

IXth Trinational Conference for the Defense of Public Education

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It's a pleasure to be here with you tonight at the ninth Trinational Conference in Defence of Public Education.

For sixteen years now, the Trinational has been bringing together teacher-union activist-educators from Mexico, U.S. and Canada. I think that we should recognize that this is a tremendously important accomplishment. It speaks to the need for us to get together on an ongoing basis and talk about public education and the threat posed to it by those who would privatize and commercialize one of our most important social rights, a well-funded, accessible and free public education system.

As Jean said earlier the Trinational Coalition began in 1993 as a result of NAFTA, the North-American Free Trade Agreement. NAFTA came into effect on January 1, 1994. At the time, a number of people attended the conference in Olympia, Washington and asked the question: what does a trade agreement have to do with public education? Until the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement, and its expansion into NAFTA, we might have answered that question with: not that much. But these trade agreements were different. Before NAFTA, most people quite rightly thought that trade agreements were primarily about exchanges of goods, about tariffs and other elements. That was no longer the case with NAFTA. NAFTA was also about services, and included education as a tradable service. All economies, particularly those in the most industrialized countries, were increasingly characterized by service delivery rather than goods.

In the U.S. and Canadian economies, for example, about 70% of the economy is made up of services. Corporations wanted access to provide those services for a profit. Not only in countries where they were headquartered, but access to taking over services in other countries as well. Trade in services is an important aspect in all trade agreements since NAFTA. The World Trade Organization, multi-lateral agreements with Central America and bilateral treaties such as the ones by both Canada and the U.S. with Colombia. However trade and profits are not possible if education is delivered by the state, funded entirely by taxes and considered to be a social right, equitable and available for everyone. So something had to change to make education tradable and fit

into international trade. Education had to become a commodity that could be exchanged, and the way to do that was to privatize it. Many of the struggles in education over the last two decades have been, at their heart, a struggle between those who maintain public education as a social right—that's *us*, most of us working in teacher unions and progressive organizations—and those who would privatize to make education profit-making, *them*, right-wing governments and corporations who benefit from the privatization of public services.

In Canada, the techniques of attempting to privatize have included seeking to undermine confidence in the quality of public education, encouraging and funding private education, underfunding of public education, attacking the labour rights of those who work in education and bringing business methods to the management of education.

Standardized testing and ranking schools based on tests has been on the agenda in most provinces in Canada. These tests are then used by right-wing think tanks to rank schools and to encourage parents to use the rankings to choose schools. No matter how good your schools are, half of them will be at the bottom of a ranking, and thus appear to be bad, and half at the top. The acknowledged purpose of this is to convince parents that they should opt for private schools, or move to neighbourhoods which have the higher ranked schools, usually reflecting the socio-economic background of the neighbourhood in which the school is situated.

The Vancouver-based Fraser Institute was the first of the right-wing think tanks in Canada to produce these rankings. It annually publishes in newspapers in British Columbia tables ranking elementary and secondary schools. The Fraser Institute has expanded to produce similar rankings of schools in Alberta and Ontario. Clones of the Fraser Institute have followed in other provinces. The Atlantic Institute for Market Studies produces an annual report card on Atlantic-Canadian high schools. The Montreal Economic Institute publishes an annual report on Quebec high schools. The Fraser Institute openly promotes private education. It offers scholarships so that a few children from poor families can attend private schools. One of its most recent programs promotes chains of private schools, which fits nicely with creating a global market in running schools as a commercial project.

Underlying these rankings is the ideology that students and parents are consumers and that value should be determined by a market approach. When one looks at schools in this way, it's easy to see how this fits with making education a commodity that is tradable either within a country or internationally. In several Canadian provinces, this market approach has also taken the form of commercialization, selling education internationally. In some school districts, budgets have been augmented by tuition revenue from international students. In B.C., these students are charged about twice the amount the province provides per student for B.C. students. In the past two years, international students have brought in about \$130 million a year in revenue that has supplemented government grants, creating a significant inequality between districts that can attract these students and those that cannot.

B.C. education is also sold overseas through schools in China, India, Egypt, and several other countries, all accredited by the B.C. Ministry of Education as meeting the B.C. graduation requirements. The province passed legislation allowing public school districts to set up business companies that would operate to make profits. Most of these have failed to make any money, but individual entrepreneurs have moved in to make education a tradable, profit-making venture.

