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People for Education: Reviving Public Debate

In the fall of 1995, a group of parents at a Home and School Association meeting in downtown Toronto was asked to raise funds for math textbooks. They agreed to do the necessary work. But the group also decided to establish a social action committee that would work equally hard in voicing their concerns about what would happen if such a practice became the norm. When committee members began getting in touch with other parent groups, they found that their situation was far from unique.

That small group of parents in Toronto has evolved from a six-member Home and School Association social action committee to a provincial organization run by a steering committee of 12. Known as People for Education, the organization collects information and coordinates events for other educational advocacy groups and parent associations across the province. In their words, People for Education are ‘Working Together to Defend Fully Publicly Funded Education in Ontario.’

*The **communities and schools** series was launched by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy with support from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. The case for education as a public good in Canada is compelling. Strong public schools and healthy communities that share responsibility for the well-being of youth are crucial to our country's future. Through stories and commentaries that link theory and practice, we hope to help inform citizens' understanding of education issues and engage them more deeply in their communities and schools.*

Core values

At the outset, members defined the basic principles which laid the foundation for their efforts. They believed that Canadians have a history of looking out for one another, and that this sense of shared responsibility had led to the creation of socially responsible institutions. Raised in the socially conscious 1960s, group members believed strongly in their ability to make a difference.

One of the group's first steps was to consult with politicians and social activists to find out how to move from defining a position to sparking debate and influencing educational decision-makers.

"We were incredibly naive in some respects," reflects Annie Kidder, one of the original social action committee members. "In hindsight, that naiveté allowed us the freedom to try things that others might have been afraid of. We didn't know the rules and protocols of media coverage. We were new, we used fresh publicity ideas, and the press loved us."

Alarmed but not alarmists

A speech by Dr. Ursula Franklin at People for Education's first education forum in 1996 validated the fledgling organization's commitment to action. Dr. Franklin stated: "We can roll out all the things that are horrible, engage ourselves in 'awfulizing' – spending our time elaborating how awful things are, but then comes the moment when you say, 'After you've taken a dim view, what do you do?'" [People for Education 1996: 1].

Dr. Franklin's words continue to inspire People for Education members as they respond to changes in the education system.

Since 1996, more than \$1 billion have been removed from Ontario's education budget, and a wide array of other changes have taken effect. At the governance level, school boards have been amalgamated and school trustees' roles have been diminished. A new government-appointed body called the Educational Improvement Commission has been set up to oversee the restructuring process. Principals and vice-principals have been removed from teachers' unions. In August 1998, all existing teacher contracts

became null and void and had to be renegotiated. At the classroom level, new curricula have been introduced at both the elementary and secondary levels, and Grade 13 is being phased out. Parents' traditional roles in home and school associations are in transition. While legislated school councils now exist in every school in the province, their roles remain undefined.

Most significant of these changes from People for Education's perspective was the passage of Bill 160 in 1998. It included fundamental changes to the roles of school boards and the introduction of a new funding formula based on a facility's square footage. "It's a formula which assumes that a 'one-size-fits-all' model is workable," says Annie Kidder. "There is no recognition of north-south or rural-urban differences in program delivery or population distribution." As People for Education member Kathy Bradden says: "Any woman who has ever bought pantyhose knows that one-size-fits-all is a lie."

As the scope and speed of the changes to education became clear, People for Education became a lightning rod for concern. Says Annie Kidder: "It seemed amazing to us that a government could launch an assault on a public institution without any notice. It rocked a core belief of mine that Canadians could just stand by and let this happen. When we held our first official meeting in February 1996, we knew we were on to something when we got a call from the Ottawa Coalition for Public Education asking us to help the debate grow around the province. Defending publicly funded education in Ontario was an idea whose time had come."

Tracking the changes

"When we first started out, things were happening so quickly that members of the public were unable to fully comprehend the impli-



Silent Protest: People for Education members Kathryn Blackett, Jan Sugerman and Kathy Bradden protest the announcement of Bill 104 by Minister of Education John Snobolen.

cations of one set of changes before another was announced,” says Annie. “In order to even include people in the debate, we had to find some way of assessing the impact of change on people’s day-to-day lives.”

