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OUR SCHOOLS

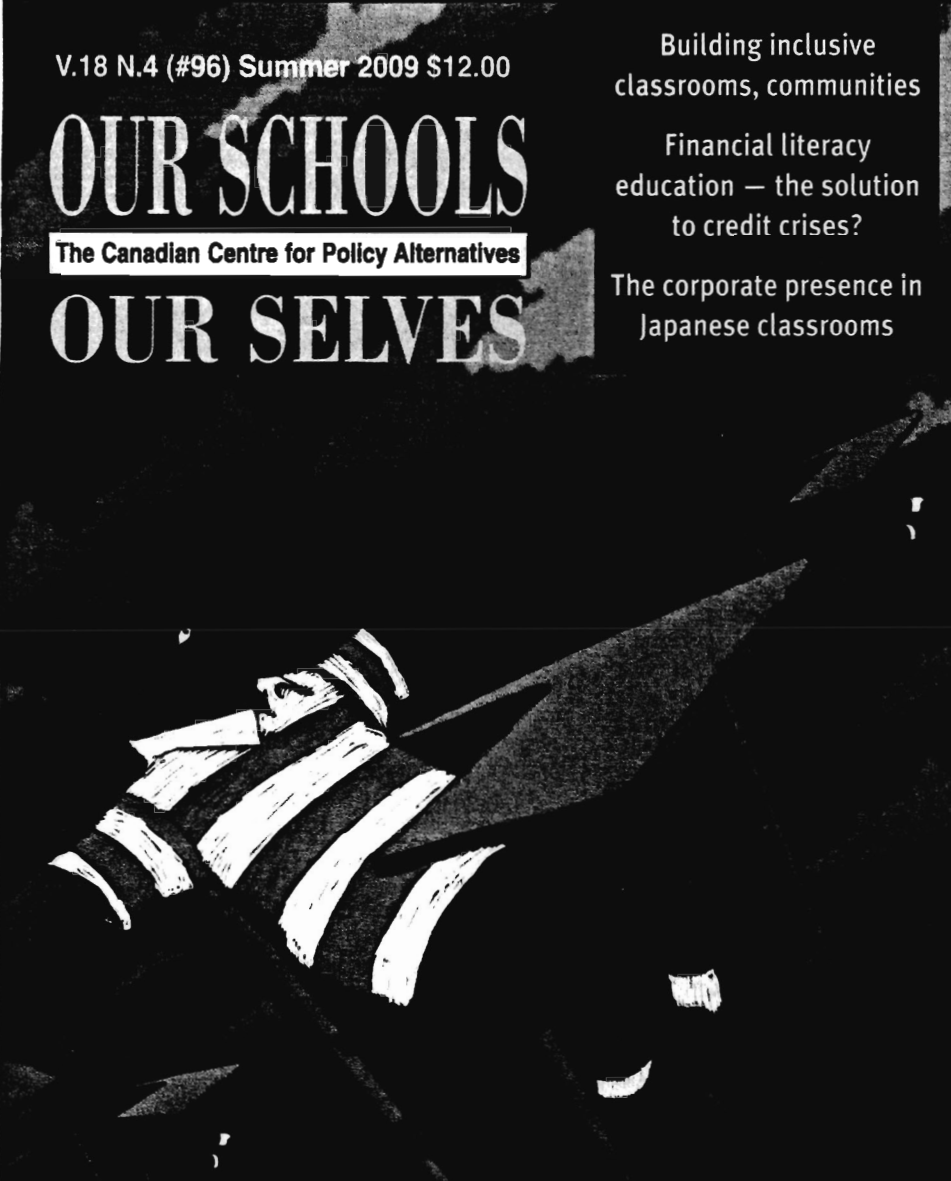
The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

Building inclusive
classrooms, communities

Financial literacy
education — the solution
to credit crises?

The corporate presence in
Japanese classrooms



Freedom to Teach,
Freedom to Learn

Professional judgment, authentic
learning and creative classrooms



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CARLO RICCI

“Partners” in Education?

