



# Reframing Public Education as a Public Good

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# Reframing Public Education as a Public Good

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## Education as a public good

In his 1847 *Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada*, Egerton Ryerson stated that public education was created in Canada to ensure that youth were prepared for their “appropriate duties and employments of life ... as persons of business, and also as members of the civil community in which they live.” (p. 9) As beneficiaries of the public education system, Ryerson recognized, as should we all, that education is much more than the transfer of basic numeracy and literacy skills from teacher to student – an important goal of public education in a democracy is to prepare all students for active participation in society.

This idea has endured in Canada for more than 150 years. Janet Keeping and David King (2012) state that “public education is a deliberate model of the best that a civil democratic society can be. This is not accidental, or occasional, or a matter of convenience. Public schools look and function like the democratic, civil, pluralist society of which they are an integral part.” (p. 17) In their view these are among the other characteristics of public education (excerpt from Keeping & King, p. 17):

- All children have a right to be included in public education, and the community has a responsibility to be inclusive: every adult in a community has both a right and a responsibility to be involved in the education of all children, not just their own or their grandchildren's.
- Public education celebrates diversity. Children should be educated together, not in order to try to make them all the same, but so they may come to value everyone's unique individuality.
- Public education supports social mobility because a democratic society will fail if it does not constantly strive for greater fairness, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to benefit from its public education system, regardless of economic status.

However, Keeping and King also assert that the role of public education in fostering democracy is not as self-evident as it should be:

Canadians share a civic culture that includes both individual and communitarian values as well as political institutions, such as democracy, the rule of law, and protection of human rights. We transmit this shared civic culture from one generation to the next through education, and we do this most successfully by means of public education.

Alas, many Canadians seem to have lost track of the role that public education plays in the nurturing of our civic culture. We have allowed consumerist thinking – the more choice, the better – to infect public policy around education. A moment's reflection reminds us that the corollary of consumerism is fragmentation, which is very problematic for the transmission of shared civic culture. Education is, in any event, a generative and productive activity, not one of consumption. (p. 16)

Mark Kingwell (2012), professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto, makes a similar observation with regard to post-secondary education. The idea that “education is a public trust” has been obscured by the reductive logic of the market, “of return on investment, of tuition traded for jobs.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say that,

Liberal education is about citizenship, not job training or simple personal enrichment – though it may incidentally provide both. Postsecondary institutions should be in the business, primarily, of creating critical, engaged citizens. This is not the current dominant view; it is nevertheless the correct one.

This process of creating an engaged informed citizenry must start with the public schools.

Last year CTF invited Joel Westheimer to provide his perspective on “education as a public good”. An academic in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, whose focus of interest is democracy and citizenship, he is also a member of CTF’s Panel of Academic Experts. He identifies some of the threats to the idea of the public good in general, and to education as a public good in particular:

- (1) The historic purpose of schools was not job training and should not be job training today even though we’ve pretty much lost most other language when talking about the purposes of schooling. Public schools were always about the democratic project of the public good. And while the work of preparing public citizens for a democracy must include more than the schools, the schools are the public institution best positioned to affect the vast majority of young people.
- (2) The public interest in schools should be far more evident to people than it currently is. Voting is down. Political participation is down. The biggest declines are among youth and young adults. Lots of kids volunteer but far fewer get involved in our democratic institutions. Volunteers are nice, no question about that. But totalitarian dictatorships like volunteers too. Democracies need more than nice people who volunteer. Democracy is not self-winding. As political theorist Sheldon Wolin observed, citizens in a democracy – both young and old – need to be taught to “know and value what it means to participate in and be responsible for the care and improvement of our common and collective life.”
- (3) There is a very real and very dangerous growing animosity towards teachers – see Wisconsin to our South, but also here in Canada. This is not something we should assume will go away. Teachers are easy targets and as the media and the general public think more and more that schools are simply a consumer service (job training, customers, etc.) rather than a critically important *public* institution for the common good, the more they are susceptible to ignorant, malicious and dangerous accusations of teacher laziness, incompetence.
- (4) Lastly, the slow erosion of a notion of “public” and “public good” is of course not limited to schools. It’s a growing threat to Canada’s historic embrace of the common good in all kinds of institutions including health care, childcare, transportation, community centres, etc. The small wedge of privatizing this or that service quickly translates into a decline in commitments to the kind of public engagement and collective endeavours that have so far made Canada an envy of many around the world.

