

Fundraising and corporate donations in schools:

The beginning of a two-tier public education system

Annie Kidder

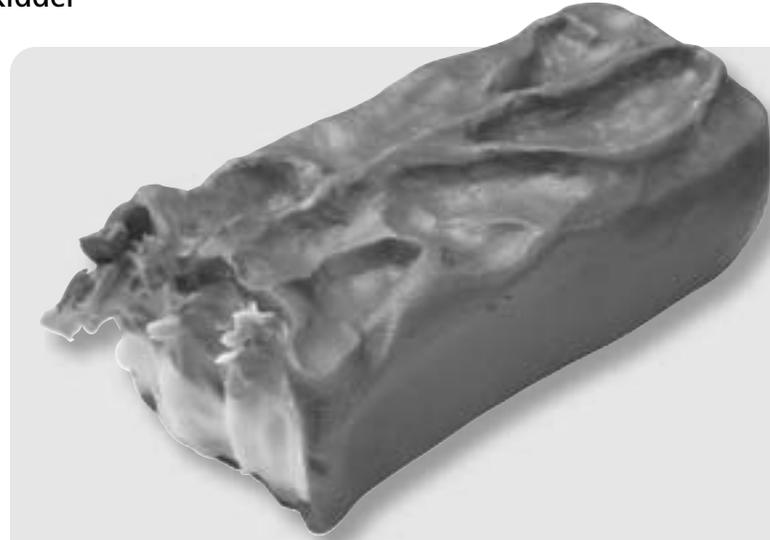
Schools across the country increasingly rely on fundraising, corporate sponsorships, and fees to augment the funding they receive from government. That growing reliance is undermining one of the fundamental tenets of our public education system: that every child, no matter what his or her background, deserves an equal chance to succeed.

Over the last few years, provincial governments across the country have made cuts to education spending, and every dollar cut creates the potential for more fundraising by parents, schools and school boards. Corporations now have whole departments to deal with public education "partnerships"; there are multitudes of companies that specialize in providing fundraising products to parents; some school boards have even created arms-length foundations to encourage private donations; and schools or school boards across the country are making deals with Pepsi or Coke, or being "adopted" by WalMart, in an effort to raise funds.

As a parent I am intimately familiar with fundraising and its importance to schools. I have eaten more than my fair share of chocolate covered almonds; I have sold cookie dough; and, out of desperation, I have ordered subscriptions for *Quilters' Monthly* and *Dog Owners' Quarterly*. I have sponsored my child in Read-a-Thons, and I've sold hundreds of hot dogs at our school's spring fair. I do not begrudge the money and time spent, but I am concerned that, as parents raise more and more money for our schools, we are destined to become the food banks of the public education system. School boards and governments will come to assume that the money we raise is funding they can rely on for basic needs.

In the past, parent fundraising was limited to things like money for team shirts, school trips, or special year-end awards. Now, parents fundraise for everything from textbooks to furniture and – in some cases – even teachers. School boards used to receive all the funding they needed from their local tax base and/or their provincial governments; now some boards have set up private foundations to augment funding from the province. In British Columbia, cash-strapped boards have been granted permission to set up private, for-profit companies to run schools in other countries. In Newfoundland, school fees are universally charged, and are waived only in cases of financial hardship.

What struck me most as I was researching this article was the consistency of concern expressed by parents' groups across the country. They are troubled by cuts to funding for public education and the parallel reliance on fees, donations and fundraising. They all feel increased pressure to fundraise and, in some provinces, to pay fees for school supplies. And they worry about the effect of these trends on the future of public



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education. In a bulletin released in March 2000, the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) found that many PACs had expressed concern that "schools are too dependent on fundraising"...School Districts and the Ministry of Education may cut or even discontinue funds to areas where the PAC has contributed funds."¹

Parents are used to raising money for extras, but one of the effects of the chronic under-funding of public education is the rapidly expanding definition of "extras". As money becomes tight, funding becomes focused on a fairly narrow core of programs and services, and cuts are made to everything outside that core. Cuts to school libraries, classroom supply budgets, music and physical education programs and other so-called "non-essentials" are becoming common across the country, and parents are taking up the slack.

