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OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

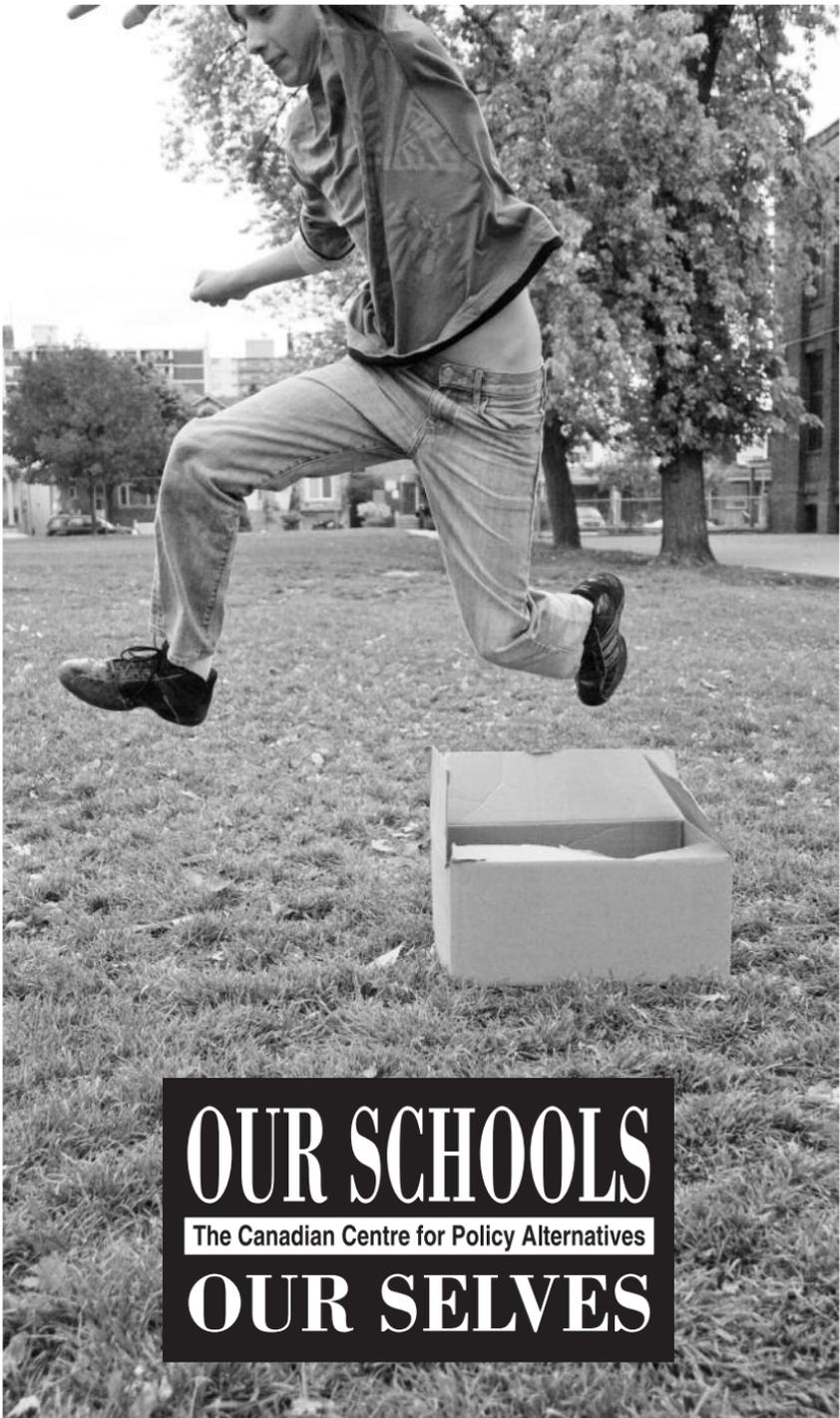
Aboriginal
Education

War on
Public Education

Plagiarism
for Beginners



**Teach
Outside the Box**



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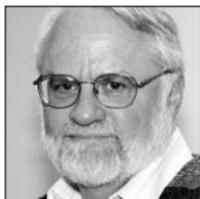
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Teach Outside the Box

BY LARRY KUEHN

“**B**ox” somehow doesn’t sound as confining as “iron cage.” Iron cage is the sociological term from Max Weber that George Martell has used in three books in the *Our Schools* series looking at the way that neo-liberalism and the power of capital has deformed public schools and constrained democratic ideals.