While most of these assertions may seem self-evident to us – fundamental aspects of public education we take for granted – the fact that we need to rearticulate and reframe these issues to a broader public is indicative of the success of the right wing agenda in fundamentally altering the education debate for its own ideological ends.

Westheimer’s comments about the connection between public schools, citizenship and democracy take on added meaning in the current context of the federal government’s silencing of public debate in Canada on critical issues like poverty and inequality. As McMaster University professor Stephanie Baker Collins notes, the government is accomplishing this by abolishing information that might inform debate (e.g. weakening the long form census; eliminating the National Council of Welfare); cutting funding to numerous groups who might use such data to speak out about poverty, inequality, human rights violations and other issues; and generally cultivating “a political climate that is disdainful of public debate and of those who seek to stimulate it.” Bill C-377, a private member’s bill discriminatory to unions that was recently rammed through Parliament with little opportunity for debate, is only one example of this new political climate.

## **The success of Canadian education and a strong teaching profession go hand in hand**

The international spotlight being shone on Canada’s public education system largely as a result of our PISA success has us – and others – scrutinizing our system more closely than ever, including making comparisons with other countries such as the United States and Finland. Education researchers Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley (2012) go so far as to describe Canada as “a ‘go-to’ country for educational inspiration and policy learning.” (p. 10)

The OECD’s PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) has become the widely used if inadequate proxy for the performance of national (mainly OECD member countries) education systems.<sup>2</sup>

Canada’s education systems work very well on the whole and arguably we don’t need PISA assessments to tell us this – PISA results simply affirm what we already know. Consider that a poor showing, even a minor slip in the global rankings, on a future round of PISA tests could potentially undermine much of the good work being done. Indeed one of the key messages coming out of the CTF President’s Forum in July 2012 was the need for broader measures of educational success. As teacher organizations we were challenged to put forward our vision of educational success, and to subsequently identify and articulate indicators of education quality other than, or in addition to PISA results to demonstrate this success to parents and the broader public.

Notwithstanding PISA’s limitations – and the irony that it took international recognition for Canadians to recognize what teachers have known all along – these highlights of the 2009 PISA test results reflect our educational success on two levels: achievement and equity.

- Canadian students rank among the world’s best in reading, mathematics, and science.
- Canada has a larger proportion of high achievers and a smaller proportion of low achievers compared to the OECD average.

- Canada is one of the few countries in which immigrant students performed just as well or even better than their non-immigrant peers. (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada website)

As the OECD (2011a) observes, these accomplishments are all the more noteworthy given the size and diversity of our country:

...Canada has achieved success within a highly federated system, which features significant diversity, particularly with respect to issues of language and country of origin. Given that many of the other PISA leaders are relatively small and culturally homogenous countries, Canada could provide a model of how to achieve educational success in a large, geographically dispersed, and culturally heterogeneous country. (p. 66)

Interestingly (and perhaps uniquely Canadian) as Ben Levin (Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto) observes, the fact that “we have one of the highest performing education systems in the world, particularly taking into account our highly diverse population” may come as news to many Canadians (Levin, 2011, p. 20). It has certainly caught the attention of policy analysts and policymakers internationally.

Levin (2011) notes that there are important distinctions between Canada and the U.S. in terms of both social conditions and educational policies that help to explain our success, including better qualified teachers:

Canadians often assume that what is said about education south of the U.S. border applies north of it as well. However Canada’s international rankings are consistently higher than those of the U.S., primarily because of different social conditions (less inequality, less child poverty, etc.) and different educational policies (more equitable financing, better qualified and motivated teachers, and less diversity in quality of schools). (pp. 19-20)

He attributes the high quality and motivation of the Canadian teaching profession in large measure to strong teacher unions “that have negotiated decent pay and working conditions but also due to a more consistent focus on effective professional learning and leadership”. He also points out as have others that, “any country that wants to improve education outcomes and reduce disparities will also have to tackle some of the gross disparities outside the education system; schools cannot achieve social and educational equity on their own.” Teachers are concerned about societal inequality because they see first-hand how its impact gets played out within their classes and schools.

