cannot open if workers and children are not able to be safe, particularly because of the high level of proximity and contact that is a necessary part of engaged learning and care. But what do we mean by “safe”? What do we mean by “schooling as usual”?

“Safe” schools are in good repair and sufficiently staffed so that they can be cleaned and sanitized to reduce the risk of being exposed to COVID-19. Their educators and education workers are properly supported and resourced so they can practice physical distancing, take the time to meet students’ individual needs and to work with their families. They confront injustice and oppression, listening to students,

families and educators across the entire school community to keep kids safe, respected and nurtured. They recognize that the school’s responsibility is not to teach kids to adapt to the insufficient status quo, but to identify its failings and to be supported in changing it for the better.

Because of course, merely reopening schools will not “fix” social injustice. Racism, homophobia, misogyny, ableism, inequity, settler-colonialism.... All are pervasive in this society, and schools are not immune. But to address them requires broad community engagement and a commitment to listen to those most affected. It requires trust and accountability, and the ability to listen to and respond to criticism — and for all of us but especially those in positions of authority to recognize the role they have played in maintaining an unjust and oppressive status quo, and to commit to doing better. It’s hard work, much harder than a well-worded statement of support, which can far too often lead to sweeping the issue under the rug as a “difficult” or “painful” subject, or even rebranded as a feel-good exercise.

After several months of the shutdown, and with provinces exploring what reopening means and for what sectors, it’s clear that the conflict between those calling for a return to austerity and “system efficiencies,” and those advocating for a just, sustainable and healthy emergence, will continue.

But the veil that the elites have counted on for too long has been lifted. Inadequate funding formulas coupled with standardized assessments are a one-two neoliberal punch. They fuel good school/bad school narratives, and the demands for boutique programs and specialized schools that are the hallmark of a two-tier public system. They deny to marginalized communities the promise of what education and learning has to offer, while hiding behind edu-speak, racist assumptions and meritocratic gaslighting.

The tide is rising. We can rise with it, working for new and equitable standards of social progress and justice. Or we can cling to a failed status quo that will ultimately sink under its own gilded weight, dragging us and future generations down with it. ●



# Are we there yet?

## Neoliberal education and never-ending reform

Pamela Rogers

In the July 1994 edition of *OS/OS*, Maude Barlow wrote that public education had become the “scapegoat” for all types of societal ills, including an unskilled workforce, a failing economy, and the reason for Canada falling behind in international competition:

Educators are being loaded with society’s failures, and when they don’t find quick fixes, “reformers” are ready with radical solutions... Many current myths are gaining cheap currency. Our schools aren’t turning out scientists and mathematicians. That none of these myths is substantiated by fact is lost in the school reform zeal. (p. 77)

Barlow wrote this before the advent of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] test, and before strategic political messaging over social media, but during a time of drastic education funding cuts and back-to-basics reforms across Canada in the 1990s. Yet the concerns she raises, such as the push for science and mathematics, and “school reform zeal” are very much present-day matters in public education. Over 25 years later, public education in Canada continues to be subjected to constant cycles of one major reform plan after the next, which begs the question, *are we there yet?*

The simple answer to this question is no, because there is no “end” to neoliberal reform. Much like the goals of capitalism, the demand

for constant growth and improvement, and for the system to perform better with less funding, is ever-present. Without a defined end-goal, the need to compete at higher levels in international testing, and continually align schools with the future economy (which is uncertain and unknown), creates deep anxieties out of fear of being left behind.

To show how neoliberalism *works* in education policy and how it is replicated *regardless of the political party in power*, I use New Brunswick and Nova Scotia as exemplars, deconstructing their reform discourse to expose its underlying logic. I’ve focused on *testing* and *crisis* to show how systems quickly reform to achieve their goal — to use public schooling as a vehicle for global economic competitiveness.

### **PISA: “Hijacking” public education since 2001**

International PISA assessments were created by the OECD in the late 1990s as a way to track student performance in reading, mathematics, and science, with the intent to bolster learning in disciplines that support global economic competitiveness for industrialized nations. The triennial standardized test is administered globally at an estimated cost of \$80 million USD (without calculating the teacher labour to administer the test), which are then compiled and analyzed, resulting in global education rankings (Sjøberg, 2019).

Since the 1990s, critical conversations, including essays by OS/OS authors Larry Kuehn and Michael Corbett, have questioned the purposes and effects of international testing in local contexts. Sjøberg (2019) has called PISA a “hijacking” of public education, part of a process where “reforms that are not at all empirically founded are introduced, often overnight” (p. 14). The “hijacking” of public education systems globally is but one of many dire consequences when politically subscribing to a single test which, although developed and analyzed abroad, steers local decisions in public education.

### Another “failed” PISA test?

In New Brunswick’s 2019 reform plan, *Succeeding at Home: A Green Paper on Education*, education is named a key priority for the Progressive Conservative government. After a brief introduction, under the title “What do we mean when we talk about a world-class education system?” the 2015 PISA rankings are used to set the tone for the reform plan. Citing that New Brunswick was 10th in the world for science, 7th for reading, and 19th for mathematics, the document states:

New Brunswick’s education system appears to perform well on the international stage. However, in a rapidly changing world, this is not enough—we need to do better. We cannot afford to lag behind or even just keep pace. (p. 3)

Based on these figures, the *Green Paper* aims for New Brunswick to become a top-10 jurisdiction by 2030. At the back of the document, full standardized testing results in PISA, Pan-Canadian, and provincial assessments are provided in *Appendix B* (pp. 16–22). These results show that, on average, Canadian schools ranked 4th in science, 2nd in reading, and 7th in mathematics in the 2015 PISA round of testing — a far cry from falling behind the rest of the industrialized world.

But even with good-to-excellent results, the standings continue to be used politically to implement massive shifts, such as flexible ability-based groupings over age-based classrooms (p. 9), and to lessen teacher workload by implementing artificial intelligence tools for assessment (p. 10). While these suggestions sound innovative on paper, the changes are based on performance, with the claim that ability-based classes will foster high levels of student competition. Further, the use of artificial intelligence “to reduce teachers’ workloads” does not solve the issue of teacher workloads;

it essentially provides technology to remove professional autonomy from an essential aspect of teaching, standardizing assessment to easily track student performance.

Although discussions on classroom composition and student learning are also included, the reform plan begins and ends with catering to PISA.

### “The future of Nova Scotia depends on it”

Like New Brunswick, Nova Scotia uses PISA results as the basis for reform. Beginning with the consultation document *Disrupting the Status Quo: Nova Scotians Demand a Better Future for Every Student* (2014), assessment results cited in the Executive Summary set the tone:

The panel’s recommendations constitute a significant change for the management of our school system. There is no other choice... Given that our youth need to succeed in a competitive world, this is deeply disturbing. (p. 3)

*Disrupting the Status Quo* is alarmist. Standardized assessment scores are claimed to be beyond repair, and, therefore, the system must be overhauled completely, and immediately: “the future of Nova Scotia depends on it” (p. 4). In reality, the chart for Nova Scotia PISA mathematics results shows that test scores have fluctuated only slightly since 2003 (p. 10), and interestingly, the report does not include PISA reading and science results, in which Nova Scotia consistently performs at, or above, the Canadian average.

So, why the fuss? One reason to evoke crisis is to push through neoliberal reform at a rate Sjøberg described as “overnight.” In accordance with this sentiment, the executive summary suggests “There is a pressing need for the government to move forward with the full range of recommendations” (p.4). And in the follow-up reform document released four months later, *Nova Scotia’s Action Plan for Education, The 3R’s: Renew, Refocus, Rebuild* (2015), the same level of crisis is used to frame the proposed changes.

Like New Brunswick, the suggested changes are based on the narrative that Nova Scotia is failing in international assessments, and the answer to this crisis is to address the issue of test scores. In the Minister’s Message, Karen Casey adds, “In the simplest terms, we want to ensure that our students do better, especially in math and literacy, and that they are better prepared to lead productive lives in our changing world” (p. 5). In other words, student test scores in

math and literacy are directly correlated to their ability to be “productive” in a future economy.

In this way, public education, and more specifically, *test scores*, are presented as the best measure for the functioning of the system, but also as a measure for how the system is functioning, and for students’ possible futures. This is an enormous amount of pressure for the education system to be judged on a random sample of students taking a two-hour test highly criticized for its methodology and analysis.

### **Teacher performance and education crises**

The discourses in the *Green Paper* and *Action Plan* oscillate between crisis — mainly around failing tests scores and an aging education system — and hope. Both reform plans use similar tactics: deficit discourses negatively framing the system, students, and teachers, with strategically placed positivity throughout, which makes for a confusing, emotionally fraught read. Perhaps more interesting are the similarities in these two plans, from two different provinces and two governments from different political parties. The actual educational priorities are in the details of the plans, teacher performance management and student tracking through digital tools and/or artificial intelligence.

### **Teachers are “the best” pieces in the machinery of education**

On the last page of the *Green Paper*, Minister Cardy states “Teachers are the most important people in New Brunswick. We need you. We need you to feel supported in your work” (p. 23). However, the exact details that describe how teachers will receive this “support” in the reform plan seem contradictory: in one breath teachers are applauded, and in another, they are subject to an oversimplified equation of their place in the “machinery of the education system” (p. 5). The section titled “Students and teachers are the most important part of the education system” positions teachers as professionals who should be “working solely to advance their students,” within an education system that needs to be assessed on its support of teachers. But at the same time “teachers should be evaluated on how their students advance” (p. 5).

While seemingly innocuous, these statements point to future teacher performance evaluations as a function of the educational machinery. In spite of strategic use of words like “advancement” and “support,” the underlying message is that teachers are *not* autonomous professionals in the education system, but instead are

cogs carrying out the state formula for public education and are to be evaluated on their contribution to improved student performance (the goal of the *Green Paper*).

Later in the document, the *Green Paper* suggests that teacher workloads will be supported through artificial intelligence, primarily in areas of student assessment (ironically, the use of digital technologies which track student and teacher performance are discussed directly before the section titled “Teacher development, teacher freedom” [pp. 9–10]). Instead of dealing with underlying issues of teacher workloads, and supporting teachers by lowering class sizes, addressing classroom composition, or increasing preparation time, the plan suggests that technology could help take over some of the work for teachers “struggling with often excessive demands on their time” (p. 10).

This bait and switch strategy accomplishes two things: it *outwardly* addresses teacher workload, while *increasing standardized assessment* through technology. Such actions are not benign: the discussion of teacher workload is side-stepped, ignoring systemic and institutional factors that contribute to increased demands. Likewise, the use of artificial intelligence to assess student work diminishes teacher autonomy, and tracks data on teacher and student performance. In effect, teachers and students become data to measure the “machinery.”

Where do educators figure into education reform? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the push for higher test scores in education also means more accountability, performance reviews, and lessened teacher autonomy in a variety of ways, including in curriculum, planning, and assessment.

### **“Supporting teachers” through performance management**

The Nova Scotia *Action Plan* was released months after a province-wide consultation, and closely based its recommendations on the reported results. The document, *Disrupting the Status Quo* positioned high-quality teaching as fundamental for systemic change. But even though, statistically, 70% of respondents reported that students were already receiving highly effective teaching in their classes, *Disrupting the Status Quo* argued that teaching quality needed to be fixed, recommending tighter personnel management and higher standards for certification.

Under the fourth pillar, “Excellence in Teaching and Leadership,” the *Action Plan* recommends an overhaul of teacher certification,

the possible creation of a college of teachers, and the need for a “more robust performance management system” (p. 33). Unlike the *Green Paper*, which at least discusses teacher workload and classroom composition, the *Action Plan* positions teaching and leadership within neoliberal education discourses of performance, efficiency, and effectiveness, with rewards for excellence, and the creation of a new performance management system for teacher appraisal. While it is mentioned that teachers have “enormous responsibilities and increasing demands,” and “need support, time, and structure” the focus on *support* is solely in the context of enhancing student achievement (p. 33) — not to change underlying issues related to the enormous demands and responsibilities educators face. While both provinces insist that teachers’ professional work matters, their plans show that student performance is the bottom line, and the way to control it is through increased control of educators. Instead of addressing systemic issues, the *Action Plan* places more pressure on teacher performance, positioning disciplinary actions as being “supportive” of teachers’ workloads.