A survey of B.C. PACs found that parent fundraising in B.C. schools totaled as much as \$30 million per year. The B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils reports that, "If PACs didn't fundraise, schools today would be lacking in basic supplies as well as many items that greatly enrich the educational experience of the students."²

In Ontario, school communities are increasingly compensating for funding shortfalls through fundraising. Seventy-eight per cent of Ontario secondary schools report that they receive money or donations of in-kind goods and services from sources outside of their local school boards.³ Principals rely on this money to provide transportation for school teams, pay for sports equipment, fund

general upgrades for school buildings, purchase supports for credit courses and, in one case, a pay for a new computer lab.

In 2002, parents in Ontario's elementary and secondary schools raised an estimated \$48 million, a 12 percent increase in one year. Some of this money paid for the traditional things like field trips, student activities, awards, playgrounds and enrichment – but a substantial amount also went to classroom supplies, textbooks, computers and library books. In People for Education's 2002 Elementary Tracking Report, Ontario schools reported that approximately \$10 million of their fundraising was for textbooks, computers and classroom supplies.

According to the study:

- ✓ 52% of elementary schools report fundraising for classroom supplies, an increase of 68% since 1997,
- ✓ 24% of elementary schools report fundraising for textbooks, a 14% increase since 1997, and
- ✓ 62% of elementary schools report fundraising for library books, an increase of 11% since 1997.

Private donations to public schools are even more common in the United States, where the Association of Fund-Raising Distributors and Suppliers estimates that parents raise \$1.7 billion per year to pay for so-called extras in schools.

The trend to greater and greater reliance on donations brings with it a myriad of problems, but the greatest of these is the inequity it engenders in the system. The capacity to raise funds varies greatly from community to community. Some schools are only able to raise a few hundred dollars per year while others can raise hundreds of thousands. And some schools can raise nothing. In Ontario this year, the top 10 percent of fundraising elementary schools raised as much money as the bottom 60 percent put together.⁴ And schools without the capacity to raise extra funds go without.

Not surprisingly, most of the high fundraising schools are situated in areas that, according to Statistics Canada, have above average family incomes. Thus, in areas of relative wealth parents can and do augment the system by paying for extra textbooks and classroom supplies. They fundraise to ensure that their school libraries are well-stocked, and they provide arts enrichment by paying for extra instructors. In those same areas, parents are more likely to have connections to corporate donors, or – because the school populations tend to be larger in those areas – corporate donors are more likely to be attracted to the schools. In this way, equitable access to education is fundamentally undermined. Schools with the better parent fundraisers, the more effective principal wheeler-dealers, and the higher socio-economic populations have more and better resources. Children who are unlucky enough to go to school in less well off areas have libraries without books, must share textbooks, and have little arts enrichment. We end up with a

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Dans le passé, les parents organisaient des levées de fonds pour acheter des maillots d'équipe, pour défrayer une excursion scolaire ou encore pour offrir des prix à la fin de l'année scolaire. Aujourd'hui, ils sollicitent pour pratiquement tout, que ce soit pour acheter manuels scolaires, du nouveau mobilier, voire même rémunérer le personnel enseignant, avec pour conséquence que les écoles qui ont les meilleurs collecteurs de fonds, le meilleur brasseur d'affaires et la clientèle la mieux nantie ont davantage et de meilleures ressources. La nécessité de lever des fonds pour suppléer les subventions gouvernementales est-elle en train d'éroder la conviction profonde qu'ont les Canadiennes et les Canadiens de l'importance d'avoir un système d'éducation publique universellement accessible ?

system of have and have not schools – just what a public system of education is supposed to prevent. And, what's worse, we deprive the children who need it most of the enriched education that would make a difference in their lives.

