



Saskatchewan



Notes

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Strengthening Saskatchewan Communities through Education

— by *Howard Woodhouse*

At a meeting in Saskatoon last September, Murray Dobbin, author and activist, stated that strengthening community was a way for citizens to oppose the power of the global economy. When we participate openly and democratically in activities embodying common goals, we learn to build relationships based on caring and trust. As citizens, we come to recognise that the principle of self-maximisation – always seeking to gain as much for oneself as possible – is a vicious myth that fuels the corporate market.

Community Schools

A community school strengthens all of the ties binding it to the community in which it is situated. By recognising that children and youth are active participants in life both inside and outside its walls, a community school makes ongoing connections between students' living and learning. The goal is to improve students' learning and to ensure that their cultural and socioeconomic needs are met in a consistent manner. This means that a community school in northern Saskatchewan will reflect the cultural values that distinguish it from one in suburban

Regina, for example. While there is no one blueprint that fits all, community schools will be open on evenings and weekends so that they can be used for cultural and sporting events.

SCHOOLPLUS:

A Vision for Children and Youth

A recent report on education written for the provincial government, entitled *SCHOOLPLUS: A Vision for Children and Youth*, advocates the broadening of a community-based philosophy to

include all schools in the province of Saskatchewan. As many as forty schools have been in existence since the 1980s designated under the community schools program. These have been predominantly in core urban areas, but the authors of *SCHOOLPLUS* argue that the underlying philosophy should now

include high schools, rural schools, and northern schools. The adoption of such an approach is an attempt to implement communitarian values capable of limiting the power of "globalisation" currently shaping schools "in the image of a corporate economic imperative". Instead of schools that are "heavily influenced by a market-driven,

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commercial policy” (p. 9), the report advocates those which “strengthen both the school and the community” (p. 142) in which they are located.

For *SCHOOLPLUS*, the teacher’s role is that of educator, enabling students to grow in a collaborative environment in which students’ “social and personal development” are well recognised. This means enhancing students’ ability to learn independently by adapting the curriculum to their specific needs, and playing “an advocacy role for children and youth” who may have difficulty with the stresses of modern life. Teachers’ guidance and commitment to values that counter the negative “effects of globalisation on our society and our children/youth” are important beacons in a sea of “global strife”, “electronic relationships”, and constant “uncertainty” (pp.138-9). Smaller classes, more consultation time, and the help of non-professionals, including parents from the community, are necessary if teachers are to succeed.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *SCHOOLPLUS* is its recommendation that community schools provide a set of integrated services to children and youth.

Nurses, social workers, justice workers, and recreation facilitators are to be active participants in the school community. Their role is to deal with the growing problems of poor nutrition, drug abuse, family breakdown, criminal activity, and lack of recreation which many students experience today. Teachers, who now face these problems alone, will have the support of professional colleagues with whom they can consult before such problems get out of hand. The report suggests that a team approach involving these different agencies will benefit students, who will have immediate access to the

services they need, since they will be located in schools. In order for teachers to concentrate on their primary task as educators, however, adequate funding for the various support services must be put in place.

Technical and vocational education and lifelong learning

According to *SCHOOLPLUS*, technical and vocational education are to be valued as highly as arts and science courses, and members of the community invited to share their knowledge and skills with students interested in practical pursuits.

Experiential learning will be available for students who want to get credits working outside the school either for business or on community projects. Recognition of the importance of “handiwork” as well as “headwork” is a welcome change for a

system increasingly geared towards preparation for university entrance, and could do something towards enhancing the dignity of labour.

The importance of enabling students to make wise career choices raises the issue of lifelong learning. The report conceives of lifelong learning as preparation for “jobs that exist and those that do not even exist now” (pp.17-18). The

ongoing training and retraining of students for jobs in the “knowledge-based economy” is also the mandate of the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST). This function is only successful if students and workers can afford to attend. Yet tuition fees for fulltime students at the Woodland campus of SIAST have risen from

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\$11.13 a week in 1987 to \$73 a week in 2003 – a massive 556% increase in sixteen years. Lifelong learning is in danger of becoming a luxury that is out of reach for those who need it most.