In January 2018, a second consultation, *Raise the Bar*, was released, authored by Dr. Avis Glaze. Three years after the *Action Plan*, and one year after the provincial Liberal government legislated Bill 75, imposing a contract on teachers after failed negotiations, *Raise the Bar* called for the dismantling of elected school boards, removal of administrators from the Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union (NSTU), and the creation of a college of teachers. Due to action from the NSTU and its membership, the college was not created, but elected school boards were dismantled, and within months, administrators removed from the NSTU; at a pace one might call “overnight.”

### **The Equation: Consult, Reform, Repeat**

Education reform plans often invoke crisis rhetoric out of fear of falling behind, and urge an immediate need to reform. Such tactics are not new or original, and in many jurisdictions have been very effective at shocking the general public into accepting swift, and major changes to education systems, often without proper research or consultation with teachers.

In the case of Nova Scotia, the government used PISA test scores to create a crisis of confidence in public education, which set the stage for a major consultation, a consultation paper, and an identical reform plan, which set into motion the next consultation. In effect,

Nova Scotia demonstrates the neoliberal education reform pattern perfectly: consult, reform, dismantle, and repeat.

New Brunswick’s reform plan, on the surface, was not as aggressively neoliberal as Nova Scotia’s *Action Plan*, but, the underlying message is that both provinces are facing major crises in education. This is justified by citing PISA test scores, which are used to support the introduction of artificial intelligence for student assessment in New Brunswick, and tightened performance management in both provinces.

Overall, perhaps the most confusing tactic is the use of conflicting language; on the one hand, claiming that the education system is excellent, and on the other, stating that the education system is in crisis and is failing. These confusions are not neutral, but part of the logic of neoliberal education reform: say everything and nothing at once, and play on the public’s fears and emotional responses to drive through reform measures quickly, with little resistance to what is configured as “common sense.”

Neoliberal education reforms continue to cross jurisdictional boundaries (Ontario or Alberta readers might be experiencing déjà-vu), re-selling the same defunct package — well past its “best before” date — to the next in line. It is critical that advocates understand the language of reform policies to see the patterns more clearly, and to resist those changes that work to dismantle public education systems. ●

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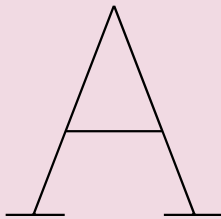
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# We can't get back to work until child care works

**Simon Enoch**



As regions around the world prepare to “open” their respective economies, they are quickly realizing that the ability to get people back to work rests on a long invisible and underappreciated but essential service: child care.

One of the more remarkable aspects of the COVID-19 crisis is the way it has revealed just how much we rely on the labour of others. The essential labour of public health workers, grocery store workers, postal carriers, utility workers, long-haul truckers and many others have sustained us to the point that we can even entertain re-opening the economy. But as we've seen, the ability of even these essential workers to do their jobs, often rests on the ability of teachers and child care workers to do theirs. The fact that governments around the world immediately prioritized emergency child care services for other essential workers demonstrates that available child care underpins the ability of much of our economy to properly function.

Here in Saskatchewan, 219,000 workers — roughly 40 percent of the workforce — have children under the age of 18. A large proportion of these workers will not be able to return to work without some form of school or child care — neither of which is set to re-open anytime soon according to the government's reopening plan.

We can announce the economy is open for business until we are blue in the face, but unless parents have somewhere to send their children, those workers aren't going anywhere. Sure, some may be able to continue to work from home, but many others will be faced with the impossible choice of returning to work without sufficient care in place for their children. How many will turn to elderly relatives

for child care, further risking their health, as has happened in Italy and Spain? How will the government support those workers who are recalled to work but have no choice but to remain home because they do not have child care?

The fact that these questions remain unanswered in the wake of the government's reopening plan is disturbing, but not all that surprising. Governments in Saskatchewan — of all political stripes — simply have not seen the need to prioritize affordable and accessible child care in the province, so it is not unexpected that it received such scant attention in the government's reopening plan. As Courtney Carlberg and Jen Budney document, child care in Saskatchewan has always been thought of as primarily the responsibility of the family rather than government. As a result, Saskatchewan ranks the lowest in the country in overall quality measures and rates of access, while our child care workers are some of the lowest-paid in the country.

Yet, as others have observed, it is an open question how much of our currently inadequate child care system in Canada will even survive the COVID-19 crisis. The loss of parent fees — their main source of revenue — without sufficient government relief will see the number of child care spaces shrink even further — at the exact time we are trying to transition people back to work and disproportionately impact women. Equally important is the safety of child care workers. How many will be willing to risk their health to return to a position that is often grossly underpaid and underappreciated — particularly in a profession that was already prone to high rates of turnover?

Many of these issues existed prior to COVID-19, the crisis has — like so much else — rendered them much more visible for all of us to see. If COVID-19 teaches us anything, it is that governments can no longer treat child care as an afterthought. As it becomes increasingly clear that accessible quality child care is the bedrock upon which so much of our economy depends, governments must begin to make investments commensurate with its increasingly visible role as the lynchpin of our economy. We can't get back to work until child care in our country works. ●

**Simon Enoch** is Director of the Saskatchewan Office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. An earlier version of this article appeared at [behindthenumbers.ca](https://behindthenumbers.ca).



# Digital technology and BC education

## Underlying issues revealed by COVID-19

Michelle Gautreaux and Anne Hales

COVID-19 has put the issue of technology front and centre in Canadian public education. Teachers across the country have quickly adapted instruction to online formats to provide ‘continuity of learning’ for their students, while tending to their own family and personal needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rushing to put materials online and teach remotely in the context of a global health pandemic is not the same as the careful, time-consuming process of creating online courses or activities. Nonetheless, the current public health crisis is illuminating BC teachers’ longstanding experiences with technological inequity, work intensification and the increasing commodification of public education by the growing ‘ed-tech’ industry.

### **Technological inequities exposed**

The system-wide move to remote learning has exposed and exacerbated existing social inequity among students and families in BC. The longstanding lack of access to reliable and

up-to-date technology in schools and homes across BC has become more visible in the context of COVID-19. Prior to the current health crisis, many teachers found themselves forging along without reliable internet access in their schools, struggling to secure enough laptops, tablets, computer lab time and tech support to meet “21<sup>st</sup> century learning” outcomes. In the face of such tech shortages, some school districts have opted for ‘bring your own device’ policies, which in practice put the onus on individual families to make up for what is not — but should be — provided to all students. These inequities have been reinforced since the shift online back in March of this year. Not all BC families have access to reliable internet at home and this is especially the case in rural communities across the province. Not all students have their own personal devices or a quiet space to study. In many homes, parents and children are sharing one computer. Not all children can easily self-direct their learning at home — especially younger children — and not all parents are able to spend time helping their children with at-home learning. Not to

mention those families who don't have a home to do 'at-home' learning in. These inequities are resulting in less 'continuity of learning' for some students — despite teachers' best efforts. This results in some students being more easily able to continue their learning while others struggle to access and work through home activities prepared by their teachers — and potentially widening the gap for when they return to the classroom.

### **Digital Technology and the 24/7 Teacher**

Digital learning platforms, online assessment and reporting tools, along with email as the key form of communication, are supposed to make teachers' work easier as well as facilitate more direct communication with parents and students. While there are many positive aspects to increased communication, the not so talked about reality is that teachers' workdays have become longer as the boundary of 'work' and 'home' increasingly blurs. Many teachers find themselves answering emails from parents and students at home after school hours (late evening, during weekends) and even on vacation. It's worth noting that as a profession comprised mostly of women, this urge to be available and ready to respond to any email from a parent or student at any time is also but is part of a broader, longstanding societal and cultural expectation that sees teaching as a "philanthropic vocation or a romantic calling" for women<sup>1</sup>. In the challenge to balance the "anywhere, anytime" features of online platforms and communications with their care for students and the need to maintain a reasonable work-life balance, teachers have been struggling to establish reasonable 'digital work hours' for themselves. COVID-19 has further blurred any work-home separation, as many

teachers are balancing teaching remotely and being attentive to their students' emotional and mental health needs during this crisis while also caring for their family members (including children, partners, elders, and extended family) as well as themselves.

### **The increasing commercialization of public education**

The past decade has seen the growth of a multi-billion-dollar global education technology market where big tech giants like Google and Microsoft as well as venture

capitalist funded ed-tech start-ups promise to 'transform' education through 'personalised learning', tailored to each individual student's needs and interests. Seeing teachers, school administrators and students as consumers of education products, ed-tech companies are providing increasingly greater educational services to schools and students. For example, Google and Microsoft have ensured that their platforms — Google Suite for Education and Microsoft Teams — are 'one-stop shops' for delivering online educational experiences. The COVID-19 crisis has created an enormous marketing and profit-making opportunity for global ed-tech companies as entire school systems across the world have had to suddenly make the shift online and use large-scale digital platforms and services to deliver all aspects of education. While many ed-tech services and platforms are 'free' for teachers and students (and many more have become so during this pandemic), teachers are asking: "What is this really costing us? How do we know that companies are not mining student data?" Profit-driven companies don't offer 'free' services just for the sake of it. Moreover, across Canada and the US, insufficient protocols are in place to protect student and teacher data. Recent "zoombombing" incidents on the video conferencing platform Zoom, which is used across many BC school districts, further illustrate concerns about privacy and security.

### **Classroom as community: Relationships, social interaction and engagement**

The move to remote learning during this pandemic has been wrought with challenges and teachers, parents and students have been doing their best to make the current situation work. COVID-19 has forced a re-evaluation of the importance of face-to-face learning, illustrating the indispensable role of teachers in students' educational journeys, and of schools as communities of care, connection, and socialization. As one BC teacher reflected on their experience with remote learning during this crisis, "The biggest and most important change with these two contexts [at home vs. at school] is the disconnection. The physical and temporal distance. When we spend 6 hours a day together in one place, we are bound by micro traumas, by micro celebrations, by the mundane and extraordinary of daily existence".

While some integral aspects of the educational experience just cannot be replicated or replaced online, it's important to keep in mind that for some students, engaging in an online

**COVID-19 has forced a re-evaluation of the importance of face-to-face learning, illustrating the indispensable role of teachers in students' educational journeys, and of schools as communities of care, connection, and socialization.**

platform can provide different opportunities for participation. As one Grade 5 teacher noted, for some of their very quiet and shy students, virtual learning has “enabled them to feel more confident to share their learning and reflect a personality with me on camera...this tool can enable some to feel more confident to express themselves without holding back.” The key takeaway is that what makes a meaningful educational experience is social interaction and connection between teachers and students, as well as amongst classroom peers. Technology that is used as a supplementary to enhance the relational aspect of education is what has

been most impactful. As we prepare for what education will look like after this health crisis, let’s keep this lesson in mind. ●

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### Notes

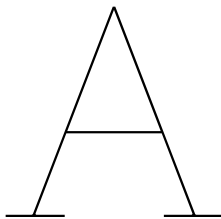
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# De-confinement

## Rethinking screen-time in a post-COVID context

Jacques Brodeur



At the time of writing, our entire country is still struggling to survive a deadly pandemic that traveled across the world. With the exception of workers in sectors deemed “essential”, most of our fellow Canadians have stayed at home hoping to avoid damage for themselves and their family. The economic and social impacts have taken a tremendous toll, which we are grappling with as we move towards de-confinement.

But in the context of physical distancing, the COVID-19 shutdown has had huge implications for how we engage with media and technology, as workers, students and educators. Within three months, “global downloads of Skype, Houseparty and Zoom each surged by more than 100 percent in March, with the latter proving particularly popular among people meeting up virtually while being confined to their homes. The videoconferencing app was downloaded nearly 27 million times this month, up from just 2.1 million times in January.”