The group members decided that one way to define that impact was to conduct an annual survey of schools. In 1998, Gay Young, the tracking project coordinator, began to seek input from other parent advocacy groups and develop a survey tool which they then sent to 4,000 elementary schools in Ontario. The survey asked parents and administrators to supply information on everything from class sizes and textbooks to whether gym and music teachers were on staff. They received 772 responses. In 1998, 843 schools participated in the survey, 450 for the second time. These schools represent 23 percent of the province’s elementary schools (approximately 302,000 children).

The 1999 survey report found some cause for optimism. More students were in classes of

25 or less than in 1998, and the Minister of Education’s one-time grant for textbook purchases meant that fewer children were using worn or shared texts. On the other hand, the survey found reductions in English as a Second Language programs; fewer specialist teachers, vice-principals, psychologists, social workers and guidance counsellors; and reduced library services, busing and custodial allocations.

Longer-term implications

Says Annie: “We wanted parents to see that a cut to their child’s gym time was not an isolated event, but was tied into the provincial government’s funding decisions. By making it clear that their experience is part of a larger picture, we encourage parents to question how funding formulas are created in the first place. If a funding formula has the effect of reducing the number of specialist teachers in our schools, for example, is that a good outcome?”

The survey also discovered that in some parts of Ontario, parent volunteers were not raising any funds, while in others they raised up to \$60,000. “If this trend continues,” states the report, “inequity among schools is going to get worse.”¹

Powerful messages

People for Education has shown a flair for drama to which the image-hungry media have responded. When then Education Minister John Snobolen stood in front of an historic one-room schoolhouse in Toronto and announced the restructuring of school boards and the redefinition of the elected trustee role in 1997, committee members stood by with gags over their mouths, ringing school bells.

Two highly successful and widely-reported ‘Visit Your MPP Day’ events saw parents across the province jam their MPPs’ constituency offices to talk about their concerns for the future of publicly funded education.

In 1998, Ontario teachers staged a two-week protest action to draw public attention to the now infamous Bill 160. After the protest, People for Education asked parents to show their support for publicly funded education by tying apple green ribbons to their school buildings, and they distributed ‘Save Our Schools’ signs with apple green lettering to protest Bill 160.

When the day came for MPPs to vote on the bill, People for Education loaded up a wheelbarrow with tissue-wrapped green apples with the words “Vote No” written on them in magic marker and hand-delivered one to each member. Then they went up to the visitors’ gallery at Queen’s Park to witness the voting. They traded their protest signs for apple green gloves which

they wore while silently holding up pictures of their children’s faces.

“It was the most incredibly moving experience,” says member Kathryn Blackett. “It brought home to each of us that we were advocates for our own children, and by extension, every child in the province.”

Other avenues

Despite these early successes in attracting media coverage to educational issues, large newspapers and television media have not given much space to these issues since the passage of Bill 160.

Says Annie: “In the first few years of this government’s tenure, massive changes in education created more of a crisis atmosphere. Teachers were on strike, omnibus education bills were being introduced with widespread opposition. That kind of controversy generates media interest. Since then, the story has changed. We want people to focus on the impacts of the new funding formula, and this kind of middle position story is just not as interesting to reporters. When we talk about the reduction in special education services, for example, the long-term impacts of that decision aren’t felt by a society until much later. Hold that story up next to people dying in emergency wards, and it’s easy to figure out which one will get covered.”

Media coverage aside, committee members have developed a number of other communication avenues. They have sponsored three public forums at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, inviting speakers to talk about funding issues and answer questions from the audience. They also held three provincial educational conferences at York University to strengthen the

network of parent groups from around the province and to provide in-depth information on issues.

Kathy Bradden oversees the production of five newsletters a year and circulates them to a mailing list of 1,200. “All 12 members of the steering committee have input into the articles we produce,” says Kathy. “If someone has been researching a particular item, that individual writes the article. Everyone pitches in to get the work done.” In 1999, People for Education secured a grant from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation to continue their work, and it is now able to distribute the newsletter to every school in Ontario (there are some 7,000 schools). The grant covers some of the organization’s direct costs and will pay a modest salary to steering committee members.

The media committee regularly sends background documents to 350 small newspapers across the province, supplementing this material

with information bulletins on specific topics. There is a People for Education website, and a new webmaster soon will be adding more punch and pizzazz to the layout. People for Education continues to meet with members of the editorial boards of the larger Toronto newspapers to discuss survey findings and bring attention to the stories they’ve collected that they feel underline the fundamental importance of education.