In what they describe as the “Canadian Way”, Hargreaves and Shirley (2012) believe that our educational success is considerably more complex than can be adequately explained by any individual jurisdiction’s particular short-term education policies. They conclude that it has more to do with

constellations of policies that run across provinces and systems, accumulate over time, and are consistent with a longstanding culture of high regard for public education, strong support for the teaching profession, and broadly collaborative



and inclusive processes of educational change management, inspired by sets of commonly shared beliefs. This embedded and inclusive Canadian Way – that is being threatened by the global trend to weaken district involvement and control in favour of more and more centralized direction – says more about Canada as a society than it does about the relative value of any specific provincial policy. (p. 13)

If we're looking for direction on education policy from outside our borders, many educators believe it would make more sense to look towards countries like Finland. The Finnish approach to education reform is refreshing precisely because it is in many ways the anti-thesis of education reform trends in the U.S. and elsewhere. In her review of *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* (2011) by education expert Pasi Sahlberg, Vivian McCaffrey (Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario) notes that, "what is most perplexing for international experts is that Finland has produced top-performing students while eschewing market-based education reforms premised on competition and standardized tests." She quotes Sahlberg: "Finland is an example of a nation that lacks school inspection, standardized curriculum, high-stakes student assessments, test-based accountability, and a race-to-the-top mentality with regard to educational change".

In a country with no system of high-stakes standardized testing and indeed no word for 'accountability' (Finns use the term 'responsibility'), Finland consistently excels on PISA. The emphasis is instead on teacher-designed assessment. When external testing does occur, it is by random sample (approx. 10% of students) for system level improvement.

The important link between educational success and the quality of the teaching profession is something Finns are well aware of, even celebrate. According to McCaffrey (2011), the "centrepiece of Finnish education is the nation's teaching force", particularly the high societal status of teachers and teaching, strong public trust in the profession, rigorous selection and training, and a focus on teacher professional development and autonomy<sup>3</sup>.

McCaffrey concludes with some takeaways for Canada, lessons Canadian teachers have consistently advocated:

In Canada, there is ample opportunity to apply the Finnish lessons to improve our own schools. Sahlberg's chronicle of Finland's success gives Canadian educators some powerful examples to support policies we have long advocated. These include universal early childhood education, a rejection of standardized testing, greater professional autonomy for teachers, a focus on experiential learning, more support for special education<sup>4</sup>, and a real commitment to equal opportunity.

Similar to Finland, Canada's strong public education system is accompanied by a high quality highly regulated teaching profession and strong teacher unions. Even though it may seem to be a logical connection, in a period in which teachers and especially their unions often face strong criticism, it's important that we reinforce our understanding of this.

In stark contrast to Finland in terms of its treatment of the teaching profession is the U.S. Gardner (2011) describes the disrespect and lack of support for teachers, the demands of accountability pressures, and the resultant high turnover rate (across the U.S. close to 50% of teachers leave the field within the first five years). Speaking at the CTF National Staff Meeting

in Nov. 2011, Rob Weil (American Federation of Teachers) described the “frontal assault on unions and teachers” in the U.S. He reported that when asked in an internal poll about the “conditions” faced by teachers today, 75% of AFT members said that the conditions are negative or somewhat negative, the highest negative feeling the AFT has ever recorded. The U.S. situation with respect to the teaching profession is clearly a red flag for education policymakers.

## Teacher unions as advocates for public education and the teaching profession

Not only do we seem to have lost the connection between a strong public education system and a vibrant civic culture, the critical role they play as advocates for public education and its broad goals is likely not the first thing that comes to mind when most people think about teacher unions.

Nonetheless teacher unions have been and continue to be among the strongest supporters and defenders of public education and, as Diane Ravitch has commented, “the best organised opposition to education cuts.” (Education International, Feb. 2011) They understand the important link between public education, democracy and the public good, and they are often in the forefront of campaigns to defend public education.

According to Wayne Peters, President of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, it is no coincidence that the high quality of Canadian colleges and universities is accompanied by a high rate of unionization in the post-secondary education sector:

In Canada, the post-secondary education sector has achieved a high rate of unionization among both academic and support staff. This has been crucial to Canada’s university and college system being one of the best in the world. If this is to continue we must take notice of these attacks on unions and the broader labour movement and work hard to defend the hard-won gains and rights that unionization and labour laws provide and to protect post-secondary education as a public good.