When school resumes, life at home during confinement will be the first topic on the agenda, allowing students (and educators) to express feelings and relay their experiences and opinions. Recognizing that so much has changed since mid-March, here are five resources or considerations for educators, parents, students and families in preparation for

the eventual resumption of in-person classes, and a world lived less on-screen.

### **1. Emotional and mental health during confinement**

Addressing the emotional and mental health of students will be a priority. A QMI Press Agency survey of 1,408 Quebec adults, conducted between April 12–20th and released on the 22nd, found that among psychological and emotional impacts of confinement, loneliness was the greatest, as confirmed by 42 percent of parents. Mood, frustration, worry, and insecurity were the four sentiments that deteriorated the most: 48 percent of respondents saw their child’s behavior degrading since the beginning of pandemic, and 35 percent found their children more irritable and aggressive.

### **2. Screen time and isolation**

When kids are forced to stay home, screen entertainment is an easy way to keep them quiet and occupied, particularly when parents are also trying to get their own (paid or unpaid) work done. This sort of engagement — watching TV, playing video games, and social networking — is common but, unlike online homework or communicating with friends and relatives, is not particularly collective in nature. According to researcher Linda Pagani from University of Montréal: “[Kids] should plan a certain amount of time each day for altruistic communication with friends and acquaintances. Isolated people

**The role of the school and the people who work there, as a site where all of these concerns and connections are so apparent, requires careful consideration to ensure workers, children and families receive the care and support they require as we de-confine and resume more of our lives off-line.**

will need human contact during the crisis. Older people are a priority right now because they often live alone and are more concerned about their well-being than others are.”

### **3. Intentional use of technology**

Confinement has forced families to change daily habits, and for parents working in their home, letting their kids watch cartoons is an easy alternative. The Children’s Screen-Time Action Network (launched by the Campaign for a Commercial-free Childhood — CCFC) recently hosted an online webinar presenting strategies to develop healthy digital habits and to help parents use design-thinking

inspired approaches to cope with challenging emotions and create reassuring structures. The webinar also promoted Digital Wellness Day on May 1st to empower individuals, organizations, and communities to be change agents toward a culture of flourishing, both online and offline. The DWD Collective, a global association of experts and organizations, collaborate to enhance human relationships through the intentional use and development of technology.

### **4. Off-screen activities**

In response to research recommending no screen time for kids under the age of 6, and only a maximum of an hour a day for older children, some parents have chosen to keep their kids away from screens altogether, but that can be easier in theory than in practice. Some parents have had good luck replacing screen viewing with podcasts, or keeping kids busy with cooking, plasticine, dancing, drawing, reading, and indoor or outdoor gardening. Other parents have instead focused on the content of the screen time, limiting choices to educational programs and watching and discussing them as a family.

### **5. Screen time reduction, at home and in school**

A few organizations in Canada, France, and the U.S. have transformed screen time reduction (STR) into educational school-wide programs. **Screen-Free Week** was created in the U.S. back in 1994, and has expanded to Canada. Screen-Free Week and Screen-Free Challenge have proven to be easy and pleasant ways for students to evaluate the borderline between technology that serves and technology that dis-serves, and rediscover activities they used to enjoy. After the COVID-19 lockdown, CCFC introduced Screen-Free Saturdays in recognition that families across the globe have had to loosen their screen time rules just to get through the week while juggling work, remote learning, keeping in touch with loved ones, and following the latest developments. SFS is an opportunity for families to take a break from the seemingly endless noise of quarantine life and recharge for the coming week...and it’s great for our mental and physical health to boot! Canadian readers and families can register online: <https://www.screenfree.org/saturdays/>

De-confinement is unlikely to be smooth: jurisdictions will pursue reopening at different speeds, and as the risk of exposure increases with contact we may have to reconfine. The risks are even greater for populations whose health is more vulnerable — people who are immune-compromised cannot consider increased contact without a vaccine. The impact of the lockdown, including reduced broader social connection, on peoples’ emotional and mental health cannot be underestimated. Governments are also remaking and updating income supports, workplace protections and social programs, in the broader context of growing recognition of how we are all much more connected than we realize. The role of the school and the people who work there, as a site where all of these concerns and connections are so apparent, requires careful consideration to ensure workers, children and families receive the care and support they require as we de-confine and resume more of our lives off-line. ●

**Jacques Brodeur** is the founder of Edupax, a Québec-based not for profit organization dedicated to critical media education and ending violence among school-aged children. Brodeur was a physical education teacher from 1967 to 2000, and began serving on the board of the Action Coalition for Media Education in 2002.



# Show me the money

## Canada's K-12 education funding landscape

Amin Ali

Canada's schools are funded through 13 different provincial and territorial funding formulas, which are highly structured grants for operating and capital costs. While all formulas address similar core costs, grant structures and allocation methods vary significantly, allowing for uniquely progressive or regressive funding approaches.

Education has been referred to as the “great equalizer”, opening the door of opportunity wide to everyone in society regardless of their race or ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, this promise of public education is dependent on the adequacy of the funding formulas. Without this, the best education policies, action plans, and strategies won't be worth the paper they're printed on (especially in a climate crisis where we need to save every tree we can).

This article sets out the basic structure of the funding formulas in each province and territory and, unless otherwise specified, uses estimates based on the most recently-available territorial

and provincial budget and fiscal framework documents. (Please refer to them for additional information and explanation.) It does not, for the most part, provide commentary on funding formula adequacy or effectiveness in supporting student need or ensuring equity.

Also unaddressed in this analysis is the way in which COVID-19 has impacted education during the cross-Canada shutdown, or what recovery means for schools and students across the country. The scope of the impact, and the scale to which inequity has been revealed, will necessitate heavy investment in emotional and mental health supports. Physical distancing and other health and safety measures will require smaller classes — at a time when class sizes have become a contentious issue at the bargaining table — and significantly increased cleaning and decontamination of schools. All of this will have tremendous implications for education funding going forward — both the amount of funding allocated, but also whether the structure of each jurisdiction's funding formula ensures that student needs are met.



### **British Columbia**

British Columbia's \$6 billion education system is funded through an Operating Grant Allocation Formula oriented around four categories.\*

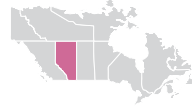
The province spends 2.6% of GDP on education<sup>1</sup>, 78% of which flows through the Basic Allocation for foundational per-pupil funding. Additionally, 15% of funding is provided via Unique Student grants, which provide per-pupil top-ups to support diverse student populations such as socio-economically challenged and Indigenous students. A further 7% comes through Unique District grants, which support the specific realities of individual boards such as low enrollment, sparseness, and density. The remaining allocation is funding protection for declining enrollment<sup>2</sup>. On the capital side, BC funds boards via a \$115 million Annual Facility Grant for maintenance and repairs<sup>3</sup>.

After close to 30 years of no review, when elected the NDP government launched a Funding Model Review Panel which tabled 22 recommendations in late 2018. They found significant issues in funding and assessment for students with special needs, approaches to differing cost pressures of urban, rural, and remote boards, and level of support for Indigenous and vulnerable students<sup>4</sup>. This comes after two decades of deep underfunding; the BC Teachers Federation estimated 2018-19 per-pupil spending in BC to be \$1,800 below the national average<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, public education has gone from comprising 20.3% of the BC budget in 2000-01 to 11.3% in 2019-20, forcing boards to increasingly rely on international student tuition revenue, which quadrupled to nearly \$250 million by 2018. One board, West Vancouver School District, saw a whopping 13% of its budget come from tuition fees<sup>6</sup>.

Underfunding has produced a school repair backlog, estimated in July 2017 by the Ministry of Education at over \$5 billion in deferred maintenance<sup>7</sup>. The Vancouver School Board, with its \$740 million backlog, by 2019 had 87 out of its 110 schools being in "poor" or "very poor" condition<sup>8</sup>.

**Of note:** *The province begins implementing 12 of the 22 funding model review recommendations in 2020-21, focusing on supports for children's mental health and vulnerable and Indigenous students<sup>9</sup>. Acting on the remaining*

*recommendations may produce a huge shake-up in inclusive education funding.*



### **Alberta**

Alberta's \$8.2 billion education system is funded through its Funding Manual, which is structured around six different allocation categories.

The province spends 3.3% of GDP on education<sup>10</sup>, and the bulk of funding flows through the Base Instruction allocation, which funds all boards on a per-pupil basis until Grade 9 and on a credit enrollment basis for Grades 10-12. The manual also allocates 15 Additional Funding for Differential Factor grants, which finance cost-factors such as operating northern schools and supporting unique student populations like socio-economically disadvantaged pupils. Other grants include Targeted Funding for Provincial Initiatives, such as the former NDP government's School Nutrition Program, and First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Funding<sup>11</sup>.

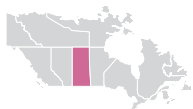
The new UCP government has made reducing education costs a top priority; its first budget in 2019 eliminated \$428 million in class size and school fee reduction grants, replacing them with a one-time transition grant of \$153 million. FOIs by the Alberta Teachers' Association found these reductions cut education spending by \$136 million in 2019 alone while enrollment climbed 13,000, reducing per-pupil funding from \$10,917 in 2018/19 to \$10,476 in 2020<sup>12</sup>.

This, combined with a freeze in education spending at 2018-19 levels until 2023, projected enrollment growth of over 60,000<sup>13</sup> and annual cost growth of 2.2%<sup>14</sup> through to 2023 has put enormous pressure on boards. This year the Calgary Board of Education cut 150 support staff<sup>15</sup> and nearly eliminated 317 teachers mid-year before the province allowed capital dollars to be spent on operating costs<sup>16</sup>. Boards are using capital dollars for operating shortfalls amid a growing school repair backlog, as the 2019 budget committed only \$1.8 billion in capital dollars to Alberta schools (the Calgary and Edmonton boards alone face a \$2 billion+ repair backlog)<sup>17</sup>.

**Of note:** *The province is introducing a new "Weighted Moving Average" funding model for 2020-21. It no longer funds based on verified fall enrollment, but 20% on last year's enrollment*



+ 30% current year's enrollment + 50% upcoming year's forecasted enrollment, an approach Support Our Students Alberta calculates will underfund 75% of boards and reduce the value of per-pupil spending 17% by 2023<sup>18</sup>.



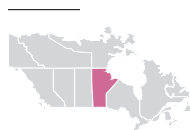
### **Saskatchewan**

Saskatchewan funds its \$1.9 billion education system through its Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 Funding Distribution Model, which consists of nine expense components.

The province spends 4.1% of GDP on education<sup>19</sup>, and 78% of funding flows through its Instruction Allocation. It consists of a Base Instruction amount for core activities like teacher compensation and supplements for special education and school supplies. It also provides for School Operations and Maintenance, Transportation, Governance, Administration, and Language allocations. The model employs a variety of allocation methods, from the per-pupil approach for base instruction to the socioeconomic factor-based model of special education to the combination of base funding, per-pupil funding, per-school funding, and geographic funding for governance and administration<sup>20</sup>. On the capital side, the province provides a Preventative Maintenance and Renewal program, which provides \$50.4 million for proactive maintenance and repairs<sup>21</sup>. However, the province's schools face a \$1.3 billion repair backlog<sup>22</sup>.

The province recently reached an agreement with the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation; class size was the largest funding issue at the bargaining table. The STF favoured collective agreement provisions mandating resources for lowering class sizes, while the government preferred an arrangement away from the bargaining table<sup>23</sup>. With a lack of a class size policy or real tracking, the government and federation have disputed class size, with the former saying the provincial average is 19 and the STF says it's anywhere between 22–40<sup>24</sup>.

**Of note:** As part of bargaining, the government has struck a "Provincial Committee on Class Size and Composition", comprised of stakeholders with a mandate to develop recommendations for a framework on class size and composition for potential implementation for 2020-21.<sup>25</sup>



### **Manitoba**

Manitoba funds its \$1.3 billion education system through its Funding for Schools Program, oriented around two types of grants: Base Support and Categorical Support.

