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Anti-CRT Attacks, School Choice, and the Privatization Endgame

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Abstract

Across Canada, school districts have been confronting a backlash to their equity and social justice initiatives. Critics of public education have been arguing that the solution to these controversies is to increase school choice. Using several examples from the United States, this paper argues that the endgame of these strategies is to undermine the legitimacy of public education and increase support for private alternatives. To protect its future viability, the paper also calls on public education advocates to grapple with ongoing marginalization within school systems which make private options increasingly attractive.



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Introduction

School districts in Canada have been confronting a backlash to their equity and social justice initiatives. Protests against 2SLGBTQ+ rights have taken place across the country (Khandaker, 2023). In British Columbia and Ontario, groups attempting to elect “anti-woke” school board candidates have been attempting to “raise awareness about how social justice infiltrated school boards” (Bradley, 2022, para. 4). The premier of Ontario has accused school boards of “indoctrinating” students (Cohen, 2023). School board meetings in the province have descended into chaos as packed crowds interrupt their proceedings. For example, police had to be called in twice in the span of just four months to respond to disturbances at meetings of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (Black, 2023).

While the specifics vary, the target of these efforts is often anti-racism initiatives. For example, in the Durham District School Board, a school board meeting was shut down after some attendees objected to the board’s Black graduation coach program, an initiative that exists in several Ontario school districts that attempts to reduce the systemic barriers to high school graduation faced by Black students and their families (Benedict & Goodale, 2023). At a meeting of the Waterloo Region District School Board, a person objected to library accessibility of *The Bluest Eye*, a book published in 1970 by Nobel- and Pulitzer-Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison that focuses on the oppressive nature of white beauty standards (Williams, 2023).

While it is easy to get caught up in the details of each specific controversy, the endgame of these attacks is to undermine the legitimacy of public education and increase support for private alternatives. Indeed, critics of public education have been explicitly arguing that the solution to these controversies is to increase school choice. In anglosphere countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, think tanks have played a key role in school choice advocacy, particularly through their relationships with media outlets (Verger et al., 2016). A leading Canadian voice in this campaign is the Fraser Institute, an influential conservative think tank based in Vancouver, British Columbia. For example, one of its senior fellows has argued:

There are also good reasons why Ontario parents might want to remove their children from the government-run school system. In far too many cases, public school boards have been captured by woke ideology... Instead of forcing almost all students into the same government school box, it makes far more sense to provide more educational options to parents who could then choose the school that best meets their needs. (Zwaagstra, 2023, para. 7–10)

Similarly, another Fraser member has written:

The case for school choice is today most persuasively made by the government-run public school systems themselves, through the disastrous quality of so many of their schools and, far too often, school administrators’ indifference to or even blatant disregard for parental concerns about the injection of politics and ideology at the expense of actual learning... Though fixing public education is politically difficult the solution is obvious: We need less government and union control and more school choice programs to expand access to private and charter schools. (Lau, 2023, p. FP6)

It might be tempting to see this as part of the broader global populist trend (see Milley & Samier, 2022) that seeks to mobilize public opinion toward restoring “traditional values” in schools

(Sandt, 2021). Yet what makes these attacks different is that, instead of attempting to wrest school control from “elites,” they offer solutions to the supposed problems in schools by looking outside of the public education system altogether.

Efforts by the Fraser Institute and like-minded groups serve to advance a crisis narrative around the “politicization” of schools. Writing about the global trend toward greater education privatization, Verger and his colleagues (2016) noted that crisis situations are “used as windows of political opportunity by organizations, policy entrepreneurs, and activists operating at a range of scales to advance their preferred policy solutions” (p. 28). Attacks against Critical Race Theory (CRT) are a hallmark of right-wing advocates’ efforts to decrease support for public education. The attempt to sow discord about public education is part of a broader movement to defund public programs, cut taxes, and increase private influence. The pattern of creating a crisis narrative about schools, blaming educators, and offering private alternatives as the solution has been dubbed “The Privatization Playbook” by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (2019).

American Parallels: A Warning

This privatization playbook is in full gear in several American states. It started in 2021, when 18 states introduced anti-CRT legislation and/or executive actions (Schwartz, 2021). In January 2021, the governor of Arkansas issued an executive order to “prohibit indoctrination and critical race theory in schools” (Exec. Order No. 23-05). In June 2021, Iowa passed a law limiting the ways teachers can discuss race, explicitly banning any teaching about systemic racism (General Assembly of the State of Iowa, 2021). In April 2022, Florida passed the “Stop W.O.K.E. Act” to outlaw the teaching of CRT in K–12 schools (Florida House of Representatives, 2022). In 2023, Utah introduced a bill supposedly about “Individual Freedom in Public Education” that places strict limits on the freedom of teachers to teach about race and racism (Utah State Legislature, 2023).

While the purported rationale behind such actions is to protect public schools, all four of the above-mentioned states have advanced the privatization agenda by concurrently introducing universal school voucher programs. Arizona’s superintendent of public instruction recently launched an advertising campaign to encourage private school enrolment, letting public-school parents know that the state will financially support such efforts. The program, which had 12,000 students enrolled when it launched in September 2022, is projected to grow to 100,000 students by 2024. While portrayed as a way to increase educational options for disadvantaged students, most of the students enrolled in the voucher program actually came from wealthy families (Mervosh, 2023).

