

SUBMISSION to Alberta's Commission on Learning by the Alberta Federation of Labour

Edmonton, Alberta

November 14, 2002

The Alberta Federation of Labour is pleased to have this opportunity to present its views to Alberta's Commission on Learning.

The Alberta Federation of Labour is the voice of organized labour in the province. Our 115,000 affiliated members work and live in every region in Alberta at a wide variety of occupations in the industrial, resource, service and public sectors. As well, the AFL has traditionally made an effort to represent the concerns of unorganized workers who have no organization of their own to provide them with a voice.

Public education has always been strongly supported by the labour movement. In fact, one of organized labour's earliest demands was the creation of a public education system. It's not difficult to understand why the labour movement is such a strong proponent of public education.

Public education provided working people's children with educational opportunities that had previously only been available through private or religious institutions - and consequently unavailable to many either because of financial expense or religious opinion.

The labour movement maintains a keen interest in the public education system since it is a major social benefit to working people and their families.

In this brief, the Alberta Federation of Labour will present its views in three areas: the delivery of public education; the direction of public education; and the governance and funding of public education. During the course of the brief, we will touch upon most of the issues covered by the Commission's document: Doing Our Homework. We will conclude with a series of recommendations.

Part 1 - The delivery of public education

The continued excellent performance of Alberta students in achievement tests, diploma exams and national and international tests is a credit to teachers, administrators and support staff who have been doing 'more with less' for many years.

1. Class Size

One of the significant issues in the provincial teachers' strike in 2002 was the desire of teachers to gain some control of class size within enforceable collective agreements. The issue was so contentious that the government specifically made class size exempt from the arbitration process which they enacted to force an end to the strike.

The measure most used to quantify class size, the student-teacher ratio, simply divides the total number of students (full time equivalent) by the number of employees (full time equivalent) who must hold teaching certificates for their employment. Considering the number of educational employees who never set foot in a classroom that this measure rolls into the equation, it is small wonder that teachers reject it as unrepresentative of the reality of their experience.

Nonetheless, it is instructive that even by this measure, in 2000/2001 Alberta had the highest student-educator ratio in Canada at 18.33, according to the BC Ministry of Education's Inter-Provincial Education Statistics Project.

Intuitively, smaller class room size must provide a better educational experience. Teachers who have more time to deal with individual students, who face less behavioral problems, and who deal with less stress will provide a better educational experience for their students. The preponderance of recent studies supports this conclusion. Smaller class sizes do have significant effects - especially when the reduction is to less than 20 students per class.

2. Professional Support

As part of cost-saving in the aftermath of the funding cutbacks in the early 1990s, many school boards have reduced the number of school librarians, counselors and educational psychologists. Timely professional support in these and other areas like reading recovery and speech pathology are essential for teachers to do the best possible job.

Another problem has been the constant addition of new curricula without providing teachers with adequate in-service training or support and without providing schools funding for the purchase of new textbooks and learning resources.

An ancillary problem is that when new material is added, generally nothing is removed, resulting in overloaded students and stressed teachers.

3. Loss of time for teacher preparation

Another victim of the fiscal squeeze on education has been in-school time for teachers to do lesson plans, class preparation and marking of exams and assignments. An Alberta Teachers Association study reported that the average workweek of public school teachers was 52.9 hours per week.

The idea that teachers must be contributing their own time in the evenings and weekends in unpaid overtime is unacceptable. There is no monetary way to compensate teachers for this loss of personal time. Teachers have lives of their own that are already crowded because of extra-curricular school activities like coaching school teams and supporting student musical programs. To further infringe upon their limited free time by forcing them to do marking and lesson preparation on their own time is just plain wrong.

4. Increasingly demanding classroom composition

The integration of special needs students into the classroom is a commendable objective. In Alberta, a survey by Alberta Learning in 2001 found that 71% of elementary school classrooms had students with special needs. The average class size was 23.3 students and there was an average of 4.1 special needs children in each class. Unfortunately, there was only an average of 2.0 teacher assistants per school available to help deal with the special needs of these students.

Teaching Assistants represented by our affiliated unions note that they are routinely required to provide assistance beyond their terms of hire - resulting in inadequate preparation time. Further, required resources to do their jobs properly are simply not provided.

5. Problems with building maintenance and renewal

There are numerous studies positively linking the overall cleanliness of schools and the proper upkeep of facilities with academic achievement. Custodial and support staff in schools are an integral part of the equation for safe schools with healthy physical and social environments. However, lack of proper funding for education has resulted in school administrators "robbing Peter to pay Paul". Funds have been directed away from needed custodial and support staff and from long-term building maintenance.

The consequences of this short-term fix to long term funding problems are several. First, because of lack of custodial staff, many schools are no longer available to the community for use in the evenings.

Secondly, there is a growing infrastructure deficit as unaddressed upgrading and maintenance needs result in needless decay of buildings. For example, a Calgary Board of Education Trustee estimated that there were \$300 million in overdue repairs and maintenance in the Calgary public system alone by the year 2000.