The province spends 4.7% of GDP on education<sup>26</sup> through a system where the province funds around 60% of education and boards fund 40% through the education property tax (Manitoba boards are among the last in the country to still wield control over the mill rate)<sup>27</sup>. Base Support covers foundational needs for all boards using 11 different allocations, providing basic per-pupil funding via Instructional Support, socio-economic supplements via Student Services Grants, and rural school supports via Sparsity Supports. Categorical Supports provide more targeted resources, like special education resources, Indigenous and International Languages funding, and small/northern school allowances<sup>28</sup>. In all, provincial government documents put funding at \$13,284 per pupil<sup>29</sup>.

The Pallister government has adopted a cost-reduction focus for education, increasing funding for 2019-20 by just 0.5% (compared to 2% inflation and 1% enrollment growth)<sup>30</sup>. According to the Manitoba Teachers' Society this represents the third consecutive year funding has dropped in real terms. Additionally, the province downloaded costs to school boards, as the provincial share of operating funding declined from 63% in 2016-17 to 59% in 2018/19<sup>31</sup>. As a re-election promise the government committed to begin phasing out education property tax at a cost of \$830 million, pledging to fill the gap in the education budget with general revenues but not specifying how<sup>32</sup>.

On the capital side, the province invests \$24 million annually in school repairs<sup>33</sup>, leading to a growing school repair backlog; the province's largest board, Winnipeg School Division reported a 2018 repair backlog of \$261 million<sup>34</sup>.

**Of note:** The province has launched a "Manitoba Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12", a review co-chaired by former Saskatchewan and Manitoba politicians who were strong proponents of their respective province's 1990s austerity drives. The Commission may recommend sweeping amalgamations, education property tax and funding overhauls, and curriculum changes<sup>35</sup>.



### **Ontario**

Ontario's \$31.6 billion education system operates under the complex Grants for Student Needs (GSN) funding formula.

The province spends 3.7% of GDP<sup>36</sup> on education. School boards receive 85% of funding via the GSNs<sup>37</sup>, which has two types of grants: Foundation and Special Purpose Grants. The Pupil and School Foundation Grants go to every school board to cover costs common to all schools, such as educator salaries. The 13 Special Purpose Grants support needs unique to particular students, schools, and boards<sup>38</sup>, such as rural education via the Geographic Circumstance Grant, and breaking down socio-economic barriers via the Learning Opportunities Grant. Ontario's funding formula is heavily predicated on enrollment, with 75% of the GSNs being linked to headcounts and the remainder being provided on a per-board or demographic basis<sup>39</sup>.

The province's Financial Accountability Office found over the next five years the Ontario government intends to maintain education spending at 1% growth annually while core cost drivers of inflation and enrollment are projected to increase by 2.7% annually. The FAO projected that the government's original cost-cutting demands of increasing class sizes and mandatory e-learning would remove over 10,000 teachers and \$2.8 billion from the system over five years<sup>40</sup>. (Note that the original demands were scaled back during negotiations but still resulted in an increase in class size and two mandatory e-learning credits.)

These measures reduced per-pupil spending to \$12,246 for 2019-20<sup>41</sup> and these cuts come to a system which as of 2017 ranked 18th out of 18th in the Great Lakes and 45th across all 61 U.S. and Canadian jurisdictions in terms of per-pupil funding<sup>42</sup>. This history of underfunding has produced a school repair backlog of \$16.3 billion<sup>43</sup>, and while Ontario is investing \$1.4 billion<sup>44</sup> in repairs via the School Renewal Allocation and School Condition Improvement program, the backlog is still projected to climb. The province's largest board, Toronto District School Board, projects its backlog could hit \$5.2 billion by 2023.<sup>45</sup>

**Of note:** *With intermediate and secondary class sizes still set to increase, and back-door mandatory e-learning still on the table through a murky*

*opt-out, the full impact of cuts to education continues to unfold in Ontario's schools.*



### **Quebec**

Quebec funds its \$11.3 billion education system through grants from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education that account for 78% of funding<sup>46</sup> and education property taxes controlled by school boards<sup>47</sup>/service centres. This funding is allocated through a framework of annual budgetary rules, which provide for two types of allocations: Basic Allocations for foundational services and Additional Allocations for enveloped grants to enact ministry priorities. (Note that Grades 10-12 in Quebec are part of the CEGEP/college system, but would be considered secondary school in other provinces and territories.)

There are four types of Basic Allocations: Organization of Services, and Education Activities in Youth, Adult, and Vocational sectors<sup>48</sup>. The former allocation funds office administration, facilities maintenance, and support for geographic realities, while the other three grants fund teacher and support worker compensation. Youth sector funding is allocated with a standard base amount plus per-pupil allocations plus allocations specific to each board's circumstances<sup>49</sup>.

Quebec invests 3.7% of GDP in education,<sup>50</sup> however this is lower than in 2009-10 when the province was investing 3.9%.<sup>51</sup> This reflects the toll of the Couillard Liberal government's austerity measures; Institut de recherche et d'informations socioéconomiques (IRIS) found in 2018 that after four years the government had cut \$337 million from the province's schools<sup>52</sup>. Underfunding has produced a \$5.3 billion capital repair backlog where 54% of schools are in a "poor" or "very poor" condition; consequently, the 2020-2030 Quebec Infrastructure Plan allocates \$19.2 billion for maintenance and repairs<sup>53</sup>.

**Of note:** *In their 2020 budget the CAQ government under Premier Legault announced new investments in education for 2020-2021. It will be interesting to see if this level of commitment is maintained or if it changes as the full impact of the COVID-19 economic downturn hits...and how the public responds to the reopening of schools and daycares.*<sup>54</sup>



### **Nova Scotia**

Nova Scotia funds its \$1.4 billion education system through a funding framework and a number of funding envelopes outside the formula.

The province invests 4% of its GDP in education<sup>55</sup>, approximately \$1 billion of which flows through a formula of seven operating grants. The largest grant is Instruction and School Services, which covers core classroom costs like teacher compensation and school supplies on an enrollment basis. There are also allocations for School Management and Support for school operations, Student Support for special education, Student Transportation, and Property Services for school maintenance<sup>56</sup>. There also are some unique envelopes outside of the formula, such as African Canadian Services which provides \$6 million to a directorate that works with African Nova Scotian communities to ensure the system is equitable and culturally responsive to Black histories and traditions. The province also provides \$74 million in capital dollars for school purchases and repair<sup>57</sup>.

Nova Scotia's education system has recently undergone some significant reforms as the government implements recommendations from "Raise the Bar", a sweeping 22 recommendation report that has led to the abolition of all but francophone school boards and removal of 1,000 principals and vice principals from the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union<sup>58</sup>. One of the biggest reforms has been the introduction of a needs-based education funding model where non-formula program grants, which account for 10% of funding, are now allocated by the regional centre of education according to the number of Individual Education Plans and standardized test results. However, stakeholders like the NSTU have voiced concern at the use of standardized test results, which miss other crucial factors like child poverty rates and youth mental health challenges.<sup>59</sup>

**Of note:** *The province continues to implement the recommendations of the Glaze report and the first full year of needs-based funding; further funding adjustments and other major changes could be possible. [Editor's note: For more information about education in NS and NB, please see Pamela Rogers' article in this issue of OS/OS.]*



### **New Brunswick**

New Brunswick funds its \$1.3 billion education system through a funding formula with three main funding envelopes and several smaller allocations.

The province invests 3.9% of GDP<sup>60</sup> (\$10,837 per pupil<sup>61</sup>) into education, and the bulk of funding flows through the \$1.1 billion School Districts grant. This allocation funds board office operations, classroom instruction, and school facilities management. The Corporate and Other Education Services grant supports curriculum development, standardized testing, and specialized services for special needs, and the Early Childhood Development grant supports early years programming. Other allocations include the First Nations Educational Fund for Indigenous education and Computers for Schools grant for technology acquisitions<sup>62</sup>. On the capital side, the province invests \$23.5 million in school repairs<sup>63</sup>, compared to a provincial school renewal backlog of \$245 million as of 2016-17, and 274 out of 300 schools needing repairs<sup>64</sup>.

New Brunswick's framework for education funding operates in a unique education context; Canada's only officially bilingual province operates parallel anglophone and francophone school systems with four english boards, 3 French boards, 43,000 anglophone students, 29,000 francophone pupils, and 25,000 French immersion student<sup>65</sup>. The system also operates under an incredible degree of policy turnover, as the province has seen five different governments since 2005, each of a different party than its predecessor. Thus, "a student starting school in September 2004 would have experienced five education strategies, each with different priorities, by the time they graduated<sup>66</sup>."

**Of note:** *The province's new Progressive Conservative government has proposed major education reforms for 2020-21, phasing out age-based grades in kindergarten-Grade 2 to be replaced by "flexible learning environments" where students are grouped based on "readiness, interests, and learning profiles". Additionally, the province is launching a "Red Tape Challenge in Public Education" and evaluating using artificial intelligence for student assessments.<sup>67</sup>*



### **Prince Edward Island**

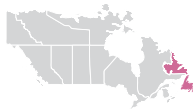
Prince Edward Island's \$300 million education system operates under an Education Authority Funding and Staffing Program.

The province invests 3.8% of GDP in education into education<sup>68</sup>, which flows via two grants: a Salaries Wages and Benefits allocation and an Operations allocation. The Salaries, Wages, and Benefits grant covers all teacher, administrator, and supervisory staff compensation. The Operations grant breaks down into six sub-allocations for school board administration, school maintenance and operations, school supplies (funded at \$119 per student), student transportation and professional development<sup>69</sup>. On the capital side, the province has a \$3.2 million School Capital Repair program, which received a \$1.2 million increase from the new Progressive Conservative government<sup>70</sup>. However, government also cancelled the former Liberal government's \$500,000 school infrastructure review assessing long-term school renewal and replacement needs, choosing instead to use boards' existing capital priority lists<sup>71</sup>.

The province has moved to fund a number of new education programs, such as a universal school lunch program launching in fall 2020. This aims to increase student achievement by reducing health inequities through school-served healthy lunches using a pay-what-you-can model, with a maximum price of \$5<sup>72</sup>. Additionally, the government has also committed to introducing a universal half-day pre-kindergarten program for 4 year-olds by fall 2020<sup>73</sup>.

**Of note:** *In addition to universal school lunches and pre-kindergarten, the government has outlined a broad agenda for education with commitments to reviewing education funding, program and standardized testing models, reinstating elected school boards, and applying a climate lens to the Education department<sup>74</sup>.*

### **Newfoundland and Labrador**

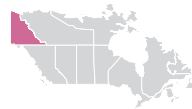


Newfoundland and Labrador's \$823 million education system operates with a funding model of six different envelopes.

The province invests 3% of GDP into education<sup>75</sup>, \$747 million of which flows through the Financial Assistance grant to cover teacher compensation, school board operations, and school supplies. Additionally, there is a Program Development grant for curriculum development, Student Support Services grant for special needs and inclusive education supports, Educational Programs grant for policy research and evaluation, and a Child and Family Development grant for early years programming.<sup>76</sup>

Much of the province's recent investments into education funding emanate from the 2018 Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes. The review produced a five year Education Action Plan, launched in 2018, with 82 recommendations in nine areas from mental health to mathematics and multicultural education<sup>77</sup>. The fall 2019 Budget allocated \$13 million towards the plan's recommendations which have led to hundreds of new reading specialists and EAs and teacher-librarians in schools, a social and emotional development curriculum, and a framework for enhanced multicultural education in every grade<sup>78</sup>.

**Of note:** *The province continues to implement the balance of its Education Action Plan recommendations, with reforms to special education funding, the role of guidance counsellors, math assessment frameworks, and supports for newcomer students on the docket<sup>79</sup>.*



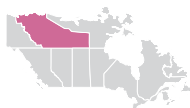
### **Yukon**

Yukon's \$218 million public education system operates under a funding formula with three main funding envelopes.