Popularized by University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman (1955), universal school voucher programs provide public subsidies for any student that attends a private school. As funding follows the student, each additional private school enrolment results in a reduction of funding to public schools. According to voucher advocates, such programs spur system-wide innovation and improvement, as schools are forced to compete among themselves for students. Effective schools will expand; ineffective schools will shrink and may eventually be forced to close. The supposed result of applying market logic to schools is to improve academic outcomes for everyone.

However, empirical research has failed to substantiate these claims. Studies of voucher programs have consistently found mixed or negative effects on academic outcomes, particularly for low-income students (Dynarski et al., 2018; Erickson et al., 2021; Figlio & Karbownik 2016;

Waddington & Berends, 2018). Despite the lack of results, voucher programs have continued to operate with little oversight or accountability. For example, a voucher system targeted toward low-income students in New Orleans resulted in 2/3 of those students attending private schools where they received grades of D or lower (Chatelain, 2019). In defending its voucher program, the Arizona superintendent remarked, “Rich people have always had the ability to choose private schools. It shouldn’t be limited...Competition is better for everyone” (Mervosh, 2023, p. A16). Thus, despite the evidence that vouchers disproportionately benefit wealthy families while doing little for those who are already disadvantaged in schooling and society, school choice advocates continue to disingenuously use equity framing in their marketing strategies.

What Is at Stake in Canada

While school choice in Canada is not yet as pervasive as it is in the United States, it is not difficult to see how continued attacks on the legitimacy of public education could lead us down a similar path. Five of the country’s 10 provinces already provide some public funding to private schools, and it is no coincidence that those provinces also have the highest levels of private school enrolment (Allison et al., 2017). Also concerning is recent research that has shown that those same provinces also tend to have the highest levels of school socioeconomic segregation (Chmielewski & Maharaj, 2022). This means that, in the provinces where school choice is most prevalent, students from wealthy and disadvantaged families are more likely to attend separate schools.

Under the broader goal of democratic equality, public education advocates have long focused on achieving equal treatment and access (Labaree, 1997). Under this view, public education should provide equal educational experiences for all children regardless of race, sex, and wealth. Political equality depends on social equality. Thus, public education can help to balance the tension between the public goods of democratic politics and the private goods of capitalist markets. In addition to being a democratic right, common educational experiences can also help people from different backgrounds to build a shared sense of community. They can help to bridge divides and promote understanding among people from different races, ethnicities, sexualities, religions, and social classes.

If, however, we accept that a core rationale behind public schooling should be to bring together children from different backgrounds, increased school choice and privatization represent a direct threat that will have dire consequences for equal educational opportunity and social cohesion. As we have seen in the United States and are starting to witness in Canada, choice advocates will use any opportunity to advance the privatization agenda and increase social polarization. This is why the work of defending our public education systems against anti-CRT attacks is so crucial. Along with equity and social justice, the viability of public education and democratic society itself is at stake.

Equitable Public Education

Public education is at risk because of neoliberal reformers and privatization advocates who are encouraging families to leave public schools in favour of private schooling as well as having broader influence on policies, practices, ideologies, and cultures within schools. How then do we make sense of a growing number of communities that have been historically marginalized in and through schooling and are choosing private schooling options to better meet the learning and well-being needs of their children? For example, Daniel (2020) has spoken to the rise in homeschooling

among Black Canadian families in response to rampant systemic anti-Black racism in Canadian schools. This includes the differential treatment, bullying, and racial profiling of Black children and families in schools as well as the lies, denials, and cover-ups employed by educators and the school system that maintain these injustices (Shah & Grimaldos, 2022). These patterns are not new. We need to reckon with the fact that public education was intentionally designed from the outset to exclude particular groups within the public realm, such as Indigenous students, Black students, deaf and blind children, and others (Aladejebi, 2021; Knight, 2021). This exclusion continues today. For example, Black students continue to experience exclusion through the dominance of Eurocentric curricula (Henry, 2020), as well as streaming, sorting, and disproportionate levels of suspensions and expulsions (James & Turner, 2017; Brown et al., 2020). Yet, schools are increasingly unable to examine the systemic and structural nature of these issues through a CRT lens because they must contend with a white minority delegitimizing this analysis as “woke ideology.” Ultimately, this leads to schools supporting neoliberal ideologies that individualize harm, ignore systemic issues, and help maintain the status quo by continuing to privilege whiteness while dehumanizing Black, Indigenous, and racialized students.

Supporting public education by addressing the limits of privatization, neoliberalism, and corporatization alone is not sufficient to foster a vibrant public education system. We also need to acknowledge the power asymmetries between the various publics within the public and recommit to challenging these imbalances. Ultimately, we must also recommit to the very practices and orientations that make public education possible—the willingness to struggle together and to engage in critical and constructive critique about the very systems we are fighting for.

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