Unfortunately, teacher unions are often perceived as impediments (and worse) to improving the quality of education. This is part of the extreme rhetoric we hear these days – the highly publicized U.S. film *Waiting for Superman* is a case in point. Ben Levin (2010) argues that we “should recognize the important positive role teacher unions have played and can continue to play in building strong and effective education systems.” For example he notes that,

A lot of education rhetoric these days includes mention of the supposedly negative impact of teacher unions on reform. For a few commentators, eliminating union opposition is one of the most essential, or even the single most important component in creating improvement, while for many others it is part of the package.

But here’s an interesting observation. Virtually all the top performing countries on international education measures have strong teacher unions, including Finland, Korea, Japan, Canada, Australia and others. Of course such a relationship does not imply causation, but it does suggest that there is no necessary conflict between strong teacher unions and good outcomes.

Moreover, some countries or sub-national units that took steps to weaken the influence of their unions did not demonstrate any subsequent improvements and in some cases, such as England, later had to take many measures to improve the situation of teachers to get an adequate supply and thus to improve student results.

There are good logical grounds for thinking a positive relationship might exist. There is virtually unanimous agreement that the quality of teaching is among the most important factors in shaping education outcomes. It stands to reason that good teaching depends on attracting and retaining talented people in the profession. Strong unions play a vital role in ensuring that teachers are reasonably paid, and perhaps even more importantly that they have reasonable working conditions; the evidence shows that teachers are highly motivated by working conditions such as good leadership and opportunity to learn.

This view is echoed in the OECD (2011b) background report prepared for the first International Summit on the Teaching Profession held in New York City in March 2011, *Building a High-Quality Teaching Profession*:

Unions are sometimes perceived as interfering with promising school reform programs by giving higher priority to the unions' "bread and butter" issues than to what the evidence suggests students need to succeed. But the fact is that many of the countries with the strongest student performance also have strong teachers' unions, and the better a country's education system performs, the more likely that country is working constructively with its unions and treating its teachers as trusted professional partners.

Education International's background paper for the Summit, in a discussion on the importance of engaging teachers in reform, notes that "successful education reform cannot be achieved without the involvement and consent of teachers, education workers and their school communities .... Reforms must factor in the engagement and capacity of the teaching profession." The EI paper goes on to cite the work of Professor Nina Bascia (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto) who has studied extensively the relationship between teacher unions and policymakers:

'teacher unions are nearly the only organisations that have paid substantive attention to the actual conditions of teachers' work... [but]... because they are rarely invited to the table to discuss substantive policy issues with education decision makers, teachers' organisations can only react after the fact to decisions that have already been made.'

So why would you look to teachers' organizations for direction on sound educational policy that benefits student learning and strengthens our public education systems? What is so important about the teacher voice on education reform?<sup>5</sup>

Echoing the OECD, Rick Salutin in his recent book, *Keeping the Public in Public Education*, notes that "in most good public systems, [teacher unions] act as partners." (p. 61) He quotes former B.C. Deputy Minister of Education Charles Ungerleider on the important contribution of

teacher unions: “With some exceptions, virtually every improvement in public education has been due to teacher bargaining rather than the government sector.” (p. 61) This is an aspect of collective bargaining that receives scant mention in the mainstream media where union stories generally focus on labour disruptions.

Educational improvements negotiated through the bargaining process are substantial. They include services for students with special needs, ESL programs, reductions in primary class size, ratios for teacher-librarians based on school size, teacher preparation time, professional development days, setting up teams to discuss individual student progress, mentorship programs, and equity in education initiatives (Salutin, 2012, pp. 61-62). No doubt we could add to this list many more union-initiated changes that are beneficial for student learning.

A decade into the new millennium, teacher unions are to varying degrees engaged in articulating a vision for the future of public education. Among the questions they’re grappling with is: how do we bridge the gulf between where we are at present in terms of the educational orthodoxy, and where we need to go to ensure that all schools are good schools?

The Alberta Teachers’ Association (2012) for example recently set out its vision for transforming education in Alberta. This vision consists of 12 dimensions (each dimension accompanied by specific practices and policies) including curriculum development and implementation, assessing and reporting student learning, optimal conditions of practice, teacher professional development and autonomy, teacher leadership, school leadership, digital technologies and learning, inclusive education, differentiation for learning, and early childhood learning. The B.C. Teachers’ Federation has produced a discussion paper and website on teaching and learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Naylor, 2011).

