

DISCARDING DEMOCRACY, EXPLODING EDUCATION, SHUNNING TRUTH

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Monday, March 15, 2021 was a disastrous day for democracy, education and truth in politics, with the release Better Education Starts Today (BEST) and Bill 64. Citizens and our young are the big losers in this latest assault on public ideals and the people who serve them. Made worse is that the attack is justified on claims of research and evidence, both of which are absent from the Government's response to the Review.

In a democracy governing means government by, for and with the people. The absurdity of the composition of the regions, the improbability of a simplified funding model and the delusional concept of voluntary School Community Councils in each school are only topped by eliminating hundreds of duly elected advocates of children and public interest. Replacing Boards with a semi-private business corporation with the Premier as CEO makes three cynical assumptions: one, most people don't care; two, most people aren't up to much and can't be trusted; and three, schools are just another industry, none of which are true. And, Gallup surveys have consistently shown that people trust their schools more than they do governments.

The claims of provincial "nimbleness," Covid crisis lessons, also exaggerated, are not based on reality. Most school boards responded clearly and decisively before the province did; they achieved multiple individual accommodations for children and parents in matters of days – impossible to imagine under one central authority.

Likewise, in my 55 years in the system, attending over 1200 Board meetings, trustees regularly brought the individual cases of children in their communities to the Board table, Boards dealt with them swiftly, respectfully, and responsibly, and asked for reports on how the schools responded to the concerns raised and how they dealt with the parents involved.

As for why more people don't vote on Board elections, it may not be lack of interest but degree of satisfaction, also confirmed by past Gallup polls. With all due respect to Brodbeck, even in provincial elections 40% of people don't vote, and many are unable to name their MLA's or even the Premier. If people needed help with their children, and were able, it was my experience that they quickly discovered who their trustees were. The trashing of trustees and superintendents is totally unwarranted, given their records of responsiveness to their communities.

This was not an educational review – it was simply an excuse to further manipulate and undermine the public. From the outset it has claimed that Manitoba students aren't doing well on international and standardized tests, a claim which is true for about 13-15% of students. If test scores are the measure that is used, then special attention should be paid to that group but any inclination in that direction is missing. Test scores are no justification for blowing up a system that serves many well.

Removing principals from their professional organizations, essentially removing them as professional colleagues has proved disastrous in other provinces. As have increased mandatory control and forced compliance. Test scores remained unchanged. Better test scores will only result from all children arriving in school well fed, clothed, and free of adult anxieties We need to make sure that there is at least one adult who cares enough, and is firm enough, to see that vulnerable children get to school and are looked after when there.

Low test scores, in the US, have served as way of blaming schools for circumstances beyond their control, for defunding, and further disadvantaging schools in lower socio-economic neighbourhoods because their test scores did not meet predetermined targets. In the same vein, poor test scores have been used to keep teacher salaries low, meaning that the schools in need of the best teachers are unable to attract them. Sounds too familiar.

Education is much more than test scores – it is about helping young people become self-regulating, self-governing adults and responsible community members and workers, in other words contributing citizens. But they also need to have places where they can practice being citizens – school boards provided one of those opportunities for many, some of whom now sit on municipal councils and fill the seats of government.

Even more revealing about the Government's anti-public agenda in BEST, an incongruous acronym if there ever was one, is what is not addressed – why no talk about regulating private schools and home schooling, why no reference to First Nations teacher shortages and why no acknowledgment of the public purposes of education? Government failed these tests!