



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

May 7, 2019

Education review must focus on kids

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In January, Manitoba's education minister Kelvin Goertzen announced the creation of a commission to review the provincial school system and propose a "renewed vision for kindergarten to Grade 12 education," to "ignite change" to existing systems, structures and programs.

The impetus appears to be concern that the province's students were "falling behind those in the rest of the country," particularly in math, science and literacy. And so, according to the minister: "Nothing is off the table."

Goertzen referenced accountability for student outcomes, because the idea that there were multiple sources of responsibility seemed to frustrate him: "If we're all responsible, then really nobody is responsible."

When thinking about what parents want from schools, I would wager that most would reply with a version of "to have my kid's needs met, and to help them learn."

But with that comes the recognition that because not all children's needs -- emotional or social -- are identical, schools and educators must be provided with the resources necessary to ensure that in spite of differing needs, interests, and realities, kids will still come each day to a place that's safe, supportive, and able to help them find success and fulfilment.

This takes resources: well-trained and experienced educators and education workers including education assistants,

office staff, guidance counsellors, custodians, and therapists. It takes reference and resource materials and culturally-relevant curriculum. It takes technology, furniture, functioning water fountains and roofs that don't leak. It takes safe play spaces and staffed libraries with reading materials. It takes functional gymnasiums, musical instruments and transportation. It takes breakfast programs and after school clubs. And yes, this costs money.

It also requires people and systems to be accountable -- accountability that's shared because schools and kids and families exist within our society which is deeply inequitable. And although the most vulnerable kids are disproportionately marginalized, everyone in each classroom is impacted.

How does the school know when a child is feeling overwhelmed or bullied, if a parent has been laid off, or if an eviction notice is looming? These realities are present in every single classroom, and to pretend otherwise is to deny what far too many kids must try desperately to navigate before they even make it to school in the morning.

Goertzen questioned whether the province needs so many school boards or trustees. There's precedent here: Nova Scotia took consultant Avis Glaze's advice and eliminated all but Francophone school boards (parents and education advocates in Newfoundland and Labrador

there is an alternative.

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and PEI have raised concerns about a lack of local input into decision-making when their boards were replaced with regional councils). Quebec's government promised to "transform school boards into service centres and abolish elections." (Take that, democracy!) And in addition to reducing per-student funding and increasing secondary school class sizes, Ontario's Doug Ford is musing about cutting back on school boards.

So with the reduction or, in some cases, the elimination of formal mechanisms for feedback, engagement and representation, how do we ensure that parents and caregivers have access to the information -- and education workers and educators the resources -- they need? And how do parents and caregivers know if kids are being supported adequately, particularly when challenges arise?

I've yet to find a governing body that improved its citizen outreach and feedback methods by eliminating the democratic component altogether. And when it comes to the education, care and wellbeing of our kids, and helping them learn the skills they need to not just fit into the world but to change it for the better, citizen and community engagement, communication and outreach is fundamental. This is what local school boards are designed and best positioned to do.

Too often, test scores, school rankings and provincial comparisons are used as a proxy for accountability and transparency. But standardized assessments are not particularly good at determining how schools are doing, or where improvement is necessary, and how to get there. They are very accurate at identifying the kids, schools and communities that are under-resourced, under-supported, and who we, as a society, have let down. But that's not how they're used.

Standardized assessments are often used by critics to punish schools for not having managed to reverse the effects of income inequality, precarity, and marginalization -- exacerbated by provincial and federal austerity policies -- on students, while dealing with inadequate resources. That's not particularly accountable.

An authentic accountability agenda starts with smaller classes, allowing for more flexibility and individualization in teaching and learning styles to meet kids' needs. It means more time for educators and education workers to collaborate with parents and caregivers; better communication and support for vulnerable kids, a more nuanced understanding of the community in which kids and schools exist.

Ensuring that public schools are accountable to the kids they teach and the communities in which they're located, and that the schools have the human and financial resources required to fulfil that task without having to spend time and energy on fundraising campaigns, must absolutely be a priority. But let's not be distracted by policies imported from other jurisdictions that seem more about fomenting distrust and disengagement and a justification for pulling resources out of the system.

Let's start from an understanding of what authentic accountability looks like for a democratic institution, and place at the centre of the process that key goal: "to have my kid's needs met, and to help them learn."

Erika Shaker is Director of Education and Outreach at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. She is speaking on May 7th at 7 pm on Public Education Democracy and Well-Being. To register for this free event please email ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca.

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