The concept of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, we would argue, is embodied by such qualities as critical thinking and problem solving, creativity, collaboration, democratic citizenship and community responsibility, as well as the necessary conditions of practice required by the teaching profession to foster these qualities in students. As noted, a major challenge going forward is reconciling the tension between this interpretation of 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning, and the prevailing orthodoxy of standardized testing, accountability by numbers, narrowing of curricula, and education in the service of labour market needs. J-C Couture (2007), citing Andy Hargreaves, observes “that teachers exist in a paradoxical position between the promise of living in the knowledge economy on the one hand, and the stark realities of underfunded schools and the tendency of policy makers on the other to default to ‘standardized solutions’ to address complex educational issues”. (p. 4)

In the current climate, teacher unions and their education partners are often placed in the difficult position of having to defend what is an inherently human and qualitative service (one essentially based on the strength of pedagogical relationships) with narrow quantitative data derived by those who work largely outside the classroom.

## Unions and the public good

Generally speaking the history of unionism is associated with serving and promoting the public good, and not solely the interests of union members. In his critique of Michigan's introduction of "right to work" legislation which he describes as the "new corporate servitude law", University of California Professor George Lakoff (2012) says that,

The deeper truth about unions is that they don't just create and maintain rights for workers; they work for and create crucial rights in society as a whole. Unions created weekends, the eight-hour workday and health benefits. And through their politics, they have been at the center of support for civil rights and other social justice issues. In short, unions don't just work for their members. They work for all of us. Including businesses: Workers are profit creators.

In the Canadian context, researchers Errol Black and Jim Silver emphasize the need to put a different frame on unions, emphasizing their critical role in a democratic society. This is especially important in these difficult economic times as well as the negative public perception of unions:

...it is important to re-frame unions in a more accurate light: as leaders in efforts to build a better world for Canadians. It was trade unions and the labour movement that joined with progressive popular groups to fight for and win union and collective bargaining rights for workers, old age pensions, unemployment insurance, Medicare, the Canada Pension Plan, programs to protect the poor, decent minimum wages and employment standards, libraries, expanded access to education at all levels, workers' compensation and workplace health and safety legislation, and the housing and infrastructure required to build decent communities for working people and their families. Not only does the union advantage produce higher wages and improved benefits for union members, but also unions bring the rule of law to the workplace, placing limits on the arbitrary power of owners and managers – thus enriching democracy and our individual and collective human rights.

Black and Silver rightly conclude that "these are enormous achievements from which all Canadians benefit. We need to be relentless in saying these things." And it's not just progressives who are saying this about unions. According to Ed Broadbent,

Right-wing commentators like to claim that unions undermine good economic performance. But respected organizations such as the OECD, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have shown this isn't so. They have recognized that unions promote more equitable societies, and that countries with strong unions have less extremes of rich and poor, stronger public services and social safety nets, without adversely affecting good economic performance. So why are Conservatives in Ottawa and the provinces disturbingly adopting the anti-union rhetoric of the American right?

The role of unions in advancing equity is becoming more pertinent given the growing trend of income inequality and the negative economic and social consequences flowing from this for society (Mackenzie, 2012). Demonstrating the important role that unions can play in reducing

inequality, Christopher Schenk (2012), Ontario Federation of Labour Research Director, cites evidence showing “a strong correlation between high union density and greater income equality.” (p. 7)

Schenk also discusses the two prevailing different perspectives of unions, arguing that while unions are generally perceived as monopolistic, they “should be viewed from a collective ‘voice’ perspective, which enables union members to participate in democratic workplace processes through discussion, voting, union elections and negotiations with their employer on issues of common concern to the workers.” (p. 6) Borrowing from Keeping and King (2012), one could say that, like public schools, unions function like the democratic, civil and pluralist society in which they are embedded.

