

"Parental choice" is a dog-whistle—let's recognize it as such ^[1]

It's less about choice, and more about privilege, privatization, populism, and patriarchy

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Excerpts

The 'parental choice' movement is increasingly organized and networked across borders. Understanding the ways it weaponizes both legitimate and illegitimate grievances with institutional power structures is crucial towards defending public education.

What we have been seeing in Canada, over the past three decades in particular, is corporatization of the public system. Corporatization has many manifestations—public money redirected (often as vouchers) to pay for or support private sector educational services, private schools or private-lite schools (charter schools); an increased corporate presence in public schools and classrooms or the contracting out of education services and materials to private entities, including curriculum design and provision or public-private partnerships.

This corporatization is the tip of a privatization iceberg that the far right (and the people who court them) tells us isn't privatization at all. It's about choice, they say. Who could disagree with that? But here "choice" is a dangerous fig leaf that is being leveraged to redirect money away from a universal public system towards an exclusionary private one.

These attacks on equity impact the most marginalized kids—kids who are poor, racialized, differently abled, queer, and more—who have no options outside of an increasingly underfunded public system. And we see how this agenda isn't about success or fairness or excellence at all—it's about profit and ideology.

To understand the implications of the 'parental choice' movement in the current education debates, we need to understand four concepts—privilege, privatization, populism, and patriarchy—and how they are connected.

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Many boutique programs or special magnet schools are still nominally public. They can't discriminate, but they can use coded expressions like "good fit" during the selection process. They may also come with a fee, but the assurance that no one will be turned away for financial reasons. The choice to self-disclose often has its own challenges—and not all parents who have the funds or social caché to keep pressing refresh while the registration website reloads or to stay up all night in lineups, let alone paying for the coaching required to help ensure their child's successful application.

These are the allowances that have been made to keep discriminating parents happy with the public system, so long as there's just enough specialization to benefit their kid's interests and needs, without going full private.

Carried one step further, it's the charter model, where public dollars pay for schools that look very private. But just because charter schools aren't in Canada other than Alberta, it doesn't mean the same mindset isn't at work. It's merely one step further along the privatization continuum.

The final—at least for now—step on the privatization scale is the voucher or tax credit model, where private parental choice is funded by public dollars. Currently, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and to some extent Nova Scotia have pursued this model. It has also been fully embraced by Alberta and Quebec, with severe equity implications.

There are nascent initiatives in other provinces too, like Ontario, where the government implemented "Catch Up" payments of \$200 - \$250 per child to offset extra education-related costs incurred during COVID—such as tutors, whose market share exploded—rather than comprehensive investment in public education for all kids.

Individualized handouts provide a fraction of the benefit that collective pooling of resources would. But that would require a pro-public, universal approach to the programs from which we all benefit, rather than an individualized approach that provides a public subsidy for parents who can afford private choices, while further depleting reserves through tax cuts that benefit the wealthiest, and ensuring ongoing underfunding of the public infrastructure.

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There is no question that public schools are being scapegoated in the culture wars. This was abundantly clear in the last round of school

board elections that saw a social media and organizing campaign targeting progressives and scapegoating trans kids in particular.

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The push for a narrower, more “rigorous”, less arts’ focused, more market-responsive public school system is not new. These zombies keep being resuscitated, and they will always have an audience of stalwart public education critics. But now they’re layered on top of decades of insufficient funding, where frustration with leaky roofs and growing class sizes and fewer extracurricular activities and insufficient acknowledgement of system oppression and more standardized tests is increasing – all of which disproportionately hurts already marginalized kids and communities, and all of which was made worse with COVID. And parents who can afford to look elsewhere – in the public system, or as private “extra”, or in the private system – just may, especially if there’s financial incentive to do so.

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In the eyes of public education’s opponents, it’s an archetypical power struggle: the traditional family holding off the full force of a government institution that thinks it knows better than actual people. Father (figure) knows best vs a feminized workforce intent on controlling the children, and reshaping the future for nefarious ends.

This false narrative resonates with certain segments of the population who are resentful at the perceived erosion of their authority and privilege—those who yearn for schools that don’t question parental authority, or won’t raise difficult questions about sexual health and consent, or gender identity, or residential schools, or Canada’s own racism.

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As with all public institutions, there is an urgent need to do better, particularly for marginalized kids and communities who have been frustrated and failed by what’s currently in place.

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