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## Growing Inequities in Ontario Public Schools

*It was the intention of my Masters of Arts thesis, The Results and Implications of Fundraising in Elementary Public Schools: Interviews with Ontario Principals, completed in January 2012 through the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, to examine the negative and positive results of fundraising, to contextualize it within our current neoliberal political climate and to assess whether or not the public school system is in fact providing an equitable educational opportunity for all students. One significant finding was that schools that fundraised higher amounts of money had more and superior resources and facilities. Additionally they outperformed, both academically and athletically, schools that fundraised lower amounts of money. Another significant finding was that fundraising is eroding the quality of education for a growing majority of students, leaving many vulnerable to private sector fundraising partnerships. It was also found that the equity gap between students, schools and school boards is widening. It is clear that if the government continues to underfund public schools it will threaten the viability of the public school system.*

**P**ublic education should be democratic, transparent and the great equalizer whereby every student, regardless of circumstance, can rely on the public school system to provide them with a high quality education. To ensure this, public funding should be made available at

the government level to fully support a robust and complete curriculum for all students.

However, Ontario schools have been grossly underfunded since 1997, originating with the Conservative government of former Premier Mike Harris, and have since taken on additional costs (Social Planning Toronto, 2011, p. 54) creating an increasing need and pressure to fundraise at a time when poverty rates are climbing. Ontario's growing education cuts, whether imposed with an agenda or not, pressure schools to compete and rely on corporate partnerships. The fundraising trend shows that the reliance on private and corporate money in the public school system is increasing, making today's potential threat of privatization a real possibility in the future. The thesis study included eight principal interviews from a large southern Ontario city and five school observation tours. Principals from high and low fundraising schools were interviewed. Although the results of the study were broad and showed that the overall impact of fundraising is more negative than positive, this article will focus only on the results of fundraising as it relates to commercialism and equity.

### **Commercialism**

Commercialism in schools is growing because fundraising in schools is becoming increasingly necessary. Our current global financial crisis and a shift by governments to the political neoliberal agenda continue to result in less money for school boards and their schools. In the province of Ontario, cuts in funding for the public education system support the political neoliberal agenda and really mean that public education has become a lower priority to the government of Ontario. Neoliberalism liberates the "free" market systems from government regulation. It includes shrinking the public sector, cutting public expenditure for public schools and other public systems, shifting the tax burden from the wealthy private investors and owners to the individual worker, and the replacement of the concept of "public good" and the power of democratic institutions with the concept of privatization and individual responsibility. For public schools this means fundraising, competition, and the reliance on private donors and corporate partnerships (Martinez & García, 2000; United for a Fair Economy, 2011) and for the private sector this means more opportunities for profit.

Underfunded schools compete for limited resources by marketing themselves and accepting conditional funding from profit-driven corporations. Principals have bought into and accept that the concept of allowing commercialism into their schools is a part of what makes their fundraising initiatives successful. It was evident from principal interviews that not only have they resigned themselves to fundraising as an overall means of providing and maintaining high quality educational standards, in some cases they have actually become excited by and thoroughly engrossed in the fundraising process and its potential. One principal said, "Unfortunately with less and less money being given out to the schools, if you need items to improve your programming or start a new program or reimburse your consumable items, like sports equipment, musical instruments, items for clubs, etc. fundraising is the way to go" (Principal #6, interview, July 28, 2011). One of the schools was so engaged in fundraising potential they made a video to market themselves. Their principal explained, "A corporation is helping us do a video, which I think they did last week and the idea is that when we go to the private sector we show this video. We also have a group of kids who have trained, called the Dream Team, who do an actual skit to promote this and do presentations" (Principal #7, interview, August 8, 2011). School #5 placed an ad in their community's local paper to advertise for one of their fundraising initiatives. This particular principal also wanted to integrate a business model in their quest to improve fundraising potential and efficiencies by establishing Paypal for the school to increase profit and decrease school labour. PayPal was seen as a more efficient process for placing orders and collecting money than the current manual procedure, which involves teachers using instructional time. Finally, this principal appeared frustrated because their board had not yet considered PayPal, but indicated that he/she believed the Carleton Board already uses the service (Principal #5, interview, July 23, 2011).