People's Free University

The same cooperative spirit as espoused by *SCHOOLPLUS* has resulted in the growth of the "People's Free University of Saskatchewan", which first opened its doors to students in the fall of 2002. Six courses were offered in different locations in Saskatoon on such subjects as human rights, the history of music, the Canadian legal system, and Aboriginal spirituality. Retired professors and members of the community offered their services for free to almost two hundred students, all of whom could obtain a certificate of learning upon completion of the courses. The move to establish the People's University was fuelled by opposition among faculty, staff, and students to the privatisation of the University of Saskatchewan, which has seen tuition fees more than double in the last decade. A 28% increase in the college of law in the year 2002-03, was almost matched by an 18% raise in medicine, and students across the university demonstrated against any further hikes. Funding for research, meanwhile, increasingly serves the corporate market as federal mechanisms require faculty to find matching funds from the private sector or conduct "targeted research" for these same "partners". This threatens curiosity-based research and the independence of the university as an institution engaged in critical inquiry. A prime example is the Canadian Light Source synchrotron, a large and powerful microscope, which cost the Canadian taxpayer \$173.5 million, and which will be used by pharmaceutical, biotech, and mining companies to maximise their money profits. The public pays the costs and takes the risks on such a venture, while private corporations rake in the benefits. Is this really the role of the so-called "people's university"?

Other Provinces

SCHOOLPLUS charts a course for education and training that is strikingly different from that of other provinces. Provincial policy in Alberta reflects the influence of the Conference Board of Canada, whose "employability skills profile" reduces education to market training. The Charter School movement in that province was initially funded by the Royal Bank, the Bank of Montreal, Syncrude, and the federal government to the tune of almost \$500,000.¹ In Ontario, corporate influence on the curriculum has been overt, and teacher autonomy has shrunk as a result of constant government pressure for "accountability". The market model in both provinces was first advocated

by Margaret Thatcher in the form of TINA – "There Is No Alternative" to market-based reform.

SCHOOLPLUS challenges this ideology by articulating a vision of education radically different from that of the market. The report is not without its problems – the multiple roles which

teachers are required to perform are complex and may conflict with one another, for example – but it is worthy of support. What, then, can be done to ensure that the report does not sit on a shelf gathering dust?

Necessary Actions

Fortunately, the provincial government has already started to take action. The 2001-2002 budget committed sufficient funds to double the number of community schools by expanding the program into rural and northern Saskatchewan, as well as into high schools. Other programs have also received substantial increases, but the government's claim that it is conducting a "province-wide consultative and consensus-building process to determine how best to achieve the vision of

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SCHOOLPLUS” is harder to pin down. Few parents and youth have even heard of the report, and those involved in implementing it – teachers, social workers, etc. – are often left out of the consensus building exercise. Without their cooperation, it is unlikely these different agencies will succeed in providing integrated services to children and youth.

This is why the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation (STF) has urged the government to involve representatives from all these agencies, as well as parents and youth, in building the necessary consensus. Unless these different parties focus on “practical rather than idealistic goals”, the implementation of the report will be flawed. While supportive of the concept of community schools, the STF argues that greater clarification is needed concerning the changing roles and responsibilities of teachers, especially with regard to workload and retention, and foresees the need for considerable government support for the kind of professional growth required to work in the new *SCHOOLPLUS* environment.

It is important that working people participate in the public consultation process now taking place. The vision embodied in the *SCHOOLPLUS* report will affect the kind of education offered to their children in the decades to

come. The report suggests the need for a democratic, or “bottom-up”, approach to the implementation of community schools. This opens the door for public participation through unions, community groups, Aboriginal and Métis organisations, women’s groups, parents’ councils, and individual citizens. The first task is to raise awareness about the strengths and weaknesses of the report and its impact on labour, so that workers can become active participants, lobbying the government to provide adequate funding for community schools. Working in conjunction with teachers and the STF is another way to ensure that high quality education continues to be a reality in the future. Only where the demands of all these groups are fully articulated will the *SCHOOLPLUS* program meet our collective needs. ❖

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Footnote:

1) Alison Taylor, *The Politics of Educational Reform in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001, p.80).

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