Why school parent councils should not be fundraising and what they should be doing instead

As a school council member, you can help your council discover new and exciting ways to contribute to the education of students in your school. Education is a partnership involving parents, students, teachers, principals, school boards, government, and the community. Your involvement in the council gives you the opportunity to strengthen that partnership, and to be part of a dedicated team working to ensure a high quality of education and an accountable education system for the children of Ontario. Your participation can make a difference! (School Councils, 2002)

Economic considerations

In speaking with school council members, I have been told how fundraising has allowed their school to do and purchase many wonderful things that the school would otherwise not be able to afford. For example, at one school the minutes of the September 2008 school council meeting reports that the school has a bank balance of \$11,694.61 and they approved: \$2,000 for teacher's requests; \$3,000 for school presentation; \$1,400 for classroom level textbooks; and \$979 for music program funding.

My first reaction is: if these resources are so valuable, then in a publicly funded school system shouldn't *all* children and *all* schools have access to these funds to obtain them and not just schools who have the resources to raise the money?

Although not all parent councils fundraise, and likely all parent councils do more than just fundraise, in what follows, I will share why I believe that parent councils and schools should not fundraise and what parent councils should be doing instead. I want to clarify, that I am not interested in scrutinizing the practices of a particular school, but I am interested in looking at fundraising as a general practice.

Public spaces

Though the case is often made that the money raised is of tremendous benefit to the students in the school, I would argue that the money does not come without a significant cost, and represents a significant challenge to social justice. Schools are public spaces, *not* for-profit businesses. Turning schools into businesses with the goal of raising money and making profits from those within the school and throughout the community goes against the tenant of a publicly-funded school system. Furthermore, we should see our children and our schools as a collective and we should not favour those within one school over another. Aren't all of our young people precious and deserving of the same advantages regardless of what schools they attend? Schools should not be competing against each other, to raise funds privately but should be a public service. We should be trying to help all of our young people and not create an unjust and imbalanced system where one school that is more affluent raises funds to trump other schools that do not have the capability of raising the same amount of financial resources.

But it's not simply a question of looking at individual schools and their capacity to raise more or less money — we need to look *within* schools and remember that there are those who cannot easily afford, or afford at all, to participate in the fundraising activities. For instance, in one school some of the proposed activities that the council members are surveying the school about are the following: school lunches (pizza, Quiznos Sub, Swiss Chalet, or hot catered service); Toonie days (where cookies and juice are sold); "cards by me" (greeting cards/calendars professionally printed using your child's artwork); family fun night (carnival

event); a DVD yearbook (photos of the school year); a dance-a-thon (dancing fundraiser); personalized labels (for child's belongings). Clearly this is a very highly capable group that has had and will continue to have success in its fundraising efforts. But this "success" can come at a great cost. Carnival events have tremendous potential to bring communities together, but often the tickets that are sold and the events scheduled are prohibitively expensive for many. A night at a school carnival can easily cost a family with two children upwards of \$50. I have been to several school carnivals and they are very well-planned, but too expensive for many within any public school community with a range of family incomes. As well, a Toonie day can easily add up. Although this is not the norm, imagine a family with four or five children who can end up paying \$10 that day for a cookie and a juice for their family members.

Beyond this, how do you think children feel when their friends and classmates are paying into pizza and cookie lunches and snacks but they cannot afford to do so? From a slightly different angle, what about children whose parents may very well be able to afford it, but who choose not to participate in the lunches and snacks: how do they feel? What types of tension in the home may result from this difference of opinion?

Junk food

Another issue that arises is the feeding of "junk" or "fast" food to our children. Given the alarming obesity rates and the push by the Ontario Ministry to ban junk foods from school vending machines, does it make sense that children are being offered pizza, subs, cookies and so on as part of fundraising activities? In a report released by Boyce, W.F., King, M.A., & Roche, J. (2008), they write that "Obesity among young people shows an increase from 4% in 2002 to 6% in 2006" (p. ix). And, "In total, approximately 26% of boys and 17% of girls are either overweight or obese" (p. 47).