Corporations try to give the appearance that they are benevolent, but in every case they are looking for something in return. They receive tax breaks, proceeds from sales, child labour, and the appropriation of time, materials and space (eg. the use of instructional time, school paper and space to promote fundraising initiatives). For example, QSP (Quality School Program) and Cadbury demand assemblies during school time to promote themselves and teach students how to

sell their product. Scholastic appropriates school space to setup their goods for sale and provides the school with a credit, not money, as their fundraising profit, thereby ensuring brand loyalty and continued Scholastic sales. Some school observation tours revealed signage in the schools and schoolyards. The signage was often distasteful and promoted commercialism.

More disturbing was the use of children to sell corporate product which not only ate into their instructional time, but it also took up personal time they may have been able to use to do homework. Principal #5 expressed concern that the lunch fundraisers are a distraction from the focus on teaching and learning. He/she said, "teachers have to collect the money. So at the beginning of the day sometimes they spend 15 minutes. That's a distraction" (Principal #5, interview, July 23, 2011). He/she said each fundraising campaign is "usually about two weeks" (Principal #5, interview, July 23, 2011). If you do the math for School #8, which runs two lunches a week, and calculate that each teacher spends an average of 30 minutes a week collecting money, over a period of 30 weeks each teacher will lose a total of 15 hours of instructional time. One can only imagine what the collective total hours spent on fundraising per school would be if you added up the time spent on every single fundraising event. It is clear that the amount of time spent on fundraising by teachers is not only a waste of educational resources, but also an act of irresponsibility towards students who lose valuable instructional time.

Corporations also benefit from teaching students and their families an informal curriculum. As an example, The Lunch Lady, Pizza Pizza, Subway, and Cadbury promote consumerism, brand loyalty, and an informal curriculum regarding unhealthy food. Seven of the eight schools in the study used the lunch fundraiser as a fundraising strategy. However, when schools regularly sell fast food or junk food, students are inadvertently being taught an informal commercialized curriculum that these lunch choices are a healthy lifestyle choice, without ever being presented the nutritional facts to support an informed decision.

The Lunch Lady is a prime example of a company that on the surface appears to offer a valuable service to families. However, as a vendor to many school boards and schools their agenda is purely profit driven. In order to be permitted into the school system they offer a

financial incentive to both the school and the school board by paying a small percentage on every dollar of food sales generated. The negative result of this board-business partnership is that the school board approval of catered lunches sends the consumerist message to families that it is a healthy alternative solution to packing a child a healthy lunch. In addition, not only does this informal curriculum potentially condition children from an early age to become dependent upon readymade meals, in the case of The Lunch Lady, the quality of foods being offered is questionable. The Lunch Lady and the Ontario school boards claim the business meets the Ontario School Food and Beverage Policy/Program Memorandum No. 150. However, upon taking a look at their menu one quickly notes that there is no fresh whole fruit. They only offer fresh apple slices (\$1.00) and peach slices in juice (\$1.25). As well, the only salad they offer is the caesar salad, a salad notoriously known as being the unhealthiest salad because, compared to other salads, it is low in nutrition and includes no peppers, tomatoes or cucumbers. Furthermore, when placing a lunch order, nothing appears to stop a student from ordering more than one food portion or from choosing healthier options for their lunch, such as chocolate milk, cookies, hamburgers and pizza. Ironically adding healthy choices/toppings to burgers, such as lettuce costs an additional \$1.00. Although The Lunch Lady claims to offer a healthy menu, nowhere on their website do they post the nutritional information for their lunch items, nor will they make it directly available to consumers, preferring to ask consumers to consult with their school or board instead (C. Kreidstein, School Community Coordinator for The Lunch Lady, personal communication, September 16, 2011).

