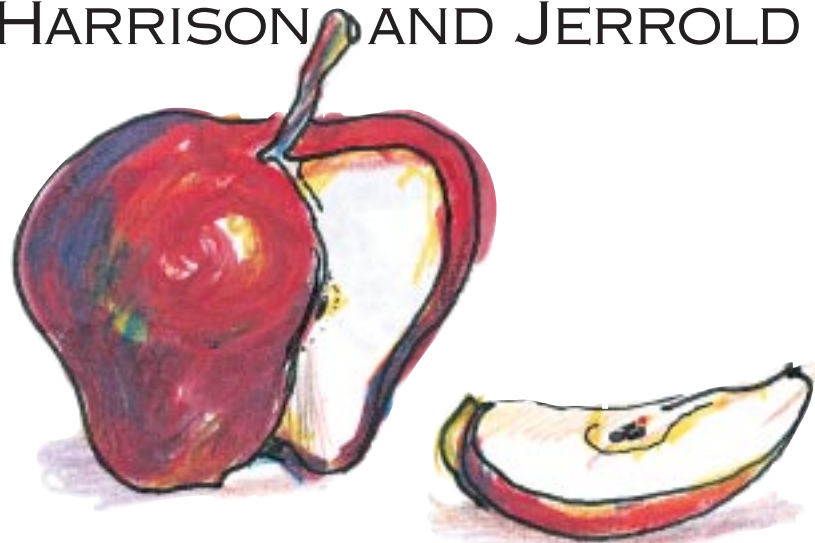


EDUCATIONAL REFORM

FAILING THE GRADE

TREVOR HARRISON AND JERROLD KACHUR



**SCHOOLS ARE
SHORT OF
TEXTBOOKS,
CLASSROOMS
ARE CROWDED,
BUILDINGS
ARE FALLING
APART**

The Klein revolution began with high hopes and all the subtlety of the Jerry Springer Show. Bombast and in-your-face marketing were “in,” supplied courtesy of much of North America’s fawning corporate media. A retrofitted Ralph Klein was touted as just the man to enact smaller government, balanced budgets, and market-based solutions, while also putting unions and “special interests” in their place. To the Tory party’s right-wing acolytes, there seemed no better place to begin the revolution than in Alberta’s schools.

The Klein government’s education policies after 1993 were sold as being necessary and beneficial to education. The new education system would produce better results than the old one—improved teaching, higher student achievement,

increased parental choice, greater community involvement, more equitable funding—at a cost that (in the words of the Education Department’s 1996/97 report) was to be “reasonable and under control.”

Not all of the changes to education since 1993 have been bad, nor altogether unusual in the context of educational changes elsewhere in Canada. At least initially, the Tories seemed to introduce a more equitable funding system than had formerly existed. Likewise, few argued with the government’s reduction in the number of school boards and subsequent attempts to involve parents at the grass-roots level through school councils.

As time has gone by, however, cracks in Alberta’s educational reforms have become gaping holes, and public concern has mounted. Why has a revolution that promised so much produced such concern?

What went wrong?

THE BEST LAID SCHEMES...

Many of the Klein government’s changes to education after 1993 were administrative. The major elements of administrative restructuring included: (1) a reduction in the number of school boards from 141 to 63; (2) a decrease in the number of locally-elected school trustees from 1,184 to 435 and the expansion of a complementary system of school councils; (3) the removal from school boards of the historic right to collect a component of the property tax for educational purposes, replaced by a system of funding education from province-wide general revenues; (4) changes to the appointment of school system superintendents and the role of principals—now viewed as plant managers and school accountants; (5) introduction of a funding scheme whereby money is provided to school boards in the form of three block grants, each block governed by government regulations which permit only limited transfer of funds within and between them; and (6) reductions in the number of people employed by the ministry of education.

The cornerstone of educational change in Alberta, however, was financial. Leading up to the 1993 election, the Klein Tories—with a helpful assist from the opposition Liberals—were able to con-

struct a view that Alberta was in the midst of a “debt and deficit crisis” that could only be dealt with through severe cuts to public expenditures.

