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CONTRIBUTORS

OPINION

# How to ruin a world-class education system

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Canada's public schools are the envy of the world. On OECD's international PISA test results, Canada consistently ranks in the top dozen countries. Apart from Ireland and the city-state of Singapore, it is the highest performer among all English- and French-speaking nations.

But suppose you don't want a strong public system. Suppose you seek inspiration from fading, imperial England, or the chaotically imperious U.S. Suppose, like them, you see public schools as means to save money, release tax dollars and create market opportunities that will mostly benefit the wealthy.

Politicians love a crisis. The pandemic is a perfect one. If they wish, governments can keep people constantly off-balance, distracted by hokey-pokey, back-to-school strategies that are online, offline, online and offline, back to school, then back home again, in constantly shifting conditions. As Winston Churchill once said, "Never waste a good crisis." So here's what to do.

## 1. Undermine public confidence

Don't copy most Scandinavian countries, New Zealand, Scotland or South Korea, who have mainly had smooth return-to-school strategies that governments and teacher unions introduced together. Instead, like Ontario or Alberta, make last minute announcements, without unions' involvement. This will provoke a reaction from unions and make them look unreasonable. It will also leave teachers underprepared and apparently incompetent. Public confidence in the teaching profession will sag. Meanwhile, underfund back-to-school arrangements so that classes are large, conditions are unsatisfactory and parents grow increasingly frustrated.

## 2. Create private alternatives

When people feel trapped, show them an exit route. Allow and encourage pods to be created by economically advantaged parents who are understandably fearful about their children's health. After the pandemic, make these options permanent. Plant opinion pieces in the media that promote charter schools and private schools as alternatives to "like-it-or-lump-it" government schools. Pass legislation to introduce charter schools or expand their number. Ignore evidence from England, the U.S. and Alberta that charter schools don't outperform regular public schools. Hide the fact that, elsewhere, charter schools often reap significant profits for their tax-subsidized private owners. And don't mention Sweden. After it introduced "free" schools, the largest group of owners turned out to be hedge fund companies. Sweden also experienced the biggest decline on PISA results of any country in the world.

## 3. Misuse technology

Expand technology aggressively after the pandemic. Enrich technology companies by extending the educational market as much as possible. Mandate online learning to reduce the number of teachers and increase profits for Big Tech. Don't implement technology in a prudent, balanced and evidence-based way to enrich and extend great teaching and learning. Use it to flood schools with devices and replace that teaching.

## 4. Impose austerity

After the pandemic is over, ignore experts like Heather Boushey, economic adviser to Joe Biden. She says that austerity is not inevitable and that public sector investment actually protects jobs and increases consumer spending. Chrystia Freeland said much the same in her 2012 book, *Plutocrats*. Impose brutal cutbacks. Pay no attention to what happened when, in 2012, Kansas's notorious Governor Brownback introduced austerity measures and the largest tax cuts in the state's history. Literacy and mathematics results plummeted from being above the national average to falling into the bottom 25 per cent.

## 5. Mortgage the future

Make your decisions on a short horizon. Ignore how our world is falling off its axis. Disregard how strong public education systems improve the future.

Implement this plan, and public education will turn a tidy profit for the wealthy. It will amplify private gain. After people wise up, they will vote you out, of course. But don't worry. You and your plutocratic peers will reap your financial rewards for a long time after.

However, if you see the light, a better future awaits. Invest resources to help vulnerable students catch up and heal after the pandemic. Plan responses collaboratively with teachers and their associations. Learn from the pandemic where technology can add unique value to young people's education.

Don't waste one good crisis by creating another. Transform education for public good, not for private profit that rewards the wealthy few.

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