**Cutbacks and Commercialism**

**in Ontario Schools**

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Ontario public schools have been underfunded since 1997, when the Harris government began a cascade of cuts. As a result, schools are fundraising for essential activities and services, and many schools are so fixated on fundraising that the quality of student education is compromised. According to the advocacy organization People for Education, in 2011, Ontario schools raised $589.9 million to make up for budget deficiencies in their schools. The fundraising dynamic promotes a two-tiered system of public education through fundraising inequity, where students in wealthier neighbourhoods experience better services because their parents, neighbours and corporate “friends” have deeper pockets when it comes to giving.

EVIDENCE AND IMPACT OF INEQUITY

Fundraising inequity, unfortunately, is the norm in Ontario schools. In fact, the 10 per cent of schools with the highest family income in the Greater Toronto Area raised 5 times more than the schools with the lowest family income, according to People for Education’s 2011/12 data. This translates into greater opportunity and a significantly higher level of education for middle and upper class kids, as well as stronger infrastructure, technology and better access to standard educational field trips (the kind most of us took for granted when we were in school). The public school system in Ontario is no longer living up to its mandate of equal opportunity for all students.

One of the major challenges for the Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools (CCFS) in the past year has been the fact that existing guidelines for fundraising are not enforced by school boards and provincial bodies. So while a board may have written a detailed document with reasonable guidelines, a visit to your local school may show numerous violations of the policy, making the school board policy document essentially useless. It takes resources for the school board to monitor school fundraising (e.g., site visits and meetings with administrators on this issue), at a time when many boards are facing budget cuts and struggling to maintain existing programs.

CUTBACKS LEAD TO COMMERCIALISM

It is important to note that the funding squeeze on public education is a key driver behind the expansion of partnerships with business. It is no coincidence that the problem of commercialism is closely related to the lack of funding and resulting inequity.

This is an example of two trends: the first in which more and more public goods and public places are being appropriated by private interests; the second in which commercial interests step in to profit from the very crisis created by funding shortfalls in the first place. We at CCFS are strongly committed to fighting to protect and preserve adequate public funding in order to prevent desperate schools from turning to support from private commercial sources.

One of the many problematic implications of this trend is that legitimacy is given to reductions in funding once schools demonstrate that funding can be found through commercial sources. Once the message is sent that commercial interests can compensate for funding shortfalls, there is even less incentive to maintain public commitments.

Our concern is that cutbacks force schools into the arms of private interests, who don’t necessarily have the best interests of public education at heart. This results in a transfer of power and authority from democratic forms of governance to non-democratic commercial interests, from schools as public spaces to opportunities for private profit.

CCFS ADVOCACY AND OUTREACH

CCFS continues to advocate for oversight and we are hopeful that TDSB guidelines will soon have some teeth to them.

In the meantime, CCFS is also is outreaching to student boards and parent councils, to educate them on the existing policies and develop a system of regulation from within. When they see violations of fundraising policy, parents and students should be empowered to report those violations and stop them. Change needs to come from the grassroots – those directly affected by the culture of fundraising – and not just the boards.

Administrators in wealthy schools may justify the culture of fundraising (which takes enormous time and energy away from educational activities) by arguing that their school needs the money. But by ignoring existing guidelines, they are contributing to a system of economic inequality, where sustainable public funding has begun to fade from the dialogue altogether. The lack of appropriate public funding has led to the greater corporatization of schools -- and the disparity in learning opportunities between a school in Forest Hill and a school in Regent Park.  No child should feel that his or her education hinges on the sale of a Cadbury chocolate bar, or a large handout from a wealthy sponsor (or parent). Education is for every child. It’s time we all stand up and fight for it.

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