These democratic union processes and rights are being systematically eroded in Canada. Teacher unions and other unions face numerous challenges, perhaps none more formidable than the current hostile environment for unions in general and the attack on labour rights in particular. Examples include numerous instances of government interference with collective bargaining (such as the passage in Ontario of Bill 115 which seriously undermines teachers’ democratic right to collectively bargain). As noted earlier, at the federal level Bill C-377 was passed in December 2012, regressive legislation which the Canadian Foundation for Labour Rights describes as

a thinly disguised anti-union measure, designed to upset the balance of power in collective bargaining relationships across Canada. Bill C-377 not only intrudes on the provincial field of labour relations and violates the privacy rights of third parties, it interferes with the freedom of workers to associate, to organize, and to meaningfully advance collective goals with their employers.

CTF’s current national campaign to defend and promote labour rights includes a strategy to mobilize opposition against Bill C-377.

## Reframing public education as a public good

A few years ago the CTF Work Group on Teaching Quality (WGTQ) looked at the politics of language in education, specifically how the language of the neo-liberal agenda is being used to marginalize both the teaching profession and the mission of public education. Often neo-liberal proponents use terms that co-opt our own language. Recently, the term *teacherpreneur* appears to have entered the lexicon, allegedly signifying an approach to teaching that is in keeping with 21<sup>st</sup> century learning for a global market economy.

The power of language to shape opinion cannot be underestimated. According to George Lakoff, an expert in cognitive linguistics, “the first principle of political and social communication in cases of conflict is: avoid the other side’s language.” One way for teachers’ organizations to promote our beliefs, and avoid playing into the other side’s language, is to develop and consistently utilize language that reframes the agenda to our beliefs. For teachers’ organizations, this means focusing on the core values and mission of public education and the teaching profession to promote and foster the well-being and education of all children and youth.

This brief list of terms was developed by the WGTQ as a starting point for the teaching profession to attempt to reframe the dialogue around public education by creating and using common language:

- **investment in society through education**, versus an exclusive focus on the cost of education, education spending as a burden
- **education for active responsible citizenship**, vs. education narrowly focussed on skills training and job preparation
- **student learning and development**, vs. achievement in core academic subjects
- **classroom-based assessment**, vs. large-scale assessment or standardized testing
- **shared responsibility**, vs. test-based accountability
- **inclusive schools**, vs. charter schools, private schools, ‘school choice’
- **self-directed professional learning**, vs. teacher training, mandated professional development

Emphasizing the benefits of all public goods and services including public schools, to counter the harmful myopic focus on tax cuts and incessant refrain of the heavy *burden* of taxation, was also part of this exercise. While tax cuts reduce both our capacity to fund existing vital public services such as public schools and to create new services and programs (such as universal child care), with a subsequent erosion of our living standards and quality of life, fair taxation is as they say the price we pay for civilized society.

To this list we could well add education as a public good, as a fundamental human right, versus education as a marketable commodity.

Education International’s policy paper on education, “Building the Future through Quality Education”, prepared for the 6<sup>th</sup> EI World Congress in July 2011, emphasizes that the purpose of public education must extend well beyond preparing individuals as job-seekers, to develop well-rounded and engaged citizens – that to do otherwise diminishes the very concept of public education:

This policy challenges explicitly the narrow, instrumentalist view of education as solely teaching students to become skilled employees. Instead, it argues for a perspective on education that serves both the values of the society at local and global levels, as well as cultural, democratic, social, economic and environmental needs. It recognises that education is a human right and a public good in its own right, enabling people at all stages in their lives to achieve their maximum potential and to better understand themselves and their role and relationships. Education is also a key means for the transmission, analysis and application of knowledge and experience, and plays a central role in the creation of new knowledge through research and innovation. Its role is broader than the mechanistic and instrumental role that many proponents of market forces and “customer-provider” models acknowledge. (p. 1)

At the April 2012 CTF Board of Directors meeting, discussions took place on the topic of “Education as a Public Good”.<sup>6</sup> The CTF teacher belief statements, drawn from the *CTF Vision for Public Education Statement* approved by the Board in November 1999, were used to inform the discourse. This discussion led to a recommendation from the CTF Board for an action resolution on “Education as a Public Good”.

Delegates at the 2012 CTF Annual General Meeting in Halifax also had the opportunity to discuss the topic of education as a public good. They identified a number of negative trends and pressures occurring across the country, in particular the “shifting drivers for education decision-making”. This includes applying a business/market approach to education, the powerful impact of the test-driven accountability agenda on curriculum and other aspects of education, the use of public debt and the austerity agenda to justify cost-cutting at the expense of program needs, and the competition with other sectors, notably health care and services for seniors, for diminished resources, making decision-making increasingly political (Fraser, 2012).