Thirdly, increasingly stretched support staff are finding it more and more difficult to fulfill their role in maintaining the physical and social safety levels they have in the past. In the Black Gold school district, for example, 53% of support staff surveyed indicated that they were not able to complete their work in the time allotted. 59% said they routinely provided unpaid work. Paid custodial work by members of CUPE 474 has been reduced from approximately 139,000 hours per month in 1993 to 91,000 hours per month today despite the fact that new schools have been added to the system.

This is a common theme from support staff across the province. Workloads have increased to unsustainable levels while staffing continues to be cut. By providing unpaid work, these dedicated staff are actually personally subsidizing public education beyond the tax support required from every citizen. This is unjust and unconscionable.

Some schools have attempted to meet their support staff needs by contracting out to private firms. Virtually every one of these efforts has resulted in inferior maintenance of schools for very little or no real savings.

Part 2 - The Direction of Public Education

Much of the current debate over public education is based upon changing expectations of the system and uncertainties about direction and priorities. The Commissions own workbook suggests that "One of the key objectives of Alberta's education system is to prepare young people for the world of work."

We suggest that there are several other, far more important objectives for public education.

1. Prepare students for lifelong learning

The essential skill students must gain in their schooling is the capacity to learn coupled with a love of learning. Critical to this are literacy, numeracy, critical analysis and logic.

It is very clear that most high school graduates will need to undergo further education at the post-secondary level prior to entering the workforce or at some later point in their working lives.

2. Citizenship training

Another critical objective for education is to provide citizenship training so that graduates are prepared to take their place as citizens in a democratic society. Respect for the democratic process, awareness of the history of our nation, tolerance of others, the ability to work cooperatively with others, the willingness to participate in communities, and an awareness of the constitution, laws and rights of Canadians are essential to good citizenship.

3. Realize Individual Potentials

Help each individual student reach their full physical, mental, creative and psychological potential. Curricula that enable students to discover and explore the full range of human endeavor and activities and environments that promote self esteem and independence must be a key component of the system.

If public education focuses upon achieving the objectives listed above, it will do far more to prepare students for adult life than trying to inculcate values which employers think workers ought to have.

In terms of preparation for the world of work, public education might do well to ensure that students leave school with a firm understanding of the contract of employment at common law, basic floor-of-rights legislation relating to employment, and a sound grasp of the history and contributions of the trade union movement and its effect upon the workplace.

Part 3 - The Governance and Funding of Public Education

1. Undermining local government

Public school boards are among the oldest democratic institutions in Alberta. Several pre-date the creation of Alberta as a province. As one of two common forms of local government (along with municipal governments) in the province, public school boards are the bedrock of our democratic traditions.

The provincial government's decision to take control of local school property tax revenues in 1994 undermined local school boards' authority and independence.

This attack on local democracy was justified by a spurious argument about equality in which the government claimed to be addressing the inequalities between rich and poor areas of the province. If the government wanted to provide equality between wealthy and poor school districts, it had two choices.

It chose to reduce the quality of education in some areas by taking revenues away from them and giving them to less fortunate areas. The end result was a decline in the upper range of educational services and modest improvement in others - a sort of enshrinement of the mediocre.

Of course the other method of ensuring equality would have been to subsidize the hard-pressed areas out of special funds from general revenues so that they could offer the higher level of program provided by the wealthy areas.

The unforgivable consequence of the government seizure of school board's right to set school property tax levels is that it has made school boards subservient to the province. Before, school boards could raise property taxes - and if the electorate didn't like their actions or didn't think they were getting value for their tax, they could be called to task at the next elections. Now, school boards have no capacity to increase their funding beyond provincial revenues - and therefore no ability to offer new or innovative services.

2. Starving innovation and service: the funding crisis

Since 1994, the percentage of public school funding coming from property taxes has fallen from 50% to 36%. The average mill rate has fallen from 7.64 to 5.62 mills.

With falling property tax revenues, more and more education funding has been drawn from general revenues. And, despite government claims of increases in spending on education, real (constant dollar) per student funding - which is the only way to accurately track education expenditure because it takes into account both inflation and population growth - has not reached pre-1993 levels.

In 1986/87, provincial expenditures on education were \$5229 per student. In 1993/94 that had been cut to \$4,734 and by 2001/02 it had increased to \$4,704 per student. At the peak of the cutbacks in 1996/97 per student funding was only \$4,104 (all figures in 1986 dollars). (Source: Neu & Taylor; Funding Mechanisms, Cost Drivers, and the Distribution of Education Funds in Alberta: A Case Study; Alberta Journal of Education Research)

The unvarnished truth is that education funding has still not recovered to its pre-1994/95 levels, and that school boards have had to deal with the cumulative effects of a decade of under-funding.