Further:

Over the past few years, obesity among young people has become a leading public health issue in Canada. Overweight and obesity are associated with numerous health consequences in Canadian

students. These include elevated risk factors associated with heart disease and type 2 diabetes (e.g., increased blood cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood sugar levels), problems with the bones and joints, poor emotional health and well-being, and a reduced overall quality of life. Furthermore, overweight and obesity that manifest in childhood and adolescence tend to carry on into adulthood, suggesting that most young people with these conditions will struggle with weight-related issues for the rest of their lives. (p. 41)

These are startling numbers and, given this, should schools be endorsing fast food chains products either implicitly or explicitly? I would argue that they should not. Our children should have the right to not be pawns for commercial activity when they are within schools — especially since, except for home schoolers, their presence within schools is not based on choice but on the law. Furthermore, according to how I read the Ministry's directives, schools are suppose to have junk food bans in place and they are suppose to be sensitive to not introducing junk food within their boundaries.

Although it may appear that the Ministry should be lauded for banning junk food in schools, I want to remind the reader of what I wrote in 2006 in "Is junk food really banned in elementary schools or have we been had, again?" In it I quoted the following Ministry Memorandum that I will repeat here:

If you read Policy/Program Memorandum No. 135 it reads, in part, as follows:

The purpose of this memorandum is to set out clear, recommended standards for school boards, in response to request for direction, regarding the sale of foods and beverages through vending machines in elementary schools...Effective immediately, school boards should restrict the sale of food and beverage items in elementary school vending machines to those that are healthy and nutritious, in accordance with the recommended standards set out in this memorandum. (Ministry of Education, 2004).

I then proceeded to write the following:

From this it becomes clear that junk food is not banned in elementary schools, but only in elementary school VENDING MACHINES. This means that tuck shops, parties that include

junk foods, the sale of junk food to students to fundraise... and so on are not banned. (Ricci 2006, fall)

What *should* parent councils be doing?

Parent councils should be dealing with more substantive issues like homework policies, and asking tough questions to challenge and to help move schools forward. They should advocate for and insist on the reallocating of resources away from a drill-and-skill curriculum that focuses on provincial testing, to one where children have a greater say in what they are learning. If the boards and the Ministry are serious about real partnerships, then they, along with parents, need to move in that direction. Parent councils should not simply be a source for funding by helping to turn public spaces into businesses.

Cautions

Parent councils that continue to fundraise need to be aware of the consequences of their actions and ask fundamental questions of the school principal and the board. Parents need to understand that, in Ontario, for example,

because the school board is a corporate entity and the school is not, any funds raised by the school council (and any assets purchased with those funds) belong, legally, to the board. The board may have policies specifying that the money raised by the council (and any assets purchased by the council) will remain with the school. However, such policies are not legally binding in the event that the school is closed. (School Councils, 2002 p. 3.4)

I watch many parent councils act as if the money they raised is the council's money and as if they have the authority to decide where the funds go; in reality, as the above quote makes clear, the money belongs to the board. Parents should also inquire about the change in accounting practices with regard to the funds they raise: "All fund-raising activities conducted by the school council must be included in the annual report prepared by the school council" (School Councils, 2002 p.3.4). Of this practice, People for Education (2008) says,

In 2004, the provincial government directed school boards to change their accounting practices. All fundraised money and

other "school-generated" funds, such as vending machines, school fees and donations from businesses, must now be included in boards' annual financial statements. (p. 10)

The question I would ask is: given that the board is now aware of the school-based funds which they include in their accounting records, does the board use this information to give schools that are more successful at fundraising less public money as a result? If they are not doing this yet, will they? Since many schools and boards are reeling from decreasing enrollment and rising energy costs and other costs in general, perhaps we should acknowledge that there may be a growing incentive to "save" the dwindling pool of public funds for those schools less effective at fundraising

Parents can be a tremendous support to the school community. They should use this power and their time to work on issues that are much more substantive than merely fundraising.

from private sources — forcing some schools to be more reliant on private donations instead of public resources.

Parent school councils — in fact, parents collectively, within all schools — can be a tremendous support to the school community. They should use this power and their time to work on issues

that are much more substantive than merely fundraising practices.

At this point I invite you to reread the quote with which I began this paper. I've reproduced it here for your convenience, and hope that you will think about it from the perspective that I have presented throughout this paper:

As a school council member, you can help your council discover new and exciting ways to contribute to the education of students in your school. Education is a partnership involving parents, students, teachers, principals, school boards, government, and the community. Your involvement in the council gives you the opportunity to strengthen that partnership, and to be part of a dedicated team working to ensure a high quality of education and an accountable education system for the children of Ontario. Your participation can make a difference! (School Councils, 2002)

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