Charting the course for elevating our profession

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When I was studying to be a teacher several decades ago, there was excitement in the air in education. In my province in Canada, qualifications for a teacher's certificate had been increased from three years of university to a four-year Bachelor of Education.

My union had negotiated with the provincial government a new structure for collective bargaining that had already begun to bear fruit.

Elementary school teachers, who were mostly women, would no longer be paid less than secondary school teachers, who included more men.

All teachers would be paid according to their qualifications and years of experience – a huge win for women and for the profession. Issues and concerns were addressed through a solid working relationship between the union and the government.

Teaching was a sought-after profession and the common good was valued. Of course, union leaders invested the time, effort and determination needed to reach agreement on contentious issues.

My point is that it was exciting for me to live through changes that truly elevated the teaching profession.

One of the major themes of Education International's 10th World Congress last month was *Elevating our Professions*.

As a young education student, I might have wondered why we needed to address this topic, given the progress I was seeing.

Sadly, during the past 20 years, teachers and public education systems have encountered "reforms" of a different kind. For

example, with the advent of New Public Management, teachers were told that their students were now “clients”.

Teachers needed to be more efficient, more business-like in their classrooms, though hungry children, refugee children, new language learners, at-risk children – all the children needed more than simple efficiency. As governments allowed the privatisation of public services, funding for public education began to drop.

The accountability movement gave teachers and the public the message that large-scale standardised testing could do a better job of assessing students’ progress than the teachers who worked daily with them.

A raft of additional paperwork proved more than problematic for teachers. Ed tech companies proposed that technology could teach children more effectively than teachers. While the pandemic exposed the limitations of entrusting education provision entirely to technology, it also resulted in vastly increased workloads for teachers.

Today, the privatisation juggernaut represents a concerted global effort by right-wing ideologues, corporate profit-mongers and many governments, in concert with multinational education corporations and some global institutions, to exploit learners and educators for profit.

And it involves a deliberate strategy. Governments devalue teachers and de-professionalise teaching by hiring unqualified or under-qualified people, making teachers’ employment more precarious, abandoning social dialogue, subverting collective bargaining, attacking teacher unions, their leaders and defunding publicly funded education systems, at times handing them directly to corporate providers.

The common good seems to have fallen off governments’ priority list, despite their signing on to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in 2015, including SDG 4 on education. Corporations’ only concern is “return to shareholders”.

Clearly, as teachers and education unions, we must act. Because we work in local communities throughout the world, we have the necessary scope for action to bring about change.

We also have a powerful new tool for creating a new global narrative around public education. In February, the United Nations High Level Panel on the Teaching Profession released its report.

Its first recommendation focuses on the critical importance of governments ensuring that “the teaching profession enjoys high status and support”.

The report reminds the global community that education is a human endeavour and that relationships are the foundation of teaching and learning.

Taken together, the 59 recommendations create a framework for action, a roadmap, as it were, for re-valuing and re-vitalising both the teaching profession and public education.

Education unions are potent agents of change for moving public education forward. Coming together at the World Congress provided the opportunity for us to dig into those recommendations and chart our course toward solving the teacher shortage and elevating the teaching profession once more.

Children’s wellbeing and learning are the key to our society’s future. Elevating the teaching profession means elevating the quality of the public education children experience.

Governments, global institutions, corporations and society at large must pay attention to these truths so that new generations of teachers can experience the excitement of a teaching profession on the move, making a difference for children, their communities and our common home.

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