The territory invests 5.8% of GDP into education<sup>80</sup>, the bulk of which flows through the \$127 million Schools and Student Services grant for administration, staffing, special needs supports, and student transportation. The Policy and Partnerships grant supports collaboration with First Nations and other stakeholders on program standards, curriculum, and research. The First Nations Initiatives grant facilitates Indigenous education through First Nations curriculum development and language initiatives. On the capital side, the territory funds \$25 million in education capital spending for school repairs and infrastructure replacements<sup>81</sup>.

**Of note:** *The Department of Education has agreed to the Auditor General's*

recommendations for educational outcomes, inclusive education, and First Nations culture and languages, committing an array of reviews, consultations and policy revisions.

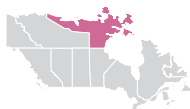


### **Northwest Territories**

The Northwest Territories funds its \$155 million education system through a School Funding Framework comprised of four funding envelopes.

The territory invests 4.8% of GDP into education<sup>82</sup>, with much of the funding flowing through the Territorial Schools grant, which finances classroom staffing, school operations and maintenance, student transportation, over-enrollment top-ups. The Administration and School Services grant supports school board administration and staffing, the Inclusive Schooling grant funds specialized teacher and professional development, and the Indigenous Languages and Education grant for Indigenous language instruction staff and Indigenous learning centres. The territory identifies base, enrollment-linked, geographic, CPI-linked and targeted funding as main education funding vehicles<sup>83</sup>.

**Of note:** In response to years of accumulating reports pointing to a deterioration in the territory's education system, new Premier and past Education Minister Catherine Cochrane has said "It's time that our whole system is looked at," because "We're failing our children<sup>84</sup>." Thus, education reform may become a centerpiece of her new government's agenda.



### **Nunavut**

Nunavut's \$250 million education system is funded via a funding formula with five main envelopes.

The territory invests 5.8% of GDP into education<sup>85</sup>, with 78% of funding flowing via the K-12 School Operations grant which funds staffing, operations, and instructional support. The Early Learning and Childcare grant funds early childhood development, Curriculum Resources and French Education grant supports development of curriculum and teaching standards, the Student Achievement

grant supports student assessment and special education, and Educator Development supports educators' professional development. The territory also invests \$8.3 million in education capital dollars<sup>86</sup>.

**Of note:** The Department of Education accepted the Auditor General's recommendations, and committed to developing a 10-year strategic plan focus on enhanced high school graduation rates and the transition to post-secondary.

### **Conclusion**

While policies and programming form the fabric of an education system, funding is the thread that binds everything together. However, this thread has become greatly frayed in recent years, with education funding not keeping pace with inflation and enrollment growth in many provinces. P3 schools have been promoted as a cost-saving initiative, and bizarre money-saving schemes like mandatory e-learning and a "Red Tape Challenge in Public Education" were becoming an increasingly popular tactic prior to COVID-19.

In the midst of a historic pandemic poised to result in the largest societal upheaval since the Great Depression, how we talk about and support public education as places of work and places of learning is undergoing a major overhaul. There is a real and rare window of opportunity to make transformative and enduring change to the core pillars of our world. And with entire swaths of the economy being utterly remade overnight, education — a central vehicle for the knowledge acquisition and skill development required for human capital formation as well as an unparalleled force for social transformation — must be a core part of any rebuilding agenda.

As we begin to re-imagine public schools for post-pandemic life, it has perhaps never been clearer that student well-being, equity in student opportunity and achievement, and student need must be at the heart of all education funding formulas. ●

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\* Unless otherwise specified, all references to dollar amounts have been obtained from the most recently-available territorial and provincial budget and fiscal framework documents. Please refer to them for additional information and explanation. Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, but because of system complexities and recent economic disruptions, there may be some variation in the final figures.

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**Annual expenditure by educational institutions per student, on core services, Canadian dollars, Canada, provinces and territories, 2016/2017**  
(Table B.1.2.1, page 91)

Canada	13,058
Newfoundland and Labrador	13,385
Prince Edward Island	11,509
Nova Scotia	12,801
New Brunswick	13,196
Quebec	12,159
Ontario	13,155
Manitoba	15,077
Saskatchewan	15,943
Alberta	14,851
British Columbia	10,724
Yukon	29,726
Northwest Territories	26,546
Nunavut	-

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# Rethinking pink day

## Ending the bullying catch-all

Amanda Gebhard

Throughout February and March, organizations across Canada participated in Pink Shirt Day, a nationwide “anti-bullying” movement. Pink t-shirts emblazoned with slogans like “Be a buddy, not a bully” and “Kindness is one size fits all” were sported by all age groups. Young people took part in Pink Day events in schools and community spaces, and learned that the history of Pink Day can be traced to a high school protest in Nova Scotia in 2007.

The version of the Pink Day origin story that circulates in my own Canadian prairie context goes something like this: When a new grade 9 student, Jadrien Cota, was bullied for wearing a pink t-shirt, David Shepherd and Travis Price purchased 50 pink tank tops to distribute to their fellow students, in solidarity with their classmate and to protest against bullying.

This is a heartwarming story. But it is also inaccurate. Jadrien was not bullied for wearing a pink shirt. Classmates taunted and threatened him with physical violence because they believed he was gay.

The erasure of the homophobia at the heart of the incident is an example of how systemic oppression and violence in our schools is often swept under the umbrella term of “bullying.” Socially constructed categories of race, gender,

class, sexuality, and ability continue to shape people’s lives, and this is starkly illustrated by the repetitive patterns of who is “bullied” at school.

There is a well-documented relationship between intolerance for non-dominant identities (think racialized, Indigenous, disabled, trans, gay, lesbian, female, Muslim, and physical appearances outside of oppressive standards) and school bullying and violence (Davis, 2018; Jiwani, 2005; Lachance, 2019; Robinson, 2012; Sykes, 2011; Walton, 2011). Of course, there are exceptions: individuals from all backgrounds can confront exclusionary and unwelcoming school and work environments. However, young people who transgress rigid social norms and expectations are those most often penalized by a multitude of consequences, ranging from micro-aggressions to physical violence.

Through an anti-oppressive lens, school bullying and violence are the outcomes of social contexts that valorize straight, white, able-bodied and middle-class ways of being, and devalue and other non-dominant groups. Adults often tell young people to “be themselves” without acknowledging that for non-dominant-group students, being “themselves” often has real social penalties. While a “just be yourself” approach is often well-intentioned, it risks locating the problem within those being targeted and victimized instead of

**Adults often tell young people to “be themselves” without acknowledging that for non-dominant-group students, being “themselves” often has real social penalties. While a “just be yourself” approach is often well-intentioned, it risks locating the problem within those being targeted and victimized instead of the perpetrators.**

the perpetrators. An anti-oppressive approach to school bullying requires us to not only hold the perpetrators accountable; it requires everyone in the school community to examine how taken for granted ways of doing and thinking privilege certain identities and marginalize others (Kumashiro, 2000).

The importance of anti-oppressive education for combatting bullying and violence in schools, and more precisely, anti-racist education, was foregrounded earlier this year by the events surrounding Kaleab Schmidt, a 13-year-old Black student from a small town in Saskatchewan. The story is a more recent example of how the systemic violence of racism — an issue in schools across the Canadian Prairies that school leaders often deny or do not acknowledge — can easily be transformed into a story

about “bullying”. Kaleab Schmidt took his own life the day after he was suspended from school for punching a student who had called him a racial slur. A public inquest into his death revealed that for several years, students in the small community directed multiple forms of racism at Kaleab for which they faced few consequences.

In the delivery of their recommendations, the inquest jury stated, “a poster in the hallway is not effective”, alluding to the superficiality of common bullying “interventions”. While the gravity of what happened to Kaleab was not lost on the jury, they did not include anti-racist education in their recommendations. Instead, the jury asked that all instances of physical altercations, bullying and racism be investigated and documented, and further recommended an update and enforcement of anti-bullying policy with education for teachers, administration and students.

How this update of the policy and the recommended anti-bullying education will directly address racism is yet to be known, but it is crucial the issues of racism and white dominance in the community remain at the centre. The actions of Kaleab’s classmates, and the adults who did not hold them accountable, were not simply “unkind.” Nor were they exceptional. Their (in)actions emerged from a wider socio-historical context that has long upheld whiteness and marginalized Indigenous and racialized people on the Canadian prairies. The need to keep the focus on anti-racism was underlined in a media interview given by one of Kaleab’s classmates. When asked what she has learned at school about racism, she stated, “Nothing. It’s swept under the rug.”

In underlining the erasure of systemic oppression, the student’s words allude to

## Resources for Getting Started

### **Open Minds to Equality:**

*A Sourcebook of Activities to affirm Diversity and promote Equity*, by Nancy Schniedewind and Ellen Davidson  
(A *Rethinking Schools* Publication)

**Critical Mentoring:** *A Practical Guide*, by Torie Weiston-Serdan (Stylus Publishing)

**The Conscious Kid**  
<https://www.theconsciouskid.org/>

**Black Lives Matter:**  
**Toronto Freedom School**  
<http://freedomsschool.ca/>

**Embrace Race**  
<https://www.embracerace.org/resources>

**First Nations Child and Family Caring Society**  
<https://fncaresociety.com/books-and-learning-guides>

**Wisdom2Action**  
<https://www.wisdom2action.org/>

**Teaching Tolerance: Diversity, Equity and Justice**  
<https://www.tolerance.org/>

**Student Teacher Anti-racism Society (STARS)**  
<http://starsusask.blogspot.com/>



**When asked what she has learned at school about racism, she stated, “Nothing. It’s swept under the rug.”**

the discomfort around talking to young people about racism and other forms of oppression. Many adults often feel unprepared to teach against oppression or even talk about it — and when it shows up in school hallways, the default response is a lecture on the golden rule or an admonishment about

respect.

It is a myth that naming and talking about oppression and power will exacerbate “the problem”, and pretending it doesn’t exist is unfair to everyone. Young people learn from a young age that straight and white are “right”, that performing their assigned genders is safest, and disability is associated with deficit. The positive side is that young people are deeply motivated to question this harmful knowledge and work for social change. To do so, they require adults to support them in addressing the challenges of race, class, gender, sexuality and ableism they encounter on a daily basis.

Teachers and school administrators have the responsibility to design meaningful interventions based on their own contextual challenges. But they cannot shoulder the work of reframing bullying as forms of systemic injustice and do the work of anti-oppression education alone. Parents, guardians, family members, youth workers, counsellors, coaches, social workers, and medical professionals all play a pedagogical role in the lives of young people. Racism, homophobia and misogyny do play out at school where young people spend a large amount of time, but they are also taught at the dinner table, on sports teams, in daycares, churches, community organizations, in social services, and in the media.

There is nothing wrong with promoting kindness and positivity, but this alone is not a solution for ending oppression and systemic violence. We need to start naming and addressing the more uncomfortable aspects of school bullying and violence, and acknowledge their inseparability from larger social forces. Anyone can be kind and niceties are not social justice. Let’s reserve our accolades for those who are having courageous conversations about social differences disrupting the myth that everyone is treated equally and working to end injustice and oppression, inside and outside of school walls. And when Pink Day comes around again, remember Travis Price and David Shepherd not for being nice, but for taking a stand for social justice. ●

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# Settling the score

## Redefining accountability and closing the opportunity gap

Ardavan Eizadirad

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When Ontario's education unions began their job action in November 2019, one of the work to rule actions was members' refusal to prepare or administer government mandated Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) standardized tests at various levels. The Grade 9 EQAO math test, which typically is administered in January, was postponed until June. *[Editor's note: since writing, as a result of COVID-19, EQAO testing was cancelled entirely for the remainder of the 2020 school year.]*

This is significant because the current provincial government has placed tremendous emphasis on standardized testing as an effective tool to close the achievement gap and reverse achievement trends in math scores which have decreased over the last five years amongst Ontario students (as demonstrated by EQAO scores).<sup>1</sup> As of 2020, EQAO testing is not only applicable to students in Grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 but also applies to all teacher candidates graduating from any Faculty of Education in Ontario. Education Minister Stephen Lecce has claimed that actions jeopardizing EQAO

testing adversely impacts student learning and data collection for accountability purposes.

