

The Funding of Public Education: What are the challenges?

Thank you. It is my privilege to participate in this panel and to bring forward the perspectives of teachers with respect to education funding. I will frame these remarks in terms of the broad purposes of public education, teachers' commitments within that context, the experience of teachers with existing funding frameworks, and some principles for publicly-funded education that might serve us well in the future.

Since its beginnings in North America, publicly-funded education has been recognized as having a broad societal purpose that extends beyond the benefit of education to individual children. When a system of common schools was created in Canada in 1848 through the work of educational leaders such as Egerton Ryerson, its stated purpose was to “cultivate the students’ sense of citizenship, loyalty, respect for property, and deference to authority” (Axelrod, 1997). From our perspective in 2010, these purposes may seem somewhat narrow and overly oriented to socializing children into the dominant culture. Nevertheless, it was well understood that governments had a responsibility to create and support a school

system that would provide children with an education for the future societal and economic benefit of all. During the past 50 years, in accordance with developments in human rights legislation and jurisprudence, the principle of the “universal right of opportunity” to education (SaskEd, 2001) has become well established. Both Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Principle 7 of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child state clearly the principle of publicly-funded education as a basic human right, at least to the end of elementary school. Interestingly, the emphasis in each of these documents is not on the acquisition of skills or knowledge as such, but on the broader purposes and impacts of education in building and sustaining the attributes of citizenship, respect for others, tolerance, and the holistic development of children and youth so that they can become “useful members of society” (p. 2). In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees public education for all children regardless of any consideration. Education policy such as the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1991 in the United States put forward inclusive principles for the education system, including the right of access to public education programs, individualization of services, inclusion of all children in the regular

classroom, provision of a broadened scope of school services, and the need for training of personnel (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989). These policy developments elsewhere had a profound effect on education policy in Canada (Sanche & Dahl, 2003).

C'est ainsi que le contexte a été créé pour l'ensemble de services livrés aux enfants dans leurs écoles locales, avec l'objet exprès de répondre d'une façon globale à leurs besoins d'apprentissage, non seulement pour leur avantage personnel, mais pour l'avantage social, économique et démocratique de notre société entière.

C'est dans ce contexte que les enseignantes et les enseignants travaillent et que leurs engagements sont réalisés. Quoique chaque enseignant.e ait la possibilité de démontrer sa propre individualité dans la façon qu'il ou elle enseigne, chacun fait toutefois partie d'une profession liée par un contrat social. Par ce contrat, le public accorde aux membres de cette même profession l'indépendance et la responsabilité d'administrer leurs affaires. En retour les membres s'engagent à maintenir une conduite hautement compétente et professionnelle. Par ce contrat social, les enseignant.e.s embrassent, avec leurs collègues, une identité basée

sur un certain ensemble de connaissances spécialisées, habiletés et autres spécificités. Cette identité professionnelle est exprimée et réalisée par les engagements des enseignant.e.s dans leur travail et envers leurs élèves et la communauté. Ces engagements comprennent les suivants :

- Créer et maintenir une atmosphère d'apprentissage à l'intérieur de laquelle l'enseignant ou l'enseignante encourage et appuie l'élève dans sa croissance globale.*
- Faire preuve d'un niveau professionnel de connaissances relatives aux programmes d'études ainsi que les habiletés requises et le jugement nécessaire pour appliquer effectivement ces connaissances.*
- Démontrer un répertoire de stratégies d'enseignement et de méthodes qui sont appliquées durant les activités pédagogiques.*
- Assumer des responsabilités professionnelles relatives à l'évaluation des élèves.*
- Tenir compte des buts et de l'expérience dans la pratique pédagogique et s'adapter en conséquence.*

- *Travailler avec ses collègues dans une atmosphère mutuellement respectueuse et développer des relations professionnelles cordiales avec la communauté éducative.*
- *Conduire toutes ses relations professionnelles de façon à être en harmonie avec les principes d'équité, d'intégrité et de respect.*

One important question that we might be asking ourselves at this point is whether or not current levels and models of education funding, together with the principles behind them, create the conditions for success for teachers in carrying out the education system's broad mandate and their own professional commitments to the well-being of their students, their school communities, and society as a whole.

Over the past decade or more, teachers have experienced an increasing number of contradictions in their work and in the education system as a result of efforts aimed at a broad reform of the education system – contradictions that have a relationship with education funding. The first contradiction revolves around decreased funding and increasing demands on and expectations of the education

system. The publicly-funded education system is viewed as more important than ever, but for a largely economic motive, that being, to support our knowledge-based economy and increase Canada's international competitiveness. Thus, the education system must ensure that children and youth are life-long learners, that they know how to find and assess information, and that they are critical and creative thinkers. Every student needs to be equipped to experience success in this economy. Indicators such as external standardized test results and graduation rates are used as valid measures of success. So, expectations of school systems have increased tremendously. At the same time, according to Canadian Teachers' Federation data, the average expenditure of provincial governments on education in Canada has declined over a twenty-year period from 14.2% of total provincial government spending in 1988-89 to 11.8% in 2007-08 (Canadian Teachers' Federation). One could argue that such a decrease in spending is justified, given declining enrolments. In many jurisdictions, enrolments have declined. However, the intensity and diversity of student needs and the provision of a much wider range of services through the school has created a very high degree of complexity and demand for resources in an educational

context that is already inherently complex (Clarke et al.). I don't think I need to list the number and diversity of student needs that schools are called upon to address. So – greater demands, but fewer resources.