As far back as 1843, when Canada's education system was first developed, Egerton Ryerson said that public education should be the "first charge upon the wealth of a province." He said it must be paid for out of the public purse, and that none of the expense was to fall upon parents.⁵ We are slowly but inexorably drifting away from that founding philosophy. In both Canada and the United States we are dangerously close to accepting the vision of public education as a charity.

IN BOTH CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES WE ARE DANGEROUSLY CLOSE TO ACCEPTING THE VISION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION AS A CHARITY.

In a speech in March 1999, former Ontario Premier Bill Davis said, "It is important that we as a society understand that we have many priorities...but at the basis of it all is what we as a society commit to education. You can't have a good health system without a good educational system. You can't have what is best for society without a good educational system."⁶ If the health of our society depends on the health of our public education system, then relying on donations to shore up education funding presents serious dangers. Though corporations may be honourable in their desire to donate money to schools, they also have ulterior motives. They are interested in the advertising potential, the new customers they develop and, in many cases, the large tax write-offs. And they are not the source of stable and equitable funding that public education needs. In Pittsburgh, for example, three foundations recently suspended payments for programs they had been funding in public schools because they were unhappy with the way the

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Inoculation Against Terror

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amused themselves playing war. Meg and a four-year old Dutch friend dressed up with swimming goggles and armed themselves with snorkels. They launched an attack upon their parents with tennis balls that became bombs. When in retreat, they bunkered down on woven mats behind bamboo furniture. Scott and a 13 year old friend, the son of an employee of the camp, joined in, staging elaborate deaths as the younger children mercilessly inflicted “wounds”. When the older boys began to arm themselves, Meg shouted “base”, and the younger ones scurried back to where they were hiding. The boys breached their security zone and Meg complained to us that it was unfair. We were as helpless as the United Nations to intervene, though we did try to control the boys with threats of banishment to the next compound. They backed off momentarily, but were quickly on the attack again, only this time with more stealth.



We finally decided to go to Israel, bringing our Egyptian experience to an end. When we arrived at the border, there was an overriding tension as our bags were checked and then rechecked, and then checked again. We forced ourselves to stay calm, stay in place, play it safe, get processed expeditiously. Teenaged boys were on patrol with machine guns slung as casually as discmans over their shoulders. Under the cover of these armed sentries, we finally walked out of the border station and to a waiting cab. The border crossing made little impression on our children, just another checkpoint in a long series of them. It was me who stopped to peer back across barbed wire and cement walls at Egypt and wondered, for my children’s sake, what peace really meant. 🗨️

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school district was being run. The effect of this withdrawal will be magnified because in the United States, state and federal funding often depends on the school district’s ability to attract private partners – which they’ve now lost.



As parent associations are pushed to raise more and more money, and school principals spend more and more energy looking for outside funding, our attitude toward public education slowly changes. We come to assume that funding for schools must be augmented by donations or private partnerships. And what has been – up to now – a fundamentally Canadian belief in the importance of a strong and universally accessible public education system, is slowly eroded. 🗨️

- 1 “To Fundraise or Not to Fundraise”, *Issues Bulletin* (British Columbia Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, March 28, 2000) <http://www.bccpac.bc.ca/resources/Resources-Main.htm>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 People for Education, *The Effects of Policy and Funding Changes in Ontario’s Secondary Schools* (The 2002 Secondary School Tracking Report: March 2002)
- 4 People for Education, *Five Years of the Education Funding Formula* (The 2002 Elementary School Tracking Report: May 2002).
- 5 Clara Thomas, *Ryerson of Upper Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969).
- 6 William Davis, quoted in the *Toronto Star*, March 25, 1999

Annie Kidder is a former theatre director and the mother of two children. She now devotes herself full time to People for Education, which she helped establish in 1996. People for Education is an organization of parents from the Ontario Public and Catholic school systems which has been fighting to preserve fully publicly-funded education since 1996.

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