Another example of a business that on the surface appears benevolent is QSP (Quality School Program), a business that sells magazines, cookies, chocolate, and restaurant and gift cards. QSP, worth approximately \$110 million US dollars, notably meets their business objectives through the school system (2009, Lexpert, para. 1).

Up until now, there has been one major company in the magazine fundraising business, but now there are several out there competing," says Robert Corley, director of publisher relations and magazine marketing for Great American Opportunities, one of those newer companies.

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"That's a big change, and it has re-energized the industry." That "big" company was and still is QSP, a division of Reader's Digest. While QSP is still the main supplier, they, too, can see that the market is changing. They, too, have begun to offer more to their clients.

"The need for what we do in schools is greater than it has ever been," says Gary Rich, president of QSP Reader's Digest. "School funding cuts are deeper. Discretionary dollars are fewer. That's why the industry is so hot."

McCarthy, 2005, para. 7-9

QSP takes a very aggressive and consumer-based approach to teaching students to sell their products, as their schools face deeper funding cuts. They conduct mandatory school assemblies designed to motivate students to sell their products. They promise prizes for top sellers, offer small prizes to students for reaching sales quotas (Principal #5, interview, July 23, 2011; Principal #8, interview, August 16, 2011) and provide students with presentations on how to sell their products online (Principal #6, interview, July 28, 2011). QSP also receives a percentage of the profits from each sale made. Principals #5 and #8 disagree with the QSP fundraising strategy because of how it is run, but their School Councils do not mind because they value the money QSP generates. School # 5 makes \$10,000 annually and School #8 makes \$6,500 annually in profit from QSP sales. The QSP practices present an unhealthy informal curriculum. One principal said that the QSP fundraiser promotes a junk society. The principal said, "I don't like QSP because it does promote commercialism and bribery and all that stuff and this junk stuff. This junk society we are in. I don't like that" (Principal #8, interview, August 16, 2011). The principal also described the QSP assembly as "geared to sell, sell, sell and here is a little toy if you sell this much and another little toy if you. It's gotten better I got to say over the years but it takes away from class time. It goes against what I believe... I'm good with fundraising. I'm good with collecting money but not at the expense of class time" (Principal #8, interview, August 16, 2011).

My thesis' literature review also shows that corporations do not know what is best for students. For example, in August 2011 Scholastic Canada, one of the country's leading publishers and distributors

of children's books and educational materials, responded to the Campaign for a Commercial-free Childhood's three-month campaign to drastically reduce its production and distribution of corporate-sponsored teaching materials. Scholastic agreed to reduce the production and distribution of corporate-sponsored teaching materials by 40% (Campaign for a Commercial-free Childhood, 2011, August, para. 1). In May 2011, Scholastic also agreed to discontinue their American Coal Foundation sponsorship of material that promoted coal as a source of energy (Scholastic, 2011, May 13, para. 1). Clearly, it is very important that the government and schools stay vigilant in monitoring corporate-sponsored material, corporate-partnerships and in holding corporations accountable.

Despite the negative results of fundraising, principals are motivated to compete for limited resources because they are underfunded. Schools, just like corporations, are influenced by neoliberal principles and are beginning to accept and integrate a business model in their quest to improve fundraising potential and efficiencies. The difference is that schools are doing it to supplement their ability to maintain an educational standard that is being eroded by government underfunding, while philanthropists and corporations are doing it for the sole purpose of growing their businesses.

## **Equity**

Commercialism is resulting in growing inequities within and between schools. The top four money-generating elementary schools collected a total of \$567,630.00 compared to \$45,308.00 for the bottom four schools. Schools in affluent neighbourhoods have more and superior resources and opportunities than schools in lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods. Field trips account for the highest fundraised amounts and not only are there inequities between schools from high and low fundraising neighbourhoods, there are often inequities between students at the same school.

