Privatised education: the virus exposed by the pandemic

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As COVID-19 continues to reap havoc and draw the public's attention, governments across Canada are sharing a privatisation playbook as they use the pandemic as cover to transform publicly funded public education.

A few years back at Aldershot elementary, at my school in Kentville, Nova Scotia, a fundraising drive kicked into full gear to finance a new playground. The old equipment had, due to a lack of funding for upkeep, deteriorated over time and was in desperate need of replacement. The community came together, as it so often did, to raise the money needed to back the modest project.

Soon after the construction was completed, a sign appeared before the playground. Instead of a plaque thanking the collective efforts of the people and organisations that made the initiative possible, it was an ad placement for Google. In fact, Google signs were everywhere. Mounted all over the equipment, the signs encouraged children to visit Google, all in an effort to mine personal information about them and their families. So much for no screen time.

It turned out that the school board had allowed the tech giant to install the signs. Though, after some sustained pressure, the ads were removed. At the time, I was shocked, and I must admit, naive, to see such blatant privatisation, but, as it turns out, this was only child's play.

Education clearance sale

Today, under the shadow of the pandemic, governments across Canada are busily working away to flip the switch on publicly funded public education. Instead of focusing on concrete ways to keep students, teachers and support personnel safe in order for school buildings to remain open and maintain education of the highest quality, ministries of education are focusing efforts on bringing their systems down from the inside.

What began as a slow creep toward privatisation has, because of the crisis that endures, accelerated at an alarming rate. For these vultures, Naomi Klein's Shock Doctrine was not a warning but a business plan.

For all of the sickness, death, economic and personal destruction of COVID-19, one of its side effects may prove to be the most damning long-term. As a privatisation accelerant, the pandemic has provided the perfect combination of fuel and oxygen, emergency rationale and political cover, for causing the kind of harm that could impact generations to come, not to mention the irreparable damage caused by tearing away the very foundation of our social fabric.

Despite Canada's reputation as a leader of strong, quality public education systems, the early days of the pandemic quickly laid bare the cracks. Formed over years and decades of government neglect, only to be repeatedly triaged by the education community, and too often at their own expense, the COVID-19 crisis has pressured the levies to their breaking point. And without adequate measures to ensure physical distancing, testing and contact tracing, schools in most parts of the country went online, leaving children without proper support or the technology needed to participate.

The domino effect

More than a year after life as we knew it came to a sudden halt, the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta have pulled out the privatisation playbook, following the cues of my home province of Nova Scotia, which pushed the first domino a few years ago with the elimination of school boards and the splintering of the union.

Most recently, Ontario announced that, starting this September, online learning will become the norm. Offered as an alternative to in-school learning, a child will have the opportunity of completing kindergarten through Grade 12 without ever having to step foot in a school.

Of course, what is presented as an educational choice is, in fact, the big play to encourage all financially-abled families to opt for private schools, while those excluded from fee-paying options will be left scrambling for stable internet connections and digital devices to learn at home. It is also an “innovative” way to eliminate teaching positions.

In Quebec, over a year of hardball bargaining tactics and the elimination of school boards has left teachers exhausted as they continue to contend with keeping students as safe as possible while trying to maintain quality teaching.

In Manitoba, the government is following the union busting script written in Nova Scotia, with the help of some of the same consultants, and is in the early stages of passing legislation that would dismantle democratically elected school boards and remove principals from the teachers’ union. The province’s education system may soon be unrecognisable.

Farther west, in Alberta, the name of the game is to cut, cut, cut while the province promotes educational choice that will see the flood gates open to an increase in charter schools. These moves have led to a drop in public school enrolment and an increasing number of families opting to place their children with private providers.

For some, these actions could be mistaken as pure incompetence, although they are anything but. Appointing education ministers with no experience
in education may seem like folly, failures in leadership, but rather it should be viewed as part of an effort to create chaos, causing the public to lose confidence in a system that was not broken and was not in need of fixing.

Despite the actions being made to paint publicly funded public education as ineffective and redundant, in fact, the opposite is reality.

More public, less private

The pandemic has shown how important well-funded public institutions are, from health care to education, for our communities, our children and youth, and their families. Yet it has also dramatically pushed us all out of old habits and routines that can be considered part of a bygone era, known as pre-March 2020.

Just think that a little more than a year ago very few knew what Zoom was. Now it’s considered a verb. But in this rush towards digital immersion, we cannot afford to abandon what works.

What the pandemic has proven is that in- person teaching and learning remain the bedrock of a quality education, but that doesn’t prevent us from acknowledging areas where virtual learning has opened doors and kept people safe.

It is time to begin a collective conversation focused on where we go from here, on how we can strengthen our public education systems, for the current generation and the generations to come.

The answer to building a better, more equitable, more just society will not be found through a fire sale of our most precious public assets. Rather, it is about doubling down on what we know delivers in our modern world.

Just like the new playground at Aldershot elementary school, it was the public that made its conception and construction possible after years of neglect.

By showing up after the fundraising and work was complete, Google was looking for recognition without any of the effort, to bask in the success of the project.

Even though that incident was minor in the global push to go private, it is an example of what we have long known: private interests are not making long- term investments for the betterment of a community, but rather short-term bets for quick bucks. We cannot let that gamble continue with Canada’s publicly funded public education, or we will all lose.

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