

## Dismantling education does harm to democracy

By: John R. Wiens

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DEMOCRACY watchers have repeatedly warned about the ways to undermine democracy. Destroying the sense of public trust through fabricated "truths" is the first warning sign, followed by attempts to amass more power centrally, eliminate dissent and reduce participation. The Manitoba government's actions leading up to the throne speech, and the premier's comments following it, do not bode well for the purposes of education and the democratic governance of the school system.

Recent years have seen attacks on some of our most valued public institutions – Manitoba Hydro, Manitoba Public Insurance and the Public Utilities Board, to name a few – inevitably making it less possible to meet their public legal obligations and more open to threats of privatization of their mandates. Add to that the frequent attempts to thwart collective bargaining and override municipal governments and school boards, and, more recently, introducing legislation to make some Indigenous protests illegal.

I view these as deliberate and conscious attempts to destroy public trust in Crown agencies, lawful unions and publicly elected officials, and an attack on Indigenous peoples' rights. In every case, the inference is that the government will rescue us from these "self-serving" agents through greater privatization and legal protection of private economic interests.

This situation is made worse by a continuous flow of shifting the blame - "Not our fault, not our problem" - or shirking responsibility - "We're at the mercy of these self-serving entities who are taking unfair advantage of us." The fact is, that when it comes to what the premier calls education problems, the government has always had the authority to solve these problems without an expensive review, finding fault or laying blame.

The arguments are that the system is too expensive, too archaic, failing and unresponsive – "too much money spent at the top"; not "classroom-focused, student-centred, and parent-friendly"; and "failing our kids." And, the system is "punishing (business) people," and "hurting families" because of "disproportionately higher education taxes." Not only false, but the government could have easily changed things without some radical "transformation."

First, "the top," presumably trustees and superintendents, the very people who made school opening in the current pandemic even possible, have co-operated with governments in every cutback the system has experienced over the last 30 years. Rather than label our educational leaders as greedy and wasteful, the government could

have instituted salary and indemnity caps such as done in some provinces. Problem solved.

Relatedly, the implication is that teachers are not student centred, classroom focused and parent friendly considering the way they have always, but certainly most recently, put themselves out well above and beyond. Not sure how they could be more so when every day they place themselves and their families at risk by teaching in conditions deemed unsafe elsewhere.

As for failing our children, that kind of blanket accusation covers off a whole lot of neglect and negligence by governments that systematically refuse to take responsibility for matters such as child poverty generally, much less their families' deplorable living conditions.

Second, wherever local education taxes have been eliminated, two things have happened: taxes have not gone down; local people simply lose local resources. Taxes, albeit in a different form, accrue to the general revenues of the provinces. Furthermore, the government has always had the power to reduce the reliance on property taxes – why didn't it? This is obviously about something else – more like a hostile takeover.

Third, a lot more has been done to punish businesses and hurt families by the anemic response of this government to hardships caused by the pandemic than ever done by education taxes, where local money can be directly traced to classrooms, children and families and, often, local businesses.

Finally, there is absolutely no evidence that amalgamations anywhere have improved education or saved money. What they have accomplished is more power in fewer and fewer hands, lately to people who often have no background in education or understanding of the school system.

Democracies, "government for the people by the people," rely on ability and opportunities to participate. Children are not born democratic; they must learn the norms and dispositions of democracy. Making finding a job the main purpose of schooling, while important, must remain a secondary purpose to preparing the young to live democratically.

Furthermore, in order for people to act as citizen participants, there must be places for them to do so – reducing those spaces and the number of participants flies in the face of democratic common sense.

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