In most schools there were instances of students who did not participate in field trips due to the cost. Principal #3 stated that students who cannot afford the field trip cost were encouraged to participate in individual fundraising work, such as selling poinsettias, chocolate bars, and QSP magazine subscriptions. "Typically a child who may not have

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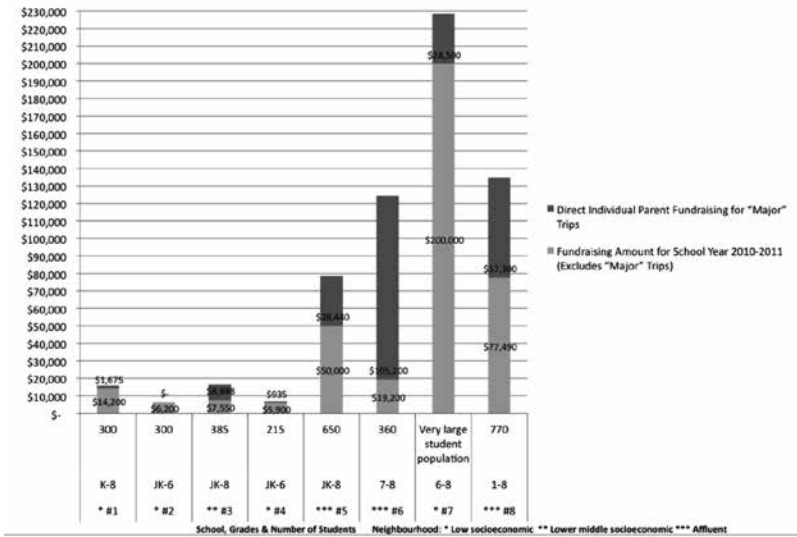
the funds, they can do some fundraising and the school, the teachers will organize that, where that they might sell poinsettias and then all of the proceeds from the sales that the child makes go towards defraying the cost of their trip. Not a pool. Just an individual fundraising to that child. So that a child who can afford the trip, without doing the fundraising, doesn't necessarily have to get involved in fundraising" (Principal #3, interview, July 14, 2011). That is inequitable and can create a loss of dignity for some students and their families. This practice was happening both at high and low fundraising schools. The growing inequities being fostered in the public school system today are reinforcing the societal structure for tomorrow.

All principals interviewed expressed the view that the results of fundraising impact student achievement positively, and their personal and professional experience in this area is supported by research in the education field. However, some schools are better positioned to fundraise more successfully than others. The School Council, also known as the Parent Council, is critical to school fundraising. School Councils in affluent neighbourhoods have more time to fundraise than School Councils in lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods. They are often more experienced and networked as well. An active School Council means less time demands are made on school staff and students, therefore the loss of instructional time is minimized. Schools #1, #2, #3, #4 and #7, located in lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods generated zero or little money through School Council run fundraising events. For example, School Councils #2 and #7 generated no money, School Council #4 generated \$1,500.00 and School Council #3 generated \$2,000.00. In contrast, Schools #5 and #8, located in affluent neighbourhoods relied heavily on their School Council to run fundraising events and raised large amounts of money. School Council #5 generated \$35,200.00 and School Council #8 generated \$34,000.00.

With the exception of School #7, the highest money-generating elementary schools were located in affluent neighbourhoods and collected an average of \$190.52 per student compared to \$37.76 per student for the bottom four schools (School #7 was excluded from the student average because their number of students was not reported in this study). Most lower-socioeconomic schools do not fundraise high amounts of money. School #7 is an exception because this principal is dependent upon corporate partnership, but as a result is constantly



**Figure A – Fundraising Dollars by School shows a quick snapshot of the fundraising disparities.**



Note: All data is approximate due to availability of information.

under pressure to minimize the conditions being demanded by corporations, such as the request for big, bold signage. There is a definite inequity between schools located in affluent neighbourhoods compared to schools located in lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods, and the Ministry of Education supports this inequity.