A report by the Canada West Foundation in January 1998 tells the resultant tale. While other provinces during the mid-1990s chose to eliminate their deficits through a combination of increased revenues and judicious expenditure cuts, cuts were overwhelmingly Alberta’s instrument of choice. Between 1992/93 and 1994/95, more than 57 percent of Alberta’s deficit was eliminated through cuts alone—more than any other province. Indeed, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland (during roughly the same period) reduced their deficits almost entirely through increased revenues. Even in Mike Harris’ Ontario, from 1992/93 to 1997/98, the budget was balanced largely through increased revenues, with expenditure cuts accounting for only 32 percent of deficit elimination.

As one of the Alberta government’s three largest departments—social services and health were the others—education was enlisted in the fight against the debt. Of these three major departments, education took the smallest hit, in nominal terms losing 6.6 percent of its budget between 1992/93 and 1994/95 compared with health’s loss of 8.1 percent and wel-

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fare's loss of 22.1 percent. Nonetheless, the cuts were significant because they marked resource-rich Alberta as one of the most miserly of provinces and contradicted its official rhetoric about the importance of education.

voiced by parents, teachers, and educational leaders alike. Even as the funded hours increased, however, the hour/grant funding ratio decreased from \$3.54 per hour in 1995/96 to \$2.96 per hour in 1996/97.

Of course, the kindergarten debacle is old news. Ever since the Growth Summit of September 1997, the government has been "reinvesting" in public education and other social areas. Or have they?

...OF MICE AND MEN (AND POLITICIANS)...

On the surface, the argument that the government is reinvesting in education appears accurate. Funding estimates provided by Alberta Education seem to show a steady increase in educational funding, from \$2.70 billion 1995/96 to \$2.75 billion in 1998/99. But these spending totals do not take into account either enrollment increases or inflation. When these elements are factored into the calculations, per student expenditures in real dollars have actually been decreasing! Indeed, in every year except one (1998/99) per student spending in Alberta has actually been declining since Klein was elected. In fact, since 1987, when Don Getty was in office, the Tories have been committed to cutting educational funding. Of all provinces, Alberta is the only one to have experienced a real spending decline per student between 1985/86 and 1996/97. In nominal dollars, per student funding peaked in 1987 at \$5,229 per student and declined over the last decade. In this sense, it is incorrect to argue that the Klein government began the decline in educational spending. It did, however, accelerate the pace. Per student levels are still 12 percent less in 1998/99 than when the Klein government took office. Moreover, educational spending is again projected to decrease in the year 2000 (see graph 1).

How does Alberta's educational spending compare with other provinces? This is an important question, given that the premier and various ministers, from Alberta Education to Economic Devel-

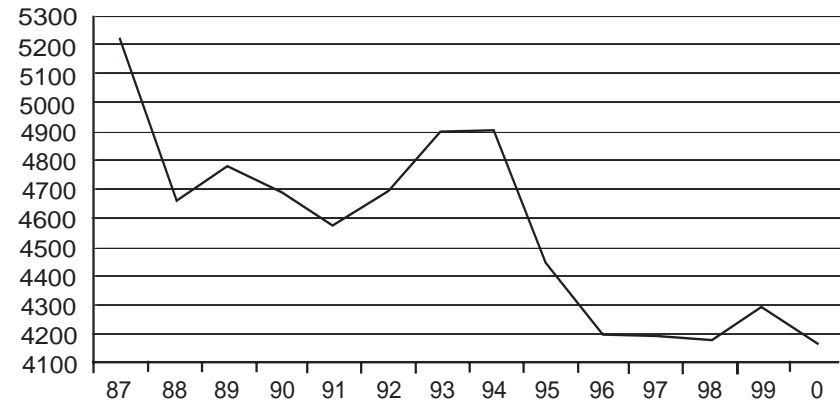
opment, have repeatedly given rhetorical support to the notion that Alberta's youth must be the best educated in Canada in order that the province be more globally competitive. Curiously, and sadly, Alberta's per student spending on public education falls below the national average and far below five of ten provinces, not to mention many American states. During 1996/97, 489,352 students were enrolled in public programs in Alberta with total spending of \$2.86 billion or \$5,848 per student—just below the Canadian provincial average of \$6,045 per student. Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia, and the havenot provinces of Manitoba and New Brunswick spent more money per student on public education in 1996/97 than did Alberta (see graph 2).