Online programs are another part of education that lends itself to global trade. A private school, the virtual high school of Ontario, for example, makes a pitch on its Web site to attract international students to its online credit courses. Private online universities, such as the University of Phoenix, mass-market their services.

Making private alternatives more attractive is also promoted by starving public education of the funds they need / public schools of the funds they need. The global economic crisis has provided an excuse for what many governments have wanted to do anyway. We read about thousands of teachers being laid off throughout many states in the U.S., and we are certainly feeling this at home. Neighbourhood schools are closed, breaking the links between school and community. In B.C. this fall, we will have seen 200 schools closed in under ten years. This is another example of applying the business model. We squeeze more and more students into fewer schools in the name of efficiency. Many necessary services such as extra support and smaller classes for students with special needs are also cut, leaving students who can afford it, to look for alternatives in the private system. In B.C., the underfunding of public education has been facilitated by a tax on teachers' bargaining rights, removing class-size provisions from collective agreements and other provisions that guaranteed services for special-needs students. In addition to that, the right to bargain those provisions have been removed from teachers—a series of legislative moves that we challenged in the B.C. Supreme Court, and we are about to hear that case in June or perhaps September.

In British Columbia, the private system actually receives government funding. In most cases getting grants that are 50% of those for public schools. This public funding of private schools allows them to have smaller classes than those in public schools, a marketing advantage sold to parents who want the best for their children. As public school budgets are cut, the private options become more and more attractive. Every year, increases in government funding are greater for private schools than for public schools.

Another element of privatization is bringing business management methods into education, making them seem more like a business. One of the most disturbing aspects of this trend is the emerging tendency to refer to children as *human capital*. Ironically this term is used by those argue for more funding for public schools as a good investment. It's a clear indication of the pervasive intrusion of the business model into education.

The most important elements of education should be the human beings, the students and teachers engaged in learning. It should focus on what students are learning, the curriculum of the school, and how they are learning, the pedagogical practices. If we want to understand education and make genuine improvements, we have to pay

attention to these factors. However, the education system has increasingly adopted management techniques from business, that are interested primarily in data collection for accountability purposes. Performance measures are used to define education, and if it can't be counted, it doesn't count. Outcomes-based education is the focus, going under a variety of names, such as intended learning outcomes. This is the equivalent to the business focusing on the bottom line. Bottom line data for accounting practices that are brought into the school as a way of, supposedly, objectively, evaluating through measuring outcomes.

An example of the distortion of ignoring the key elements in an example of ignoring the key elements to education, the Minister of Education in B.C. recently produced a report on the education system that *not once* in the text, used the word *teacher*. Defining measurable outcome objectives has replaced the genuine educational activity of talking about curriculum, teaching and learning.

The more education is understood and managed as a business, the easier it is to start thinking about it as an economic transaction and a tradable commodity. When NAFTA was being considered, and concerns were raised about its potential impact on public education, assurances were given that there was no intention to undermine public education. If one looked at the issue by a year after NAFTA, or even five years, it might not be obvious that a significant change in direction has taken place. However, after more than fifteen years, we can see that incremental steps are taking us in a direction away from public education. It would be difficult to map any single thing to a particular clause of NAFTA, and NAFTA is now only one of hundreds of trade treaties that deal with services as a commodity. However, it is the ideology behind these trade agreements and the power and influence of corporations expounded by these agreements that are a growing threat to public services in general and public education in particular.

The Trilateral Coalition in Defence of Public Education has contributed to keeping these concerns on the agenda, of groups in all three NAFTA countries. One of the most important elements of international work among those concerned about public education is that it helps us to see more clearly our own situation when it is held up in comparison to the situation of people in other countries. Although the context is different, as you've heard from all the speakers tonight, when we see the same patterns and problems appearing in many places, it helps us to understand whose interests are being served and how institutions and treaties are used to favour some interests over others.

The ninth Trilateral Conference gives us a chance to do that comparison. To analyze the common concerns and threats to public education. To form strong and sustained alliances with those who share our values. And to develop strategies that allow us to work together in defence of public education.

Thank you.