CANADA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION: A Right and Not a Cause

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CANADA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM HAS BEEN POUNDED BY WAVE AFTER WAVE OF RESTRUCTURING IN RECENT YEARS. BUDGET CUTTING HAS RUN RAMPANT, SOCIAL VALUES HAVE SHIFTED OFTEN AND DRAMATICALLY, WHILE TECHNOLOGY AND CURRICULA SEEM TO CHANGE WITH THE SEASONS. DESPITE THE FACT THAT PUBLIC EDUCATION HAS BEEN RECOGNIZED AS THE CORNERSTONE OF A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY AND THE VEHICLE WHICH ALLOWS ALL CHILDREN TO DEVELOP THEIR FULL POTENTIAL, THE SYSTEM CONTINUES TO COME UNDER ATTACK. FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CANADA'S EDUCATORS, IT IS NO EXAGGERATION TO SUGGEST THAT TEACHING IN CANADA HAS BECOME MORE DEMANDING, MORE COMPLICATED AND MORE DIFFICULT THAN EVER BEFORE.

From this rather bleak scenario, four interrelated issues emerged, which are of key concern to parents, students, and in particular, Canada's teachers, who, with representation from the 240,000-member Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF), are endeavouring to point out that a viable public education system and a prosperous future for Canada go hand in hand.

TEACHER SHORTAGE

At an October 2000 demographics conference sponsored by CTF, a survey initiated by the teachers' federation revealed that the number of teachers in Canada declined to 271,000 in 1999-2000 from 284,000 in 1991-1992. During the same period, the number of students increased by more than 200,000. As a result, educators are operating within a system where there are fewer teachers available to teach a growing body of students.

The survey also showed that more than two-thirds of Canadian school boards expect to have difficulty hiring teachers this year. It also indicated that 51 per cent of boards surveyed found it increasingly difficult over the past four years to attract good quality candidates for full-time teaching positions, especially in rural areas. To make matters worse, certain jurisdictions are experiencing difficulties finding qualified teachers for specific subject areas, including general science, chemistry, biology and physics. Blame for the shortages has been laid with retirements, teacher burnout and a reduction in school support services. Other causes are deteriorating working conditions, including lack of preparation time and minuscule wage increases, and a negative public perception of the teaching profession, both of which have caused fewer teachers to graduate. The problem has been compounded by aggressive marketing campaigns in some parts of Canada which are luring teachers to jobs outside the country.

CTF has responded by calling on governments to increase the number of spaces in teacher training institutions and develop support programs for beginning teachers. CTF is also asking governments to improve the conditions under which teachers teach and children learn; maintain support programs, resources and competitive remuneration packages; utilize the pool of qualified substitute and part-time teachers to fill part-time positions; provide greater opportunity for in-service training; and increase investment in public education and the provision of education resources.

LACK OF QUALIFIED TEACHERS

With teachers in short supply in Canada, teachers and school boards are under severe pressure. Teachers are facing increased stress, resulting in symptoms such as fatigue, headaches and more absences, which in some areas leads to even more teacher shortages. Boards are under fire to fill vacancies.

Some school boards — in Canada's North, for example — have reacted by hiring under-qualified teachers. This is causing further problems. First, teachers who lack proper training are unable to handle the workload and don't stay in the profession for long. So this stopgap solution does little to solve the country's mounting teacher shortage. Second, educators who are not properly trained cannot possibly offer the sound academic training that Canadian students and parents have come to expect.

Should this trend continue, Canada's students will be the big losers. It will be a tragic situation, indeed, if significant numbers of children cannot be guaranteed a sound educational program.

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The solution would appear to be relatively simple: Teachers, governments and faculties of education must initiate discussions which will ensure there are adequate spaces to train new teachers — particularly in subject areas plagued by shortages. Broader discussions are needed, including at the high school and teachers' college level, on how to attract more people into teaching in Canada. In short, teaching has to be made more pleasurable and more rewarding. Then, these attributes must be heavily promoted.

USE OF THE NEW MEDIA

In several provinces, education ministers have embraced technology with ambitious plans to bring more computers into the classrooms, based on the assumption that technology has the potential to allow students to proceed at their own pace.

This may be true, but the intended outcome may never be realized because in many parts of Canada teachers are not adequately trained to deal with new media issues. Put simply, they have not been shown how to blend computers into existing academic programs. In these situations, the likely and unfortunate result, is that the advent of technology could do more damage than good, by leaching resources from an already financially

strapped system, effectively undermining those whom children depend most heavily on in the school system — teachers.