Teach outside the box is the theme of a number of articles in this issue of *Our Schools*. I like the box image better than iron cage because it makes the challenges seem less confining and more open to change. Even with all the bad news and discouraging directions of education policy, a box seems like something that you can break free from and escape.

And once you are outside the box, there is a whole world of opportunity.

Unfortunately, that isn’t the direction being taken in education in the United States. It is incredibly discouraging to see that the policies of the Obama government may be worse even than those of the Bush government. No Child Left Behind — which left millions still behind — has transformed into Race to the Top.

Obama’s basketball buddy and Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, has made competition the central driver of change — with financial incentives for the winners. Whole states have had to compete with one another for the \$4 billion incentive funds from the federal government.

As a part of the package, a competitive financial incentive approach to teacher pay, called “performance pay,” is being forced on teachers, with the willing assis-

We are in a post-standard world, but the message hasn’t gotten through.

tance or reluctant compliance of some of the unions. The national president of the American Federation of Teachers has shown up at the bargaining table in several major cities to negotiate agreements that include standardized test scores as an element in determining teacher pay.

In Washington, D.C., most of the incentive payments negotiated are provided by foundations or private corporations, including Wal-Mart. The mayor who pushed the plan was defeated in his attempt at re-election, with this approach to education considered to be one of the factors in his loss.

When he spoke at Dalton McGuinty’s “education summit” in September, Duncan praised Canadian public education as performing so much better than the schools in the U.S. Why, then, should anyone in Canada be using any aspect of the American model of education as the route to go?

It really does feel like the box is increasingly an iron cage in the U.S.

Several of the articles in this issue have a focus on Aboriginal

education. The nature of the box in this case is significantly different. Canada’s schools, whatever their significant successes, are Eurocentric in their nature.

The culturally violent expression of Eurocentrism in the residential schools is no longer in place, but it still exists in the generational carryover from the residential school experience and in much of our curriculum — explicit as well as hidden.

Change is taking place. The Assembly of First Nations has published an update of “First Nations Control of First Nations Education,” staking out a political position claiming a right to be central to decision-making in education policy. New curriculum in BC has given an official stamp to Aboriginal content in courses that meet graduation requirements. One of the projects carried out by the Canadian Council on Learning during its five year mandate worked on defining Aboriginal ways of knowing and calling for a change in how we look at learning.

We aren’t out of the box in the education of Aboriginal students, but we may have at least opened one of the flaps.

Andy Hargreaves says that we are in a post-standard world, but the message hasn’t gotten through to the folks for whom standardized testing is still the central foundation of education.

The test mania of the U.S. has infected much of the world through the World Bank, the

OECD and the policy borrowing that characterizes international bureaucratic trend-setting.

In Latin America, teacher unions and allies in the society have been challenging educational directions set before the “pink tide” of somewhat leftist governments swept through significant portions of South America. Standardized testing and other models that have failed in the U.S. were still imposed by American-influenced organizations, such as the Inter-American Development Bank.

While Latin American activists are looking for alternatives to the testing focused agenda, that is happening in Canada as well. David Chudnovsky writes about the Great Schools Project in British Columbia, a project aimed at creating a public discussion of what are appropriate ways of evaluating whether our schools are doing well.

The project is based on opposing standardized tests and the school rankings of the Fraser Institute, so fatally skewed by Donald Gutstein in his piece in this issue on ‘the war on public education.’ Beyond opposition, though, the Great Schools Project is based on the belief that asking how well our schools are doing is legitimate, both by parents and students, but also by the larger society.

Standardized testing and ranking systems are tools to keep

what happens in schools in a box. We must have other ways of addressing the issue of education quality and it must not reinforce the class divisions if we are going to be able to teach outside the box.

And what about our brains. Until recently, the understanding about our brains was that the structure was basically formed during childhood and it did not change significantly after that.

That’s a box that we may not be in after all. Research reported in *The Brain that Changes Itself* and other publications suggests that the brain is much more plastic than assumed in the past. Even if it is less so for those of us past middle age, it almost certainly is for the young folks who are students in our schools. What is the impact of technology on the development of the brain, as well as on how we frame education and develop personal relationships?

We are going through dramatic changes in technology. Many of the most utilized gadgets we have now did not even exist at the turn of the 21st Century. Are these new invisible boxes that we are allowing ourselves to be enclosed in? Or are these tools that have shattered the box, and we just haven’t noticed yet.

Teach outside the box is a challenge and we hope the articles in this issue of *Our Schools* help to illuminate possibilities as well as limits.