

Where there's smoke, there's fire



OTF statement on privatization

There's a common expression: *where there's smoke, there's fire*. That is why the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) remains concerned about the announcements and actions by the Ontario government since the pandemic began. While any one of these alone are cause for concern, taken together, the spectre of the privatization of and profiteering from our publicly funded education system may be going largely unnoticed until it's too late. Take, for instance, EQAO's two recent tenders for online test developers for the Grade 9 Mathematics Assessment and the Math Proficiency Test. Add in TVO's expanded mandate, under Bill 197, to develop a warehouse of virtual courses for the 2020-2021 school year to meet the government's mandatory secondary two online course credits for graduation requirement. Recent public pronouncements and policy adjustments by the Minister of Education look and feel like the world class publicly funded education system in Ontario is being propelled in a direction that risks undermining it.

To be sure, the pandemic created exceptional and emergency circumstances. This has compelled teachers and educators to find alternative means to teach and learn. They have been expected to step up and try to make this work on the fly and too often without the necessary level of Ministry resources and support one might reasonably expect. However, while these circumstances have continued to require substantial pivoting, it does not mean that this should become the new (post-pandemic) normal.

Like a mirror, the current, lived realities and experiences have all too clearly reflected the fact that online learning for all, all the time is not a panacea. Instead, the way learning-at-a-distance has played out since March 2020 has both underscored the importance of the relational aspect of teaching and learning that happens face-to-face and magnified systemic inequities and conditions that further, and disproportionately, imperil the success of the most vulnerable among Ontario's students. The foundation and backbone of the publicly funded education system are the people, the

frontline teachers and educators working with students, and not the tools and technologies they use in the service of teaching and learning.

OTF wonders whether the Ontario government presumes that, when Ontario re-opens for business post-pandemic, publicly funded education will be on the auction block and sold to the highest ed-tech bidder. Ontario citizens, OTF members among them, are vehemently opposed to trading in students' futures; this is not a commodity for sale.

But that appears to be what the Ford government and the Minister of Education seem to be engineering behind a smokescreen and under the cover of COVID. These dissembling, exploitive behaviours should give everyone collective pause. Publicly funded education remains the bedrock of an inclusive, robust democracy and it requires sustained levels of public investment and resourcing. Moreover, the Conference Board of Canada noted in its report *The Economic Case for Investing in Education (June 2019)* that each dollar invested in public education in Ontario generates \$1.30 in total economic impacts. More specifically, additional increases in levels of spending on public education could propel high school graduation rates to 90 percent, which would match the highest in the country, and lead to an average fiscal savings of over \$16 million per year or \$3.5 billion over two decades.

Pursuing a path paved with commodification, corporatization, privatization of, and profiteering from publicly funded education would come at a cost no one should be willing to accept or agree to pay for.

OTF, its four Affiliates, and all its members can smell the smoke and see the fire; alarm bells are already ringing.

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