The preamble to CTF’s action resolution on “Education as a Public Good”, adopted at the 2012 AGM, states that the teachers of Canada believe that a strong publicly funded public education system, rooted in the principles of universality, equity, responsiveness and accountability, is essential to sustaining and promoting our democratic society working for the good of all. Further, teachers believe:

- that the best interests of all children and youth must guide each decision that society and its institutions make on their behalf.
- that the development of educational policy should be founded in the belief that public education is a public good for the whole of society.
- that Canada must honour its commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to make the well-being of children this nation’s highest priority.
- that a responsible, knowledgeable, committed teaching profession is essential to the provision of quality public education.
- that teachers must have sufficient autonomy to apply their professional judgement.
- that quality schools are well supported with public resources.
- that the conditions under which teaching and learning take place have a direct impact on what teachers and students can achieve together.
- that the goals society sets for students and schools must be challenging and attainable.
- that there are many forms of success for schools and students including personal, social, academic, cultural and vocational success. Varied approaches are required to evaluate the extent to which schools and students achieve success.
- that the school curriculum is designed to prepare students to become caring responsible active citizens.



- that schools must be governed by people who are elected by, and accountable to the public.
- that change in schools is natural and healthy provided it is based on sound research and reasoning and in consultation with teachers.
- that lifelong learning is a right for all citizens and that programs developed should be universal, accessible and adequately funded.

These beliefs inform the actions of the Canadian teaching profession through their respective teacher organizations in support of public education as a public good.

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#### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere Kingwell argues that instrumentality “currently functions as the operating system of everything from technology itself through to creativity, education, and public discourse, and even to friendship and family life. The triumph of economic thinking is that it has become the invisible presumption of everything; there is nothing, or almost nothing, that cannot be reduced to a transaction.” (Santos-Neves, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> On the response to the PISA 2009 results, Dunleavy notes the “overwhelming amount of attention paid to a single, league-style table ranking the 65 participating countries on combined reading, mathematics, and scientific literacy scores. Witnessing how results get taken up in the public domain, it is hard not to feel that the PISA country rankings have become the Olympics of the education world .... there is much to learn from [PISA] data designed to tell us how well young people are prepared to ‘fully participate in modern society.’ However, as Sjöberg reminds us, we need to ‘discuss and use the results with some insight...we need to know what we might learn from the study, as well as what we cannot learn. Moreover we need to raise a critical (not necessarily a negative) voice in public [and] professional debates over the uses and misuses of the results.’”

For a critique of PISA’s growing influence on education policy, see *The OECD, PISA and the Impacts on Educational Policy*, Canadian Teachers’ Federation, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) make an excellent case for why teachers need autonomy. They state that “...like medicine or any advanced profession, teaching isn’t an exact science. Uncertainty is in its nature. This uncertainty calls for wise, well-founded judgment. Uncertainty is the parent of professionalism and the enemy of standardization.” (p. 107)

<sup>4</sup> A recent far reaching Supreme Court of Canada ruling on special education involving a child (Jeffrey Moore) with severe dyslexia serves as an example of these ideals. According to the Alberta Teachers’ Association’s Jonathan Teghtmeyer (2012), the crux of the court’s argument that there had been discrimination

...was that Jeffrey should not be compared to other students with special needs but that he should be compared to students in general. Defining discrimination as the denial of a customarily available service based on protected grounds, the courts looked at what the service in question was. Their ruling was clear: ‘*For students with learning disabilities like Jeffrey’s, special education is not the service, it is the means by which those students get meaningful access to the general education service.*’ [emphasis added]

Teghtmeyer describes the unanimous decision as “a clear and significant call of support for public education from Canada’s top court”, adding that “It reinforces the importance of a strong, accessible, appropriately funded public education system that accepts all students and provides them with the services they need.” This is the essence of public education.

<sup>5</sup> The importance of listening to the teacher voice on educational change has been an important aspect of CTF’s work over the past few years – see for example, *The Voice of Canadian Teachers on Teaching and Learning*, CTF, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> The discussion regarding advocacy for education as a public good was framed by three questions: What is at the heart of our message to society? What argument will resonate with society? What is the role of CTF and its Member organizations?