

Playing Politics with Public Education

--Shannon D.M. Moore & Justin Fraser

[The provincial government is sending out cheques again](#) (Bernhardt, 2022).

These one time installations of cash are likely welcome news to people who are struggling. Yet, these inconsistent financial supports are a form of dazzle and distraction. Manitobans are struggling due to an embarrassingly low minimum wage alongside years of government cutbacks and austerity measures from the very government that is handing out this pittance. These cheques are an obvious political ploy that will actually cost the recipients more in the long run.

Extra cash in the pocket might provide some immediate, albeit temporary, relief, but undeniably costs individuals and families in other ways. When we do not pool funds to support public goods such as healthcare and education, costs are downloaded onto individuals through service and usage fees. For example, a one time cheque to a family would not cover the range of fees that are now expected in public education, including registration fees, school supplies fees, art fees, music fees, lunch supervision fees, team fees, and field trip fees, among many other hidden costs. In addition, many divisions now expect students to bring their own laptops to school. It costs a lot to go to public school--but it shouldn't. Rather than giving out money to some Manitobans, our government needs to reinvest this public money into public education.

While the government continually claims that they are spending more on public education than ever before, [education funding increases have not matched the rate of inflation for years](#) (Macintosh, 2022). The government's disingenuous claims rely on the inclusion of inconsistent grants and one-time funding, [and ignore that a 2.9% base increase translates to a cut in education funding](#) (Froese, 2022). With an inflation rate of 7.6%, this results in a cut of 4.7%. Beyond inflation, schools are facing increased costs due to rising enrolment, pandemic related costs, aging and unsafe infrastructure, and student poverty. When other social services are gutted, schools become a last social safety net to feed, clothe and support students and families.

When the government brags that they are spending more than ever on education, it is purposefully misleading. Instead, they are defunding the system and periodically announcing installments of cash that do not allow divisions to plan based on a reliable budget. Rather than consistently and robustly funding public education, this government requires already overburdened systems to apply for grants and one time funding. For example, last week Minister Ewasko announced an annual funding increase to the Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba. While this is welcome news, it veils the fact that funding for school nutrition programs still requires divisions to apply for grants, fundraise and rely on donations. This not only places increased labour on schools with greater needs, it also creates precarious conditions for students and families.

Beyond distracting announcements and funding shortfalls, the government has still not indicated how it plans to make up the money from the Property Education Tax

Reduction Act. [The CCPA estimated that the Property Education Tax Reduction Act would translate to a loss of \\$384 million in revenue for the government by 2022, and nearly \\$1 billion annually when the tax is fully phased out](#) (McCracken, 2021). Worse, in order to send property owners these education property tax rebate cheques, the province needed to borrow this money. [This money was taken out of public education and added to the already significant provincial debt to give rebate cheques to large corporate property owners and billionaires, including American, Charles Koch](#) (Levasseur, 2022). The top 10% of recipients of rebate cheques received four times as much money as the bottom 10% of recipients. A particular demographic benefitted, and the larger demographic will pay the price. As a result, this deficit financed refund is now the burden of all Manitobans. Further, the actual act of mailing the cheques costs the government [\\$1.3 million per year](#) (Zerbe, 2022). Not only does Manitoba not have the money to pay for this tax cut, they are either concealing their plan to make up for this shortfall, are entirely clueless, or are embarking on a purposeful plan to defund a public good in order to encourage privatization.

While the government has not announced their plan to make-up for this deficit financing, we have seen the alternatives in other provinces. Across Canada, school divisions have been forced to run like businesses, renting out school spaces, importing international students and exporting curriculum. Parents have turned to fundraising to make up for budget shortfalls, a move that disproportionately disadvantages schools located in less affluent areas while also relying on parental volunteerism and funds. Divisions have also entered into public-private partnerships that create unstable sources of funding and place corporations in positions of power once divisions come to rely on their support. These funding alternatives further exacerbate inequities and do not allow divisions to plan based on reliable and consistent public funding. When the government does not budget enough money for divisions to run, and those divisions cannot rely on community fundraising or increased 'user' fees, the students in those schools go without programs, services and resources. The result is have/have not divisions--and this inequity flies in the face of the purpose of public education.

Public schools are meant to be open and accessible to all students so that every student has the opportunity to fully participate in the learning community. Public education is a public good that benefits everyone. It should not be rationed to those who can afford it. If students in this province have access to a solid education they are more likely to enter the workforce with pertinent skills and knowledge, a benefit to students, employers and our country's economy. Beyond economic benefits, society benefits from a citizenry that understands our laws, rights, and democratic systems. Democracies require an educated citizenry. Moreover, public schools help build a sense of community for students from varied backgrounds. They provide a commons, a space for people to consider our public values and to develop as critically engaged citizens.

While educational 'reformers' are actively trying to undo a public gem, we must use our communal voices to remind the government whom they represent; they

represent a populace that rejected the reforms put forth in Bill 64. We must not let them defund and destabilize our public education system in order to legitimize privatization. We must not let them rationalize ‘a bit’ of private funding--we have seen where that leads. If dismantling public education is the government's plan, then they should be explicit about their plans. I imagine the people of this province would have a lot to say about that.

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