

Breach of Contract

Publicly-funded educators are renegeing on their pledge to succeed with all students.

By Margerete Wolfram

When, close to 500 years ago, Martin Luther first proposed publicly-funded education for all children, he tried to convince the mayors that it is not enough to rely on parents to provide the education their children need.

Some parents, he argued, do not have the ability and knowledge to teach their children. Others are too busy earning a living or are so heartless that they simply don't care about their children's well-being. Publicly-funded education, he thought, would be a safety net for these children.

During the 1840's, when Egerton Ryerson began to promote publicly-funded education in Ontario, he encountered the same resistance as Luther did. Many taxpayers, because they had no children or because they had private tutors or because they didn't value formal education, saw no point in publicly-funded education.

Ryerson's argument was that all taxpayers would profit from publicly-funded education regardless of their circumstances. The country as a whole would be safer, more functional, and more productive if it had a well-educated population. Furthermore, an investment in education would reduce the future drains on the public purse by such things as prisons and insane asylums.

Thus publicly-funded education began as a social contract, according to which the taxpayer provided the funds and the education system guaranteed an education for all children, regardless of family background. It is thus a fair question to ask whether both parties have kept their side of the bargain.

For their part, taxpayers undertook to pay their share of the cost. Today, any taxpayer who fails in the timely submission of his education taxes or even requests a reduction for any reason will get a rude awakening to the fact that his part of the bargain is still very much in effect.

The education system, on the other hand, has backed away from its pledge to succeed with all children.

The results on Ontario's provincial tests clearly indicate that educational achievement in Ontario is closely allied to socio-economic status. In other words, the better-educated and wealthier a student's parents, the higher his academic achievement is likely to be.

Reading consultants, for example, tell us that whether a child learns to read and write depends on his home. This may well be so, but it should not be so, because it attests to the ineffectiveness of the school system in teaching a basic cultural skill.

Few people would have learned to read and write if the contribution of the home had been a prerequisite in the past. All families were illiterate until their first ancestor learned to read and write as a result of being taught by someone else.

If, in present-day Ontario, only children with helpful parents can be expected to succeed in school, then clearly the social contract, on which publicly-funded education is based, has collapsed.

Adding to the collapse is the fact that an increasing number of middle-class students, those with whom the schools can usually get acceptable results, are leaving the system for independent schools.

A system that is not effective for a sizeable proportion of children serves neither the disadvantaged, for whom it was primarily instituted in the beginning, nor the society that had agreed to invest in the education of all children.

The former Ontario government's proposal to eliminate school taxes for seniors, on the grounds that they no longer have children in the system is another indication that society at large no longer expects to benefit from publicly-funded education.

Waiving education taxes for seniors could open the door for other groups to opt out of the contract — for example, people who remain childless throughout their lives, or those whose children are educated in independent schools, since these groups don't benefit either.

Publicly-funded education has failed its purpose. Rather than a safety net for disadvantaged children, it has become a major industry that the powerful education unions feast on. For society, it is an apparatus that is running out of control at a high cost and with diminishing returns.

Unfortunately, up until now the education industry has been able to define the terms of the discussion. The man on the street thinks that publicly-funded education is seriously underfunded and that the children who fail to learn are unteachable.

As long as the debate centres on these issues, there will be no improvement in the academic achievement of Ontario students. A more productive approach would be to return to the basic premise of publicly-funded education: that it was designed primarily to give a hand up to society's most vulnerable citizens.

If, upon close examination, the evidence suggests that it is not possible for publicly-funded educators to succeed with disadvantaged students, then I would suggest that the time has come to end taxpayers' heavy bondage.

If, on the other hand, educators manage to find a way to succeed with disadvantaged students — for example, by using teacher-centred methods such as direct instruction to teach them — then most taxpayers would be overjoyed to continue to support publicly-funded schools.

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