The Ministry of Education’s “Guideline for Fees for Learning Materials and Activities (2011)” allows and encourages individual schools, through fundraising, to enhance or provide optional programming to their students (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 1). By doing so, not only are schools in affluent or higher fundraising neighbourhoods able to offer their students a greater educational opportunity over those in poorer or lower fundraising neighbourhoods, they are offering it to kids who already have an advantage at home. School Principal #6, whose school is located in an affluent neighbourhood, said,

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It's not equitable because we are a public system. It should be as equitable as possible, but it's not equitable. Kids in low socioeconomic schools should derive the same opportunities in a perfect world as kids in middle or high socioeconomic schools. Through school fundraising the rich kids are maintaining a level that they are already getting at home. In a perfect world all fundraising would be spread out equally. It's about kids and equity. Parents who don't work have the time to fundraise and other parents who work don't have the time and effort. They are exhausted.

(Principal #6, interview, July 28, 2011)

Principal #5, whose school is also located in an affluent neighbourhood had similar comments. "No. It's not [equitable]. Our kids already get lots of stuff after school, such as scouts and soccer. They've got all sorts of stuff. Plus we are able to provide them with all sorts of other opportunities and some schools have nothing. They don't have a community centre. They have nothing. It's not fair" (Principal #5, interview, July 23, 2011). School #5 is attached to a community centre and the students have access to a swimming pool and an additional gym. Principal #2, whose school is located in a low socioeconomic neighbourhood explained, "it is not fair that some schools are able to raise many more dollars than others — it only stands to reason that the big fundraisers can provide more opportunities and experiences for their students compared to the smaller [fundraising] schools" (Principal #2, interview, July 13, 2011). The net result is that the gap in educational opportunity between rich and poor kids is widening and this greater educational opportunity correlates with higher levels of student achievement.

In the school year 2010-2011 Schools #5, #6 and #8, located in affluent neighbourhoods, raised an average of \$120.67, \$345.56 and \$177.00 respectively in fundraising amounts per student (including "major" trips) and overall these schools experienced the highest levels of achievement in this study. School #8 scored the highest EQAO results and achieved two to three athletic pennants due to their "bottom heavy" student population. School #5 scored the second highest EQAO results and achieved 17 athletic pennants, and School #6, grades 7 and

8, did not participate in EQAO and won 20 athletic pennants. In contrast, Schools #1, #2, #3, and #4, located in lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods raised an average of \$52.92, \$20.67, \$42.59 and \$31.75 respectively in fundraising amounts per student (including “major” trips) and experienced lower levels of achievement. For example, School #1 scored the lowest EQAO results and won only one athletic pennant. School #7, located in a low socioeconomic neighbourhood fundraised a substantial amount of money for the first time, but had not utilized the bulk of the money yet, utilizing some fundraised money only for “major” field trips. Their student achievement was found to be very low compared to the other schools.

It is obvious that more money means better educational resources and greater educational opportunity. Consider that “The U.S. educational system is one of the most unequal in terms of distribution of educational resources between schools. These disparities weaken the nation’s capacity by reinforcing the inequalities in educational outcomes” (Beese & Liang, 2010, p. 274). In Ontario, the inequalities in educational outcomes are not determined by the distribution of educational resources, but instead are reinforced by the huge fundraising inequities between schools. In contrast and as an example of an equitable educational system, all schools in Finland are fully state-funded, with the exception of a few privately run religious schools, (Vasagar, 2010, p. 2) and their overall PISA results are the strongest with 5 percent performance variance among their schools. “Parents can rely on high and consistent performance standards in whatever school they choose to enroll their children” (Schleicher & Stewart, 2008, pp. 48 & 51). This country is also prosperous, competitive and has a perceived lack of corruption (Salutin, 2011, April, p. 4). The lack of tax corruption in Finland provides enough tax revenue to fully fund all public schools. Therefore, the academic achievements of students at all schools in Finland, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are not dictated by the results of fundraising and all educators have the same educational resources and can focus solely on teaching.

This study’s finding on the correlation between higher fundraised monies and higher student achievement is also supported through a comparison of fundraising amounts between TDSB and YRDSB relative to their EQAO score results for the school year 2008-2009. Table 1 shows fundraising dollar results for the top 20 fundraising schools

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versus the bottom 20 schools in TDSB and YRDSB. The average dollar figure per student is also provided.