Provincial Funding of K-12 Education

Year	Enrolment	Adjusted Funding	Current \$ (Per-Student Spending)	CPI (Alberta)	Constant \$ (Per-Student Spending)
1980-81	422,370	\$1,094,360,670	\$2,591	67.2	\$3,856
1981-82	425,011	\$1,340,484,694	\$3,154	75.5	\$4,177
1982-83	428,865	\$1,629,258,135	\$3,799	83.7	\$4,539
1983-84	433,616	\$1,750,941,408	\$4,038	88.5	\$4,563
1984-85	432,640	\$1,991,598,000	\$4,603	92.4	\$4,982
1985-86	435,312	\$2,108,644,000	\$4,844	96.0	\$5,046
1986-87	423,372	\$2,213,797,000	\$5,229	100.0	\$5,229
1987-88	455,990	\$2,223,208,000	\$4,876	104.4	\$4,670
1988-89	464,585	\$2,407,521,000	\$5,182	108.6	\$4,772
1989-90	474,373	\$2,536,077,000	\$5,346	114.0	\$4,690
1990-91	486,612	\$2,661,381,000	\$5,469	119.5	\$4,577
1991-92	464,421	\$2,810,258,000	\$6,051	126.2	\$4,795
1992-93	475,013	\$2,878,000,000	\$6,059	128.1	\$4,730
1993-	481,296	\$2,971,000,000	\$6,173	130.4	\$4,734

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1994-95	479,074	\$2,784,000,000	\$5,736	130.6	\$4,392
1995-96	487,164	\$2,707,000,000	\$5,557	133.5	\$4,162
1996-97	489,352	\$2,723,000,000	\$5,565	135.6	\$4,104
1997-98	499,139	\$2,963,697,000	\$5,983	137.8	\$4,310
1998-99	509,122	\$3,044,218,000	\$5,979	139.0	\$4,302
1999-00	519,304	\$3,261,274,000	\$6,280	140.4	\$4,473
2000-01	529,690	\$3,462,533,000	\$6,537	141.8	\$4,610
2001-02	537,636	\$3,622,000,000	\$6,737	143.2	\$4,704

Misdirection of funds to private schools

The funding problem is actually worse than it appears. That is because a portion of education spending in Alberta is not going to the public school system at all - it is going to the 193 private schools operating in the province.

Small wonder that classrooms are crowded, teachers stressed, support staff overworked and buildings improperly maintained in the public education system when a portion of declining funding is being redirected from the system.

The Alberta Federation of Labour supports the right of citizens to opt out of the public system - but we are opposed to public funds going to private schools. Private schools can and do simply refuse children with behavioural problems and special needs children that the public system must accommodate. They can, in fact refuse any child access to their school without appeal.

Private schools - like private hospitals - are permissible in our democratic society. But to put public funds into private hands in order to allow them to

compete with public systems is irrational. If citizens choose not to take advantage of a free high quality education system, then they should be prepared to pay the full cost of that choice. Private schools are a luxury for specific special interest groups and the costs for such special treatment should not come out of the public purse.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although the government is famous for saying that you don't solve problems by "throwing money at them", in the cases where the problems that need to be addressed were specifically caused by finding cuts, this is exactly what is needed. This is exactly the case in public education.

We need more front line teachers in order to reduce class sizes, and provide teachers with adequate preparation time. We need more teaching assistants to deal with the growing numbers of special needs students. We need more custodial, maintenance and office support staff. We need more educational psychologists, more librarians, more counselors, more reading and speech specialists. We need more money for new textbooks, new schools, new computers, new equipment and facility upgrades.

Since the provincial government does not seem to have the will to adequately fund our education system, despite massive public support for more spending, control over education spending and revenues (at least from property taxes) should be returned to school boards.

We need to see public education as one of the cornerstones of our democratic society. Public education is one of the experiences that everyone in our province shares. It helps define our society and is a major determiner of what kind of people we are. It is an investment in the future, not an expense or liability.

Recommendations

1. That control over education property taxes be returned to school boards.
2. That current levels of provincial funding from general revenues be increased by 10% and thereafter indexed to student population and inflation.
3. That a special fund be established to assist school boards in less wealthy areas in order to provide equality of educational experience.

4. That an infrastructure fund be established to clear up backlogged school renovations resulting from the last decade of under-funding.
5. That no financial support be given to private schools.
6. That Alberta set standards for class size that do not permit classes over 19 in elementary school or over 24 in secondary school.
7. That teaching assistants must be provided in classrooms with special needs children.
8. That teachers be provided with adequate in school time for class preparation and marking.
9. That sufficient custodial, maintenance and office support staff be retained to meet the highest standards of cleanliness and safety in our schools. The practice of having support staff working unpaid hours must stop immediately. No contracting out of support staff work.
10. That librarians, counselors, educational psychologists and other professional support personnel be available as required by schools and teaching staff.
11. That building maintenance and upgrades be done regularly on a 'best practice' schedule (e.g.: painting on a 5 year schedule). That maintenance equipment and shop equipment be replaced as required.
12. That capital for new schools construction be provided as needed in high growth communities without forcing closure of current facilities.
13. That as new material is added to school curricula is added, some reduction in existing curricula take place.
14. That introduction of new curricula be accompanied by financial support for new texts and learning resources and by appropriate professional support for teachers.
15. That provincial exams be restricted to grade 9 achievement exams and grade 12 diploma exams.
16. That no intrusion of the private sector into public education be countenanced.

**Respectfully submitted on behalf of the
Alberta Federation of Labour**

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