In addition to standard communication vehicles, the group gathers stories from parents, teachers and students to engage Ontarians in the education debate. People for Education published a series of stories in 1998 that highlighted individual experiences with the education system. Plans are in the works to produce a book which may use a fictional cartoon character to poke fun at the serious business of education.

“In many ways, stories help us to define what we have in common. They capture our concerns and our aspirations, and they help give us



People for Education supporters hold up photographs of their children in the Queen’s Park visitors’ gallery while government members vote on Bill 160.

direction and energy for the work to come,” says Annie Kidder. “Now that funding decisions are having real life impacts, it’s important to keep collecting stories and using them to engage politicians and reporters in a continuing dialogue.”

Staying true to their principles

From the outset, People for Education has kept its distance from political parties and teachers’ unions. It has stayed away from single educational issues like curriculum and standardized testing, except to comment on the processes being used to make changes.

Says Annie: “It’s very easy for decision-makers to dismiss groups they perceive as serving a special interest or as too narrow in focus. We pose a problem to our detractors because we serve children and the right to an education guaranteed by our Constitution. We’ve also worked hard to stay polite, and we aren’t defensive about flaws in the educational system.”

Besides staying away from partisan politics and unions, People for Education also has avoided focussing on single-option, breakaway solutions (e.g., testing, quality debates and the ‘back to basics’ movements). By remaining constructive and nonpartisan, the organization has succeeded in attracting funds for its operations.

Achievements and plans

Compared to the well-oiled communications machinery of a teachers’ union, People for Education is limited in its ability to quickly disseminate information. This limitation is a difficulty common to many volunteer organizations, but the committee has been successful in tackling the problem. Says member Gay Young: “We’ve been invited to speaking engagements all

over the province, and word-of-mouth is proving to be our best advertisement. As well, we’re expanding our e-mail system to send out bulletins, and when there’s really a crunch on to get something out quickly, our telephone list and press release network are very effective.”

All of the effort has garnered respect from teachers’ unions, school boards, parent groups and government. When Janet Ecker took over as Ontario Minister of Education in the summer of 1999, she identified People for Education as a key stakeholder and invited members to meet with her.

Annie Kidder was invited to join the Educational Improvement Commission’s Progress Review Reference Group as a parent representative. The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (the province’s largest teachers’ union) has asked People for Education to speak at their annual teachers’ federation meetings for the past two years. At the same time, the number of parent advocacy groups across the province continues to grow.

While the goals and character of the group are well defined, its members are continually challenged to maintain a positive perspective on events, and avoid the trap of ‘awfulizing’ that Dr. Franklin warned them about in 1996. The re-election of the Conservatives in 1999 allowed members to refocus their energies on their main task: arming Ontarians with the facts about educational funding so that they can enter the debate at whatever level they choose.

Says Annie: “You give people the power to speak up by giving them lots of information. You encourage a network of parents to keep the dialogue going. You help people to focus on the global impacts of government decision-making processes, and you remember that the first step is saying out loud what you believe in. As Canadi-



People for Education members (left to right). Top: Laurie Matheson, Jacqui Strachan, Kathy Bradden, Stephanie Lever, Annie Kidder, Valerie MacDonald, Gay Young. Bottom: Cathy Dandy, Kathryn Blackett, Diane Dyson, Mary Jankulak, Joanne Naiman, Liane McLarty.

ans, we've been loath to say 'I believe in this!' But when you do, you find that there are many others who feel exactly the same way."

Encouraging public debate consumes a lot of time, energy and money. People for Education is in the process of incorporating and investigating long-term funding sources. Member Cathy Dandy says: "The work we do is valuable, and it takes a lot of careful planning and patience. All of us have made sacrifices to see People for Education get on its feet, and now we want to set a structure in place that will make the organization sustainable."

Structural changes aside, People for Education members remain firmly rooted in their commitment to encouraging public discourse and building a broad base of support for public education.

"Public debate and balanced news coverage got derailed somewhere along the line," says Kathryn Blackett. "But that's a trend that can be

reversed. We believe that as long as there are people reading and thinking and asking questions, publicly funded education has a future."

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul works on the 'communities and schools' series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

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Endnote

1. For more information about People for Education's school survey, visit their website at: <http://www.clo.com/~p4e>

Reference

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