In practice, then, Alberta does not seem committed to education in any significant way. What is it committed to?

The government justified the financial cuts to public education as necessary to deal with the debt and deficit. We know now that this wasn't entirely the case: while the province had to address the problem, there were other means of doing so. The cuts were, however, necessary to the government's implementation of its deeply held ideological beliefs in smaller government and private enterprise. In education, these ideological beliefs turned on two axles: first, making schools more responsible to market principles; second, through a series of methods, privatizing the costs—and opportunities—of education.

Making schools more responsible to markets required altering the relationship between government and a number of key actors in education. These initiatives included measures aimed at increasing provincial control over fiscal matters (the purpose of removing boards' taxing authority); creating a "quasi-market" in education services to encourage school boards and schools to compete with each other; attempts to limit the power and autonomy of teachers and the Alberta Teachers' Association; introducing new forms of

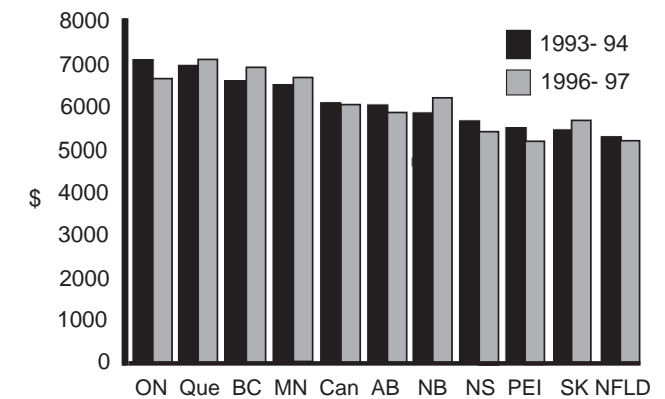
accountability based on transnational corporate practices; and transferring responsibility for operational decision-making from the school boards to the schools. In this new educational order, public (including Catholic) schools now must compete by diversifying their own programming and increasing their enrollments—that is,



GRAPH 1: PER CAPITA STUDENT SPENDING IN CONSTANT 1987 DOLLARS, 1987-2000.

Cuts were made to every area of education funding. Funds were also reduced in the area of school food services, native education programs and general transportation, while funding for community schools was abolished entirely. There was a reduction, too, in the grants to private or independent schools. Also, the number of personnel with Alberta Education was significantly reduced, as were capital expenditures needed to repair Alberta's aging classrooms. The salaries of teachers were rolled back 5 percent in 1994. Teachers' salaries have only recently begun to modestly increase.

Sometimes, the logic behind the cuts seemed bizarre. Take, for example, the changes that were made to kindergarten funding in 1994. From September 1993 to September 1996, the funded hours of kindergarten in Alberta went first from 400 hours to 200 hours, then to 240 hours, before settling once more at 400 hours. No reason was ever given for the changes, resulting in considerable anger being



GRAPH 2: COMPARISON OF PROVINCIAL STUDENT FUNDING LEVELS IN NOMINAL DOLLARS.

market share. To do this, they invoke typical business practices: acquire a bigger territory through amalgamation, advertise surplus space to fee-paying parents in other countries, repackage specialized programming, and pick on smaller competitors.

Ironically, an unintended consequence of marketizing public education has been to contradict and curtail—to a degree—the government's other efforts to support private forms of schooling. In the new, competitive framework, smaller private and charter schools have suddenly found themselves pitted against the larger, heavily capitalized public schools. Nonetheless, the government has reinforced the ethos of privatization in three ways: support for private and charter schools; invitations to business to play a bigger role in education; and throwing costs back upon individuals, families, and volunteers.