As an educator who has worked with various students from elementary to post-secondary levels over the years, I became concerned about the impact of EQAO standardized testing on racialized and minoritized students symbolized by how vividly they remembered writing EQAO tests in their early years and how it profoundly impacted and made them feel. Many had developed test-taking anxiety rooted in their experiences in the early years with EQAO testing. These conversations inspired me to further pursue the impact of EQAO standardized testing; to compare and contrast the extent to which narratives from racialized and minoritized children and parents interviewed support or oppose the dominant narrative told by EQAO about the exclusive positive benefits of EQAO standardized tests.

### **History of standardized testing in Ontario**

Since at least the early 1990s, Ontario's education system was increasingly scrutinized by taxpayers, media outlets, policy-makers, and parents due to the compounding provincial government debt and the rising unemployment rate. Schools were blamed for inadequately preparing students for the emergence of a

knowledge-based economy. This placed pressure on the government and politicians to seek new changes and educational reforms as a means of restoring public confidence in the education system.

EQAO was established in 1996 as an arms-length agency of the government of Ontario responsible for creating and implementing annual criterion-referenced standardized tests to provide “an independent gauge of children’s learning and achievement” (EQAO, 2012, p. 1). The launch of annual EQAO standardized testing began in 1996-1997 school year where all Grade 3 children wrote the EQAO test in reading, writing, and mathematics. EQAO standardized tests continue to be implemented today in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 in Ontario and cost about \$32 million per year to administer. The current provincial government has invested a further \$200 million over four years to improve EQAO math scores in elementary schools, and is forcing all future teacher candidates, regardless of teaching subject or grade, to write a Math Proficiency Test designed and administered by EQAO.

Currently, EQAO test scores (used in annual school rankings produced by the Fraser Institute based on EQAO results over a five year period) have gained so much currency that they drive increases or decreases in property values in local communities. Real estate agents emphasize school rankings to attract homebuyers which feeds into the cycle of parents making inferences about the quality of education offered at a school exclusively based on EQAO scores. As part of this cycle, schools

often located in higher socio-economic communities maintain a valued status being labelled as offering “high quality” education, whereas schools located in marginalized, racialized, and lower socio-economic communities get labelled as “bad” schools offering a “poor quality” education.

EQAO uses the phrase “check on the use of tax dollars” (EQAO, 2012, p. 19) to symbolize the importance of maintaining the use of standardized testing in schools for accountability purposes which aligns with the market-driven economical view of education as measurable and quantifiable. But test scores do not capture what an entire school is about, the power dynamics within a

school-community interface including level of support for students, accessibility to opportunities, type of systemic issues impacting the community, or type or quality of relationships between students and teachers and amongst staff and administrators. And, significantly, since EQAO testing was introduced in Ontario schools, the achievement gap has not been drastically reduced and instead has intensified for certain identities particularly impacting Indigenous, racialized, English Language Learners, recent immigrants, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Colour of Poverty, Colour of Change, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

### **Findings and implications**

To test the accountability hypothesis and the dominant normalized narrative about the benefits of EQAO testing, as part of my research I interviewed<sup>3</sup> eight racialized families and their children about each child’s experience preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO test. The focus was on their lived experiences before, during, and after writing the test.

Two major reoccurring themes were: a) experiencing intense socio-emotional stress and anxiety; b) fear of failure. Examples of negative physical and psychological impact expressed by the children interviewed included; losing sleep by worrying about doing poorly, experiencing overwhelming anxiety and nervousness demonstrated by crying and needing reassurance from parents to enter the classroom to take the EQAO test, feeling excluded by being taken out of the regular classroom to be prepped for and write the EQAO test, and fear of failure and being labelled as “dumb” or made fun of by peers for doing poorly on the test. And regardless of what the children were told about the non-impact of the test on their marks and advancement to the next grade, majority of them did not believe it, exemplified by their fear of failure and their own subjective perceived consequences associated with doing poorly on the test such as having to redo Grade 3 all over again.

One of the implications of placing such high importance on EQAO tests and doing well on them is the rise of test-taking anxiety amongst young children which can have a spill-over effect into the rest of their lives as they mature and attend high school and post-secondary institutions. If students do not feel great about themselves, in terms of their self-confidence as a result of doing poorly on a standardized test, it can lead to “a self-fulfilling prophecy on continuing lower achievement” (Ontario Teachers’

**One of the implications of placing such high importance on EQAO tests and doing well on them is the rise of test-taking anxiety amongst young children which can have a spill-over effect into the rest of their lives as they mature and attend high school and post-secondary institutions.**

Federation, 2011, p. 10). This can occur at two stages; immediately after completion of the test based on their subjective self-perception of how they did on the test relative to how difficult they found the questions, and at the start of Grade 4 when they receive their EQAO results back and it does not align with how well they thought they did retrospectively and in comparison to their peers.

Upon receiving their EQAO test results, which indicate an achievement level ranging from level 1 to 4 without any descriptive feedback or where mistakes were made, children often ask their peers how they did to compare one another's achievements. This sharing of one's achievement level amongst peers can be stressful and traumatizing, particularly if one has "done poorly." This can have long term effects; for example, a child who does poorly in reading according to the EQAO might avoid reading for enjoyment for not wanting to feel embarrassed by being judged or made fun of by others. Significantly, data collected as part of student questionnaires administered to children who write the EQAO test at the primary and junior level indicates that "the number of students who read for enjoyment has dropped significantly over the last 10 years" (Ontario Teachers' Federation, 2011, p. 10) which aligns with increased investments in standardized testing by the government.

In the long term, the negative psychological and emotional stress and anxiety associated with writing highly publicized standardized tests such as EQAO can lead to lack of motivation, reduced effort in completing tasks, and simply not caring about school-related activities. This can become part of a vicious cycle that perpetuates the self-fulfilling prophecy where the young child is labelled as "at risk" by the education system. Russo (2012) makes an important developmental argument stating, "By placing unrealistic demands upon children who are not developmentally ready, we are asking teachers to spend most of their time attempting to

push children in ways that may set them up to fail." (pp. 143–144) The problem may not be that the child is not knowledgeable, but rather that EQAO standardized tests — in medium or format — are not an effective avenue for all children relative to their developmental stage to optimally express what they know. One of the implications is that "the school system convinces many working-class kids that they

are stupid, incapable, incompetent, and that their aim in life should be to show up at work on time while being polite to their bosses. This is part of the violence that streaming does to working-class kids" (p. 3). This is unacceptable and needs to change.

### **From equality to equity: from closing the Achievement Gap to minimizing the Opportunity Gap**

The current market-driven model of education, with its reliance on standardized testing as an accountability tool, homogenizes the needs of all students and communities by disregarding them as holistic beings and dynamic communities and instead judges them predominantly by results on standardized tests. This approach disregards how learning conditions are impacted by systemic barriers within a local community. We need a shift from sameness to fairness; from equality to equity, and a place-based approach to judging the quality of education offered within a school. Just as being healthy is simply more than whether you are physically sick or not, the quality of an education offered in a school is much more complex than scores on EQAO standardized tests.

We need to change gears and try new approaches and strategies as standardized testing has proven ineffective in closing the achievement gap. We need to shift towards aligning the opportunity gap in a more equitable manner as a long term sustainable approach and strategy to closing the achievement gap between racialized and non-racialized students and those from higher and lower socio-economic status. This approach goes beyond a microscopic focus on outcome-based standardized test results to considering synergic collaborative efforts between schools and outside organizations in the community offering holistic services addressing local student and community needs.

If we want to close the achievement gap between different social groups in the education system and to address systemic barriers that are present and persistent in schools impacting racialized and minoritized identities and communities, we need to invest in programs and policies that view education as symbiotic with the larger community and other institutions outside of schools. We cannot address the achievement gap without first addressing the inequality of opportunity that plagues our educational system and further marginalizes our most vulnerable student populations. We have to deter from viewing children from a deficit lens

and transition to view them from a strength-based lens; as holistic beings with different social, cognitive, emotional, developmental, spiritual and academic needs. We need to stop calling students “leaders of tomorrow” and instead treat them as capable students who are “leaders of today”! ●

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## Notes

- EQAO provides many documents on their website (<http://www.eqao.com/en/>) available for the public to download to inform them about the agency, its goals, objectives, and findings. EQAO justifies the use of standardized in schools by emphasizing accountability to the public by means of providing useful data to schools to close the achievement gap between different social groups.
- The term “minority” is descriptive in nature and refers to “a group of less than half of the total, a group that is sufficiently smaller in number”; the term “minoritized,” and by extension racialized, focuses on power relations referring to “groups that are different in race, religious creed, nation of origin, sexuality, and gender and as a result of social constructs have less power or representation compared to other members or groups in society” (Smith, 2016, para. 11). “Racialized” shifts the conversation from looking at student achievement from a deficit lens focusing on individual factors such as effort and motivation, towards examining systemic processes such as accessibility to support services and opportunities that function as barriers towards achieving optimal student success.
- A combination of male and females attending eight different schools in the Greater Toronto Area were selected. Participants were recruited via purposeful sampling and community networks. Interviews were conducted between June to August of 2017 at a place of convenience chosen by the parent(s) either at their home or at a nearby school.

In my book I recommended a series of action-oriented strategies and initiatives to mitigate the negative impact of EQAO standardized testing. The following suggestions are intended to promote discussions and dialogue towards a decolonized educational assessment model that is more equitable and justice-oriented:

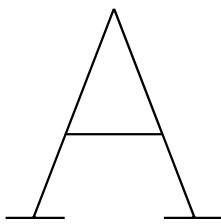
- School boards and schools should immediately invest in mitigating the short- and long-term invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing by investing in offering more mental health and mindfulness initiatives for racialized and minoritized children and parents.
- To address concerns about how individual EQAO student results contain only raw achievement scores with limited descriptive feedback, EQAO should digitalize all marked EQAO booklets by scanning them and making them, along with comments, available to students and parents online through a secure website that allows them to log in with a personalized username and password. This would allow children and parents to visually see what questions they did well on, where they made errors, and how they can improve in various areas.
- As soon as EQAO results are returned in the fall, schools should host “parent-student-teacher” meetings, in person or via alternative methods such as by phone or email, to explain how to effectively interpret EQAO results in a constructive manner to improve student learning and mitigate the invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing associated with children’s self-critique and parent’s critique of their children based on EQAO scores. As part of this conference meeting, the child, the parent(s), and the teacher should collaboratively co-construct an individualized personal action plan for the school year outlining short- and long-term goals for areas of improvement along with plans on how to achieve those goals. Near the end of each three-month period in the school year — November, February, and May — teachers should have a “parents-student-teacher” conference meeting to assess and discuss progress of students in different subjects.
- The Ministry of Education, school boards, and schools should invest in creating and maintaining sustainable long-term synergic collaborations with external organizations at the local community level involving practitioners from multiple sectors that work with children, youth, and young adults to provide socio-culturally relevant holistic services relative to the needs of students and the local community.

—Ardavan Eizadirad



# The UN to hold Quebec accountable for its segregated school system

Stéphane Vigneault



is how it happened, and why it matters.

In February 2020, the Mouvement L'école ensemble sent a report to the United Nations (UN) Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in which it called on the UN body to make the Quebec government accountable for its (unofficial) school segregation policy as far as its human rights obligations are concerned.

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is made up of 18 independent experts that monitor the implementation of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) by its State parties. All States parties are required to submit

after half a century of willfully ignoring its segregated school system, the Quebec government will have no choice but to justify it in front of a UN human rights committee in Geneva. Here

regular reports to the Committee on how these rights are being implemented. The Committee considers each report and shares its concerns and recommendations with the State party in the form of “concluding observations”.