A second contradiction arises from a point I have previously mentioned – an economic motive for pursuing higher educational achievement for students. Teachers and parents both desire what is best for the child, what will support their learning, and what will help them to grow in confidence as human beings and become contributing members of society. As teachers work hard to implement inquiry learning, to differentiate instruction and assessment, and to take many other initiatives in response to student needs, the political focus on economics and market ideologies has produced a range of practices that seem to run counter to the very objective we are purportedly pursuing, that of enhanced student learning and achievement. These practices include narrowed curricula, narrowed accountability measures, the generation and questionable interpretation and use of data, and an over-emphasis on standardized testing.

The trend towards centralization of funding in the hands of provincial governments often leaves school divisions in the difficult position of having to make cuts to programs and personnel when the funding they receive is inadequate. In the name of efficiency and practicality, music and other fine arts programs are often cut first, in order to maintain a core program focused on language arts, mathematics and the sciences. It is ironic that contemporary educational research underscores the importance of music and fine arts in enhancing student learning. We also know that increased physical activity can improve students' ability to focus and enhance their learning, yet gymnasium facilities are often lacking. If we are to believe education pundits such as Sir Ken Robinson, the path to the future of education does not run through standardization or efficiency. To be truly transformative, we need to open opportunities for children to develop their creativity and their intelligences.

Another worrying development for teachers is the diversion of public funds from the publicly-funded education system to the funding of quasi-private schools or independent schools. For example, since 2005-2006, funding for independent schools in British Columbia has increased by 34%, while funding for the public education system has

increased by 13% (*BCTF Teacher*, April 2010). These actions have the potential to create a tiered education system, in which those who are able to pay send their children to quasi-private schools, while the publicly-funded education system, which serves the children of those who are not able to pay, is starved and becomes increasingly less able to respond to the needs of these children, who are among the most vulnerable children in our country. We see another contradiction: If the publicly-funded education system is to achieve its mandate of nurturing a compassionate, capable citizenry, then all children need the opportunity to encounter and know one another in that setting, and the school system has to receive funding that is appropriate for welcoming and educating all children well.

This brings me to a dilemma regarding the teaching and learning environment. I alluded earlier to the importance of appropriate facilities to support student learning, including gymnasiums, welcoming and well-equipped classrooms, resource centers, current technology, and appropriate space for support services. Much of the current education infrastructure is in serious need of renovation or replacement. In an environment of increased expectations, teachers would wish for a school infrastructure that

supports and facilitates teaching and learning, rather than posing challenges.

What might teachers point to as a helpful approach in considering education funding? Given the education system's public mandate, the public trust environment in which teachers work, and the public funds being put to the purpose of the publicly-funded education of children and youth, we might ground our discussion of education funding in the basic principle that publicly-funded education is a public good and basic human right. We might uphold the belief that education is a human endeavor, not simply a technical or economic one. Because of the manifest benefits to society brought about by the publicly-funded education system, public funds put to this purpose should be considered as an investment in the future of our country and of our society. There is ample evidence of the relationship between Grade 12 completion and lower rates of incarceration, unemployment, family violence, and use of the social welfare system. I find it interesting that our federal government is considering a significant expenditure for the construction of prisons. Teachers would advise that those funds might be better spent on early learning and child care programs and on schools. It will take a

few years for that investment to bear fruit, because we are really talking about generational change, but, in the long run, this will yield the greatest benefit.

So what is needed? An appropriate level of funding: the principle of adequacy. There are limits to government funds. However, the necessary funds should be allocated to carry out the required mandate. For example, when new curricula are being implemented, teachers and students should not be placed in the position of no longer having access to previous curriculum materials and at the same time not being able to obtain and implement new curriculum materials because of insufficient resources.

Funds should be distributed equitably: the principle of fairness. Responding to student needs is a key transformative element in the lives of children and youth. Geographic location, socio-economic status, and other factors should not negatively affect a child's educational experience – not just opportunity, but experience.

The principles of stability and predictability must be part of the equation. In order for school divisions to plan long-term, they need to know what level of funding they can expect in order to allocate resources appropriately.

Of course, there is a need for transparency and accountability -- these are necessary principles as well. One important condition teachers would apply to the principle of accountability is that measures taken to ensure it **not** interfere unduly with actual instruction, preparation and assessment. By this, I mean undue emphasis on standardized testing, data generation, paperwork, and the like.

In closing, I would like to refer to the title of this Forum and the great promise of public education that I have attempted to describe here. It is a promise made by our society to children and youth and their parents that their universal and basic human right to public education is being honored. It is also a promise made by our present society for its own future and the future of all its citizens. I worry that, when we start talking about money, funding formulas, and the like, we tend to forget for a moment about the children themselves. When teachers walk back into their classrooms in late August and September, they meet the kids. As a teacher, you walk into your classroom, and you see all those pairs of eyes looking at you -- brown eyes, blue eyes, black eyes, green eyes, friendly eyes, happy and eager eyes, mischievous eyes, sad and lonely eyes,

sometimes angry eyes, all of them seeking a connection, and we look back with smiling eyes that say, "Welcome!" One of the greatest gifts that schools and teachers give to kids is hope: hope for themselves, hope for their families, hope for their communities, hope for the future. Let society make the commitment to fund that promise for all children.

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