Enrollments in private schools in Alberta increased from 13,275 in 1986 to 20,327 in 1996, and now constitute about

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**SCHOOLS NOW
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4 percent of total school enrollments in the province. These private schools (for the most part) serve people who want to preserve the distinctiveness of their religious or linguistic cultures, and—with tuition fees ranging from \$3,000 to \$5,000 per year—are generally not the preserve of the elite. However, the government has increasingly made it easier, through fiscal incentives, for parents to choose private schools as a viable alternative to the public system. In 1996/97, private schools received (on average) \$1,815 per student funding from the province—one of the highest provincial funding rates in Canada. Remarkably, however, in March 1998, Education Minister Gary Mar announced that public funding for private schools would be increased by \$7.2 million (or 22 percent) over the next two fiscal years, to \$2,362 in the year 2000 (60 percent of the public per student grant). Unadjusted, the proposed increases mean that, between 1997 and 2001, private schools will receive a 30.1 percent increase in funding compared to public education's increase of 6.8 percent over the same period.

The number of students in charter schools has also increased dramatically in recent years, from 224 students in 1995/96 to 1,843 students in 1996/97. As with private schools, this growth has been facilitated by government actions, specifically

amendments it made to the province's School Act (1996). These amendments allow for the easier establishment of charter schools whose number is hovering around ten. In keeping with the government's priorities, some of these new charter schools are linked to science and technology but some have adopted teaching strategies and moral sentiments that point to the last century rather than the next. While private and charter schools are important aspects of privatization, their primary purpose is to make public systems more like markets and schools more like businesses.

The Klein government has proceeded to privatize education in other ways. Budget cuts have forced schools and school officials to seek out alternative funding and other supports. Some of this funding has come from private businesses, only too willing to take advantage of an emerging market niche. Thus, for example, in exchange for signing up staff, students, parents, and relatives with a long distance telephone provider, school boards can receive a percentage of the long distance revenues these subscribers generate.

Not all schools have followed the business route, however. Some have turned to Alberta's newest growth industry: gambling. In the fall of 1998, a story about school fund-raising in the *Edmonton Journal* quoted the chairperson of the parent advisory council at a prominent elementary school as one example amidst many. His group had held casinos and run charity auctions in order to pay for such things as computers and reading materials.

Finally, education is also being privatized in the literal sense of being put back upon private individuals and families. Core elements of Alberta education—such as computers and books—are now paid for through fees, raffles, auctions, bingos, and assorted other fund-raisers. In 1997, for example, Alberta's public schools raised a total of \$124 million (up from a budgeted figure of \$70.8 million) through private donations, parent fund-

raising, and sales to staff and students (e.g., cafeterias and student stores), not including amounts raised through course-related fees.

Perceptions of increased privatization and educational decline worry many Albertans.

...GANG AFT A-GLEY

Alberta is not Ontario. The heated teachers' strikes of 1997 and 1998 in Mike Harris' Utopia, supported by most of the public, are unlikely to be replicated in Alberta. But discontent is growing with the changes to education—and other areas of Alberta life—wrought by the Klein revolution.

In the first years after 1993, it was easy for the government to discount opposition to its initiatives. Complaints of separate and public school boards that their constitutional rights to control funding had been summarily taken away garnered little public sympathy. Likewise, words of discontent coming from the quarters of the Alberta Teachers' Association were contemptuously dismissed by government officials as little more than the digestive grumbling of pampered professionals suddenly forced to diet, even in the face of a mass demonstration in October of 1997. The concern of parents—many of them staunchly conservative in other ways—is less easily dismissed.

Remember the government's wonderful promise about increased parental involvement? It is happening, though not as many Albertans imagined. Today, many already overworked and overstressed parents find themselves doing double-duty as fund-raisers, volunteers, and classroom aids. Likewise, the unequal resources which families and communities can draw upon in conducting fund-raising have contradicted the promise of equalized funding. David Townsend, a professor in the faculty of education at the University of Lethbridge, notes what he terms a rising tide of “pocket-book” resentment among parents who find the new demands

stretching their finances and time to the limit.

Alberta has a strong tradition, going back to Social Credit days, of supporting public education. Nearly half a million students are enrolled in the province's public schools. Many of these students have parents who have benefited with others from the public system. Some of these parents are currently school council members and believe the situation at the school level to be worse than they remember. Schools are short of textbooks and learning resources; classrooms are crowded; and buildings, many of which were built during the 1950s, are starting to fall apart. They are asking, as members of school councils, why the education system of a comparatively well-to-do province seems to be going backwards into the future.

**SCHOOLS ARE
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Illustrations CARL G. DANKER

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