The ICESCR constitutes one-third of the International Bill of Human Rights alongside the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. In accordance with the constitution's separation of powers, the responsibility for the implementation of international human rights treaties and for respect of human rights principles in Canada lies jointly with federal, provincial and territorial governments.

The Mouvement's report (available on the UN website), is based on the *Guiding Principles on the Human Rights Obligations of States to Provide Public Education and to Regulate Private Sector Involvement in Education*, better known as the Abidjan Principles (abidjanprinciples).

org). These principles were adopted in February 2019 by more than 50 recognized experts around the world, and were quickly supported by many institutions, including the UN, through a Human Rights Council resolution of July 2019, and a report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education presented in June 2019. They constitute a reference point for the analysis of the governance of education, and the role of public and private actors.

### **An unfair system**

Of course, Quebec's unfair three-tier education system, with its three components — subsidised private, selective public and regular public — is highly problematic. Our report to the UN showed that nine Abidjan Principles are violated by Quebec's education system. Those include:

- Principle 29 (*"States must respect, protect, and fulfill the right to free, quality, public education"*)

Quebec's public selective schools charge fees that can reach more than \$4,000 yearly. These fees have been known to be illegal, but current Education Minister Jean-François Roberge passed Bill 12 in 2019 to retroactively legalize them. The Bill was passed against the recommendation of the provincial human rights commission.

- Principle 65 (a) (*"Any potential public funding to an eligible private instructional educational institution should meet all the following substantive requirements:*
  - a. it is a time-bound measure, which the State publicly demonstrates to be the only effective option to advance the realisation of the right to education in the situation in question...."*)

The private education sector has been subsidized in Quebec since December 1968, a provisional measure implemented to help the newly-created (1964) Department of Education cope with the Baby Boom. However, the time-bound aspect of public funding was never enshrined in law, and as a result, funding has been available for 51 years without interruption.

The Mouvement L'école ensemble appeared on March 9, 2020 before the Geneva-based committee by videoconference. The members then met in camera to decide on the questions to be addressed to Canada. The list of issues prior to submission of the seventh periodic report of Canada was made public on March 24th. The Committee decided to specifically target Quebec, asking it to provide information on "measures taken to ensure equal access to education for students in the three-tier school system in Quebec, regardless of the economic situation of their parents, and measures taken to improve the quality of education in regular public schools." (art. 26.e).

The Quebec government has until June 2021 to submit its response (an extended deadline because of the COVID-19 pandemic). We at the Mouvement will get a chance to comment on the government's response before senior government officials are flown to Geneva where they will have to answer publicly to the UN Committee.

### **A milestone**

To have the UN describe Quebec's education system as being "three-tier" is in itself an important milestone for all of us who work to desegregate Quebec schools. If these words have ever been uttered by anyone in power in *la vieille capitale*, it has been to flatly deny the reality they describe, like in former Education Minister Sébastien Proulx's book ("school segregation, a term that seems to me to be very ill-chosen"). This is why the UN decision to single out Quebec and specifically demand how the province can reconcile its human rights obligation with its inequitable education system is important.

Forcing the government to simply acknowledge the reality of the issue is no small feat. After it finally happens, the next question quickly becomes — maybe as soon as the plane leaves Geneva — "how do we fix this mess?" ●

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# Organizing with radical love

## Towards equity and social justice education in Alberta

The RAD Educators Network is a collection of educators working within a variety of contexts who are committed to equity and social justice education. We believe that educators, working within and outside formal education, have a vital role to play in helping students and teachers understand their role in reducing prejudice and discrimination, uplifting student voices, and advocating for more equitable and just educational policies and practices.

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### **Same struggle, but shifting contexts**

At the time of writing, over one third of humanity is currently in lockdown due to the COVID-19 global pandemic and schools across the globe have transitioned to distance and online learning. Overnight, school buildings were closed, and students, families, and educators had to adjust to teaching and learning in a virtual space. Even though the context of learning may have shifted, the principles of great teaching and learning remain constant. Educators within the RAD Educators Network have taken up the challenge of educating in this new context while continuing to build connections, create community, and ensure that students in the margins of our education system are not left behind with the transition from face to face to remote learning.

This work exists in the context of an austerity driven government led by Jason Kenney who has made no secret of his goals for reduced public services in Alberta. As the threat of the

pandemic heightened, the premier used this as cover to criticize doctors, play politics with n95 masks and lay off 25,000 educational workers across the province. Tensions regarding public policies in Alberta — as in other parts of the world — have been on the rise since 9/11 and the financial collapse of 2008, and will now become even more pronounced due to the insecurity resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These events have led to conditions of economic, social, and political uncertainty that fuel a generalized anxiety, which has enabled neoliberal, far-right political agendas to flourish (Blackmore, 2019). In this context, education has become a key battleground, as it is perceived as having the capacity to either maintain or divide class position and ensure or deny social mobility (Blackmore, 2019).

Times of crisis, such as this, tend to create spaces of opportunity to rethink traditional ways of functioning and relating to one another as a part of a system. Never again, will people



believe that integral societal institutions cannot shift; it is instead a question of political will and urgency. How will this adjustment affect perceptions of education, what it means to learn, and ideas about the purpose of education moving forward? These shifts present openings to ask ourselves new questions, and opportunities to push for a more equitable and socially just education system for all students. However, this is also an opportunity for opposing forces to further entrench standardization and marketization of education with the idea that the purpose of education is to solely prepare students to participate in the economy.

The RAD Educators Network was established in 2018 out of a desire to create a supportive community for educators, with a broader goal of empowering them to continue this work in their own schools and workplaces. This is a critical moment for a network of educators committed to equity and social justice education to emerge.

### **What makes RAD, rad?**

The work of RAD Educators is rooted in a conception of *radical love*. We learn, come to know, and exist in relation to those around us — our families, our communities, and so on. Like bell hooks, we believe that love necessarily entails telling the truth about the historical and continued effects of racism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression within fundamentally inequitable (and, thus, inherently violent) education (and other) systems, even those we ourselves might benefit from in some ways. For liberation movements to fully divest from systems of oppression, they need “love as the ethical foundation” (hooks, 1994/2006, p. 247).

Like Ibram X. Kendi (2019), we see radical love as a profoundly antiracist way of *relationally and actively* bringing about individual and social changes that will root out violent policies and practices that live at the intersections (Crenshaw, 1989) of racism, colonialism, capitalism, sexism, imperialism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, transphobia, and too many other forms of injustice and inequity. Considering current educational policies, like Kendi (2019), we ask, “What if we realized the best way to ensure an effective educational system is not by standardizing our curricula and tests but by standardizing the opportunities available to all students?” (p. 127).

### **Solidarity in the context of education**

As we are considering how we might live, teach, and work from and with a relational

ethic of radical love, we also draw from the work of Paulo Freire (1970/2000) who asserted that “solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity; it is a radical posture” (p. 49). Freire argued that true solidarity is an “act of love” (p. 74) as opposed to “paternalistic social action” which purports to be generous but is essentially a form of colonization. It is all too easy to impose upon others, even with good intentions. Instead of assuming we know the right answers and the best path, we strive to listen to the groups we wish to support and then work *with* them (rather than on their behalf).

RAD Educators discussed how we might resist the cuts to education that we knew would be harmful to teaching and learning — particularly for those already marginalized — and wondered how we could individually and collectively move ourselves and each other to fight inequity right now in our classrooms, schools, and educational systems? How could we move beyond what Dwayne Donald (2019) identified as the logics of *homo economicus* in a “North American settler dream imaginary” (p. 104) evidenced through the focus in mandated curriculum documents on individualism, progress, and anthropocentrism? We wondered how we might inspire ourselves and others to root out and confront inequity within our education system and move towards a practice of radical, relational love, specifically in context of the shifting paradigm of education during and after COVID-19. How can we approach this work in the spirit of radical love in order to transform the often harmful ways students experience inequity in our schools through poor pedagogy, standardized assessment, outdated curriculum, disciplinary practices and system oppression?

Much of our work in the last several months has been in building a community of resisters in response to the provincial government’s plans to defund, dismantle and even privatize education in Alberta. Cuts to funding, layoffs to educational workers and a stall on new curriculum for Alberta’s students are all taking place under the shadow of policies and statements by Premier Jason Kenney, and the Minister of Education, Adrianna LaGrange. The government’s prevailing mindset seems to see schools as indoctrination centers for youth, and public services as a commodity better handled by the private sector.

At the heart of our work is our desire to advocate for the students on the margins of our education system and society. These

young people will be the hardest hit as funds to education are cut, class sizes increase, and fewer supports are available to those who need them the most.

### **Creating opportunities for community**

We know that this work is difficult and that many educators feel a sense of loneliness and isolation as resistance to progressive change — both within and from outside the profession — can be daunting. The RAD Educators Network sought to create a sense of community for those determined to teach for equity and social justice education over the long term.

Our first event was the RAD Educators Summer Gathering in 2018 where for three days over 30 educators from across the province built connections and engaged in dialogue with other educators on issues of equity and justice within education. We discussed everything: issues within the classroom, pedagogy, assessment, the school to prison pipeline, and more. Perhaps most importantly, this gathering began a process of building connections with and among educators across Alberta, working towards a more equitable and just education system for all.

Since our initial gathering, we started a private Facebook group to connect digitally and to share resources. We began hosting social nights to build relationships and provide educators with space to vent and blow off steam, and held “salons” with a mix of professors and teachers as guest speakers, followed by discussions. We also established a book club.

Recently, a few pre-service teachers approached us to host a circle gathering where

they could share their stories as emerging and new teachers. This event was a meaningful one, with participants commenting on how much they valued this space — physically and emotionally. Furthermore, we have also humbly attempted to uphold our responsibilities to treaty, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP) by publicly supporting the struggles of the Wet’suwet’en nation.

When schools closed on March 15th in Alberta due to the COVID-19 pandemic we knew that our community of educators would continue to desire a space to share and connect about how they were going to tackle transitioning to emergency remote learning. Many educators within our network were scrambling to advocate for an equitable and just approach to emergency learning and knew that, on top of everything they were going through personally, this added advocacy work could push educators to their limits. To support each other through this period of adjustment we established a weekly online community dialogue session. These sessions feature guests to help frame and discuss the nuances of emerging issues of equity in emergency remote learning such as how we approach connecting with students, maintaining relationships and learning and negotiating the calls for assessment during this crisis. We moved our book club online, and created a new writing project entitled, “Pencils Down” to provide educators a space to share their words and experiences of working for equity and social justice education.

### **Sustaining “the fight” and ourselves**

As a network, we do not see ourselves as “radicals” in the word’s colloquial sense, although we have been branded as such by those who feel threatened by our message. It is not radical to understand that hatred (e.g., racism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, sexism, etc.) impacts the lives of our students. We feel it is important to remind ourselves, as well as those we are trying to hold accountable, that it is not radical to see how students living in poverty face inequity within the system. It is not radical to grow capacity amongst our colleagues to defend and fight for a more just, equitable, and anti-oppressive public education system. We are teachers, community and adult educators, professors, early childhood educators and researchers who firmly believe that centring the issues of equity and social justice along with racial, economic and climate justice will allow



us to co-create with students the classrooms and schools that all young people deserve. It is essential to understand that our commitment to working for equitable and just schools for all requires us to uplift the voices and experiences of students in order to work alongside them and to understand the real needs of students.

We are learning that we have to consider what we might need to sustain ourselves and our members. A choir metaphor we encountered on social media resonated with us: Choirs can hold a note for a seemingly endless period of time not because every member holds the note the whole time, but because each person's voice comes in when it can, and when someone needs a break, another can take over. As such, the organizers openly communicate about how we are feeling with the stresses and strains of work and life, and take turns leading projects.