**Table 1: TDSB-YRDSB Fundraising Comparison (2008-2009)**

	<b>Top Schools Total</b>	<b>Average per Student</b>	<b>Bottom 20 Schools Total</b>	<b>Average per Student</b>
<b>TDSB (2008-2009)</b>	\$4.4 million	\$418.19	\$103,000	\$18.47
<b>YRDSB (2008-2009)</b>	\$4.8 million	\$398.78	\$844,126	\$168.35

Sources: (Toronto District School Board, 2008-09; York Region District School Board, 2008-09)

The most noteworthy figures are the bottom 20 schools for each board. They show that low fundraising schools in TDSB really are poor, while it could be argued that there are no poor schools in YRDSB. Table 5 below shows grades 3 and 6 average EQAO scores (2008-2009) for TDSB, YRDSB and the province.

**Table 5: EQAO Scores (2008-2009) – Comparison Between TDSB, YRDSB and Province Averages**

	<b>TDSB Gr. 3</b>	<b>TDSB Gr. 6</b>	<b>YRDSB Gr. 3</b>	<b>YRDSB Gr. 6</b>	<b>Province Gr. 3</b>	<b>Province Gr. 6</b>
<b>Reading</b>	58	67	69	79	61	69
<b>Writing</b>	66	67	78	78	68	67
<b>Math</b>	69	63	80	75	70	63

Source: EQAO, 2011, p. 1 (<https://eqaoweb.eqao.com/pbs/Listing.aspx>)

These two tables show that the YRDSB outperforms TDSB in EQAO scores, and is well above the provincial averages, while the TDSB's overall scores are lower than the provincial averages. It can be argued that this is due to YRDSB having more disposable income per student to spend on resources and facilities that support student learning and

achievement and is contrary to Ontario's Ministry of Education funding aim which "is meant to be equitable in order to provide equal educational opportunity for all students" (The Annual Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools, 2010, p. 26). This type of board comparison could be done across all school boards.

The Ministry of Education's decision to not fully fund schools (in order to ensure a complete robust curriculum is available to every student) while allowing "enhancement" (in the form of commercialism and for-profit corporate relationships) to programs and curriculums is giving one set of students an academic advantage over other students.

## Conclusion

This study showed that schools involved with the private sector were forced by circumstance to accept conditional funding, subjecting themselves to a consumer ideology and a neoliberal business model. The neoliberal agenda, promoted by the decrease in public school funding and the increasing need of individual public schools to fundraise, undermines the true purpose of public education, which is to provide a fair and equitable education to all students that supports critical thinking and the teaching of democratic values. To begin with, corporate involvement in schools is not benevolent or healthy. It is profit driven to serve the elite, takes up school and personal time and students are taught consumer and corporate values instead of civic values. Additionally, the ability to make unbiased choices is eroded by exposure to an informal curriculum that includes consumer solutions and the buy-in to brand loyalty. Finally, because schools in affluent neighbourhoods can fundraise substantially higher amounts of money than schools in lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods, the kids in affluent neighbourhoods have more resources and a greater opportunity to achieve.

**It is profit driven to serve the elite, takes up school and personal time and students are taught consumer and corporate values instead of civic values.**

Despite the negative results of fundraising, none of the staff at schools in this study were using their time or efforts to urge the prov-

ince to ban fundraising altogether and fully fund public education. The Ministry of Education continues to open their doors to private and corporate school board and school partnerships, allowing schools to be used for profit and allowing the school's formal curriculum to be undermined by an informal private and corporate curriculum and agenda. In addition, the equity gap is widening and an equal educational opportunity is not being provided for all students. If this trend continues, not only is the public education system in real danger of becoming privatized, the model of critical thinking that defines our democratic values today will eventually be lost.

In the final analysis the government should be banning fundraising and commercialism in schools and fully funding public education. Finland has done this and they arguably have the most successful educational system in the world. We need to realize that responsible government and policies that truly reflect the aim of the public education system will work for us here in Ontario as well.

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