

PRIVATIZATION and EDUCATION

Only a handful of parents dream of sending their children to a high-cost, user-pay private school, college or university. Most hope and expect that a high quality, public system of education will be available so that their children can reach their educational potential, whether that be learning a trade, attending a college or working toward a university degree.

But government policies implemented over a decade ago are today threatening the very core of the public education system.

The Privatization “Two-Step”

Step one: create a crisis

When the Conservative government took office in 1995, then Education Minister John Snobelen stated publicly that the first step in bringing about change was to “create a crisis”. The government acted upon this by slashing over \$500 million from education.

In the elementary and secondary school system, this cut forced school boards to slash the numbers of staff, teacher-librarians, and guidance counselors. Further programs cuts saw the elimination of shop programs, English as a second language programs, and adult education classes and a plethora of other programs and services.

Many secondary schools began charging user fees for everything from athletics, lab materials and art supplies, to the use of school facilities for community groups.

The quality of public education was thrown into a downward cycle. Communities redoubled their fundraising efforts to fund basic school programs like music and sports. But relying on parents’ private fundraising capacities only exacerbates socio-economic differences between schools. For example, elementary schools in the top 10% most affluent communities raise an average of \$32,400 per school. Contrast this with the \$1,750 average raised by elementary schools in the bottom 10% least affluent communities.

Step two: create a market

Between 1999 and 2004 nearly 300 Ontario elementary and secondary schools closed.

At the same time, private schools and companies are buying the public schools that were closed.

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Parents with the financial means began considering other options. In a single year, 2004-05, 40,000 more Ontario students enrolled in the private school system. (source: Our Schools/Our Selves, Winter 2006. p.28). This situation exacerbates the funding crisis because funding is partially based on enrolment. In other words, declining quality in public schools helps to create a market for private schools, which in turn further erodes education quality in public schools.

Facts: Source: 2006 Annual Report on Ontario's Public Schools, People for Education	
•	Less than half of Ontario schools have music teachers.
•	Over 40,000 students are on waiting lists for special education services.
•	In 1998, 80% of elementary and secondary schools had teacher-librarians. In 2006, only 74% of secondary schools and 54% of elementary schools had them.
•	The percentage of English-language grade 6 students who reported they like to read has declined from 64% in 2000 to 48% in 2005.
•	Despite an increase in the number of students who need English as a Second Language support, the number of ESL teachers has declined from 41% in 1999 to 27% in 2006.
•	Elementary and Secondary schools will be privately fundraising approximately \$63 million in additional funding to keep the schools going.

Rather than collecting adequate tax dollars efficiently through the tax system and allocating resources based on the needs of each community and each school, the previous Conservative government decreased its tax base by implementing billions of dollars in tax cuts for wealthy corporations and individuals.

Yet at the same time, public educators were encouraged to privately fundraise the very dollars that the government stopped collecting. It is expected that by the end of the 2005-2006 year, Ontario elementary and secondary schools will have privately fundraised over \$63 million in revenue. Simply returning corporate taxes to 2000 levels would generate over \$1.3 billion - or nearly double the amount of money that is currently being fundraised by individual schools (source on corporate tax: Ontario Alternative Budget 2006). This would be one small step toward rebuilding Ontario's capacity to fund a high quality public education system.