### Working together for change

The RAD Educators Network works to create opportunities for those within and affected by the educational system to come together to discuss how we might work toward a system based upon equity, and then take appropriate action. Part of that work is finding fissures in the existing system and then exposing what is underneath. Moving forward after the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope that the temporary suspension of provincial standardized testing is one of those fissures. If stakeholders can see that it is possible to not have these exams, then perhaps they will be open to realizing the benefits of permanently foregoing them.

Regardless of our specific tasks in the months and years to come, we wish to continue our broader goal of working against oppressive systems and practices as we strive for a more equitable education system. Listening first and foremost to students and their struggles within the current education system and working with them to co-create sustainable solutions is one of the ways the RAD Educators Network may realize this goal. ●



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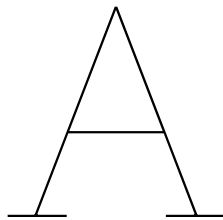


# Leaving normal

## Re-imagining schools post-COVID and beyond

Vidya Shah and Erika Shaker

“People need to get back to a normal life.”  
— *Simon Descoteaux, principal of  
Ecole de la Primerose, Quebec City*



As provinces take tentative — some less tentative than others — steps towards reopening, what it looks like for public education and what it means for education workers, students and families has been a matter of fierce debate.

Much of the conversation has focused on the physical safety aspects of reopening: what it means for distancing, how it puts discussions of class size and funding relative to school capacity in a radically different context. The new post-COVID reality will require much more rigorous sanitation, many more custodial staff, and a completely different understanding of basic worker rights including paid sick days, paid leave, and the right to refuse unsafe work in order to protect workers and students and their families from the pandemic. It will also necessitate a much more flexible approach to education to accommodate sudden and prolonged absences, and because some children who are immunocompromised, or whose families are, may simply not be able to return to school without a vaccine.

But this is only one aspect of reopening. It doesn't begin to address the support mechanisms that need to be in place to address the

emotional and mental health of students, staff and families, who may have been traumatized by the previous months of lockdown, illness, isolation. Some may have lost friends or family to the pandemic, and still be grieving. Some may have not begun to grieve. Some may have developed anxiety or agoraphobia or other mental illnesses. Some may be struggling with addiction. Some children may have spent the past months in a home where they do not feel safe.

And beyond this, there are other deeper and far reaching discussions that must take place in the context of reopening — rooted in the recognition that “back to normal” is untenable for far too many students who were not only under-served but damaged by the status quo. Months of isolation, of crisis learning, of just-in-time WiFi and homemade daily timetables (abandoned in week four), of resentment and frustration and, in some cases, giving up on the pretense of homeschooling altogether, have thrust into the spotlight the question of what post-COVID classrooms will look like. One thing is certain: when it comes to schools as places of work, places of care, and places of learning — because they are simultaneously all three — **“normal” is not a standard to which we should aspire.**

These past few months of physical isolation and separation have surfaced what some families and communities in Canada have known all along — that schooling was

intentionally constructed to sort students based on perceived abilities (Gaymes San Vicente, 2016; Parekh & Brown, 2019) and that they continue to maintain grave inequities for historically oppressed populations.

As populations with greater power, privilege and social capital have experienced challenges with access, opportunity and freedom in these times, we see greater alignment between their calls for change and what many Indigenous, Black and racialized communities have been advocating for all along: an approach to schooling that centers honours the humanity in students, educators, families and communities (Battiste, 2013; Love, 2019). In this time of intense change, we write this article as an invitation to pause, reset and reimagine possibilities for schooling as sites transformation that honour our collective humanity.

We are at a moment of reckoning for our public institutions and our institutions of care which are so often at the centre of our communities. If we are to ensure progress, we need to take a multi-faceted and layered approach that is interconnected rather than linear as we move towards reemergence (not simply “reopening”). There is how we have to respond to these current times in the context of workplace standards and proximity. There is also what we have learned, or not learned, in creating and ensuring communities of care and places of learning, and what we do with that knowledge. This leads us to ask the question: How can this time invite a reimagining of schooling?

In spite of the grand promise of public education rooted in its potential to engage and empower on a universal basis, traditionally, schools have been sites of fragmentation and separation. We ask students to separate their heads, hearts and spirits by focusing at times exclusively on their mental development and failing to see them as complex and nuanced people. We separate students from one another based on exclusionary and antiquated notions of ability, by comparing them to one another on the basis of grades and their ability to be socialized into white supremacist, capitalist schooling (Kelly, 2020), and as concealed attempts at creating a two-tier schooling system within public education through offering specialty programs, gifted programming and French immersion classes. We separate students from their families, communities and larger society when our teaching is instrumental and technical, and disconnected from larger social realities and students’ lived experiences.

Then there are the students who we deem uneducable, who we have given up on, whose humanity we fail to see.

This erosion of humanity also occurs in the continuous deprofessionalization and surveillance of educators, leading them away from their inner knowing and being in classrooms as competent professionals. It occurs in the ways that employees and representatives of, and ambassadors for, the system are themselves socialized into white supremacist, capitalist spaces in which they learn to be silent and even complicit in the ongoing harm of students and adherence to the status quo, with clear and direct repercussions should they step out of line, especially if they too are historically oppressed. Dehumanization is also present in the often-traumatic ways that families, particularly those from historically oppressed populations, are spoken to, dismissed, disregarded, pushed out, and denied information.

How, in this time of pause, might we acknowledge and grieve how these systems have dehumanized particular members of our school communities in different ways for far too long? How might we imagine a schooling system that honours the humanity of students, educators, families and communities? We attempt to answer these questions by exploring concepts of equity, relationality and well-being, and critically engaged learning.

### **Equity**

As we consider a return to school, we need to acknowledge pre-existing inequities that have been exacerbated for students, families and educators as well as new inequities that may have arisen. Differences in access and opportunity to health, wellness and opportunities to learn appear for:

- Families experiencing housing and food insecurity or living in poverty
- Indigenous communities living on reserve with boil water advisories and inadequate health systems
- Families with members that are immunocompromised
- Families living in shelters
- Families with loved ones who are incarcerated
- Families that are non-status without access to universal health care
- Families that have experienced increases in child, sexual and domestic abuse

- Families that have experienced deaths both COVID-19 related and not
- Families experiencing mental health challenges
- Families with members who have disabilities

Humanizing the return to school means recognizing and responding to these different realities. Charles Taylor’s seminal essay on ‘The Politics of Recognition’ (1994) states that nonrecognition and misrecognition can inflict harm and therefore constitute forms of oppression. If we do not see difference, and we are not conscious of how we may pathologize or denigrate those differences, we further inequity through an assimilationist ideology that educates children away from their families, communities and identities.

As we return to school, we need to be conscious of the ways in which crisis breeds opportunity (and opportunity for whom). Sometimes, that opportunity is aligned with the collective good, with social and political justice and with communities. Sometimes, that opportunity is aligned with white supremacist, capitalist aims to further self-interest and personal gain, which we saw with a vengeance as schools in New Orleans were privatized after Hurricane Katrina. Humanizing education demands vigilance in recognizing and disrupting disaster capitalism (Saltman, 2009) and disaster white supremacy (Lopez, 2020) in education.

In particular, we need to be vigilant about aims to de-professionalize teaching, moves to e-learning as a replacement for the co-generative and relational nature of teaching that funnels public dollars in private hands, opportunities for “school choice” that result in furthering a two-tiered education system, and contracting out of curriculum development and educational content to the private sector in the name of “efficiency” and “cost containment”.

#### **Relationality and well-being**

For many, months of physical isolation, concern about our present and future, and an increased sense of emotional disconnection has led to increased trauma and mental health challenges. For others, this trauma exists because of and in addition to trauma caused by settler colonial, white supremacist, capitalist, ableist, cisheteronormative, sexist, xenophobic systems of oppression, which have resulted in

disproportional access to basic rights, inadequate social structures, ongoing experiences of exclusion and violence, and more. Vocalized concerns about student and family access to technology in the leadup to and during the move towards online (crisis) learning hinted at the need for a far-reaching and much more systemic discussion about equity and oppression; one that needed to go far beyond access to Chromebooks and reliable WiFi.

As we return to schools, we will need to attend to the mental health and wellness of students and educators experiencing trauma at individual and collective levels. While for some this trauma is rooted in months of isolation, disconnection, and even the realization that for some students home is not a safe space, we must also reckon with knowing that, for some students, and staff, a *return* to class is what constitutes trauma for those most oppressed by schooling. In the process, we must question our assumptions of who has experienced trauma, assumptions that often rooted in racist and classist discourses. How can we relate to ourselves, each other and our environment in ways that acknowledge the trauma, and also acknowledge the joy, the resistance, the desires, the possibilities and the hope?

During lockdown, the role played by the physical school became more evident in its absence, when questions were raised about the implications of students no longer having access to school breakfast or lunch, or engagement through planned activities that may not be available outside of school hours or off school grounds. How might students respond to a physical return to schools in which there are far fewer students in their classrooms, there is continued physical distancing (with implications for how sensory needs can be met), and there new rules about how they can interact with teachers and friends? In reopening, how might our classrooms become sites of what Alexis Shotwell (2020) refers to as community care? How might we create the conditions for students to demonstrate their capacities to care for themselves, each other and the larger school environment? How might their actions and their thinking consider those who are immunocompromised or have family members that are immunocompromised, for whom reemergence from lockdown is simply not an option until a vaccine is available? How might this shift create new and necessary relationships between families, school and communities? And even more broadly, how might communities of care

**This type of deep engagement with learning requires critical self-reflection about who we are in relation to each other and the world.**

change our relationships and responsibilities to protecting our lands and waters?

This pause allows us the opportunity to let go of the apolitical, ahistorical and neoliberal approaches to schooling that have given preference to individuality, effectiveness and competition and re-center values of relationality, connection and community.

### **Critically engaged learning**

Schooling involves formalized measures of learning, such as evaluations and standardized testing and is a site of social stratification often along the lines of race, social class, gender and other social identities. As we return to schools, can we question which elements of formal schooling we might relax, or even leave behind altogether? How might we nurture and encourage curiosity and wonder — that need not be measured and accounted for at every stage — deep relations and individual and collective transformation?

Learning, whether in our homes, on the streets or in our classrooms is co-generative and co-constitutive. How might we imagine a learning environment that is also critically conscious in its ability to challenge the status quo, to center and analyze multiple perspectives, to make relevant connections to larger socio-political and historical contexts, and to take action towards social justice (Lewinson, Leland & Harste, 2014)?

This type of deep engagement with learning requires critical self-reflection about who we are in relation to each other and the world. It requires that we challenge notions of students as empty vessels and educators as the “depositors of knowledge”, notions that are ever-present in the Ontario government’s push for e-learning pre, during and possibly post-physical distancing in the time of COVID-19. While a fear-based approach will focus attention on gap-filling the “fundamentals” of language and mathematics, it is the arts (in all its forms), physical education, social studies and science that will provide the container for learning and wellness. This type of engagement also invites us to imagine future possibilities with students, to honour their creativity, imagination and solutions towards co-creating that is more just, humane and compassionate.

Such an approach to education means that we need to center much of what has been sidelined all along in education — the power

of young people, the power of families and communities, and the power of educators.

### **Re-emergence**

The focus post-COVID19, as economies and institutions begin to reopen, has largely been on “recovery,” and a resumption of “normal” (with some acknowledgement that this is a “new normal”).

But, as far too many students, educators and communities know, and as many more of us were witness to over the shutdown, normal hasn’t always been inadequate; in some cases it’s been outright damaging.

COVID-19 has provided a moment of reckoning; a possibility of reimagining education based on the role it plays in our communities and lives, and the role it *could* play; on what we know about education and what we now know we *don’t* know; on what we’ve learned about engaged and connected schooling and what we *need* to learn.

The inadequacy — and the trauma and violence — of ‘normal’ makes a mere ‘recovery’ untenable. The only possibility for social progress, for justice, for truly engaged, anti-oppressive and connected education that honours students, families, educators and communities is re-emergence. Anything less is to turn our backs on the promise of public education, and those communities and voices who have been excluded from it. ●

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