In 1994, The Ontario Royal Commission on Learning recognized this, stating "... we are [not] suggesting that technology is an automatic good in the learning process... We acknowledge that machines must be at the service of humankind — not the reverse. That is why we insist so vigorously that, without appropriate teaching strategies, information technology will not do the job required."

To date, teaching strategies linked to technology have not materialized. Rather than add to teacher resources, education ministries in several provinces have proposed cuts in teacher preparation time partly to pay for incoming computers. While there is no question information technology can be extremely motivating and conducive to creating new and exciting classroom environments, governments have not developed the necessary understanding of how new technologies will affect the learning environment. Nor have they given teachers the tools they need to help students take advantage of technology.

Canadian educators are united in thinking that the education system will only harness technology's tremendous potential, if teachers are better trained in the use of computers. Without a strategy, and without training, this potential may never be realized. The education system needs an agreed upon set of goals and ongoing research which can be used to build a responsible plan to introduce technology into the classroom on a country-wide scale. With the current set of irrational plans, schools stand to lose control of the agenda in a way our children may live to regret.

It is CTF's view that teacher education should be readily available to generalists as well as instructional specialists, with particular emphasis placed on multidisciplinary studies and the integration of technology with other print and audio-visual resources.

COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE CLASSROOM

Across Canada, teachers and students are operating in a climate of underfunding. As a result, private corporations are attempting to capitalize by turning classrooms and teachers into profit centres and profit maximizers. Their goal is to provide certain resources to schools in return for having access to a captive audience of Canadian students who will be bombarded on a daily basis with advertising which aims to sell products such as computers, clothing and soft drinks.

Thanks to the lack of government support, business/education sector partnerships are a growing phenomenon in Canada. Partnerships run the gamut from school-to-work programs and private companies running schools on a for-profit basis, to arrangements involving the "matching" of specific businesses and schools, school-related fundraising, business-related curricula and business involvement in the development of curricula and privatized management of publicly-funded schools and school divisions/boards.

One highly publicized attempt at commercializing the system is the Youth News Network (YNN), which wants to advertise in schools under the guise of providing a news program. Secondary schools are lured by offers of televisions, VCRs, satellite dishes and computers in exchange for students watching more than 12 minutes of YNN-packaged news, information programs and commercials. There are now plans for YNN to move into the web-based field offering so-called "educational portals" that would expose students to additional advertising while surfing the web at school.

To date, CTF and educators across Canada have withstood attempts by YNN to infiltrate Canada's education system. This is due largely to staunch resistance from CTF and the Canadian public, which in a recent survey turned thumbs down on the commercialization of the public school system. Parents, teachers and school boards have made it amply clear that the YNN approach is unethical, since it holds students hostage to the almighty dollar — the ultimate goal of businesses such as YNN.

The reality, however, is that as governments continue to hack away at education budgets, teachers, schools, school boards and students are becoming extremely vulnerable to attempts by YNN and others to commercialize the public education system. This cannot be allowed to happen: On more than one occasion, experts have cautioned educators of the dire consequences when negotiations occur between parties that know what they want and parties that are driven by need. Disaster for the need-driven party is a common result because in the end, students will be exposed to curricular materials that promote corporate interests.

CTF believes that materials intended for classroom use should be subjected to rigorous evaluation. Particular attention should be paid to accuracy and completeness, objectivity, commercialism, bias and stereotyping. CTF has stated unequivocally, that successful partnerships are based on sound educational principles and are built on trust and mutual respect between the contracting parties. Programs of corporate involvement should meet an identified education need, not a commercial motive.

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THE NEED TO PROTECT PUBLIC EDUCATION

It is imperative to remain vigilant in reminding the public and decision makers not to lose sight of what schools are for and whom public education should serve. We as a society need to take a step back and take an ideological and philosophical view around public education. As the Governor General of Canada so eloquently stated: "It is a tragedy that public education in Canada, which used to be a given for every child, is now becoming a cause."

That is why at CTF, we will continue to speak in defence of our public education system. Our voice will be heard calling upon governments to provide the necessary human and financial resources to allow all Canadian children equitable access to quality public education.

That is our best guarantee of a caring, prosperous and socially engaged society. That is our guarantee for our collective future. After all, public education is to democracy as spelling is to writing.