

Education dispute ignores Generation Squeeze ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Class size is a sticking point between the B.C. government and the B.C. Teachers' Federation. It affects teachers' working conditions, the quality of education received by children in kindergarten through Grade 12 (K-12), as well as the province's bottom line.

The dispute about class size is inevitably influenced by classroom characteristics. Take extra support needs, for example. A class of 24 kids in which seven have extra support needs will be far more challenging for a well-trained teacher than will be a class of 24 in which just two or three children require additional support.

Yet this is precisely the trade-off we are making in all school districts because our debates about education fail to engage with the declining standard of living for the generation raising young kids.

Schools are really the first universal programs to which young families have access, save for medical care. Teachers are among the first responders for Generation Squeeze. They do what they can to compensate for the fact the generation is squeezed for time at home because stagnant wages necessitate more parental time in the labour market; squeezed for income after rising housing costs; and squeezed for services like child care before and after their children start school.

Because the generation raising kids is squeezed, 30 per cent of their children reach kindergarten struggling to hold a pencil, or follow instructions, or get along with peers, or know many of their letters - all age-appropriate tasks. Most of these children live in middle-and upper-income homes and neighbourhoods.

So long as 30 per cent of children arrive at school struggling in these ways, there are seven kids with extra support needs in a class of 24. Ample research evidence reveals there is no reason for this number to reach even three children.

The proportion of B.C. kids struggling when they enter school has been pretty consistent for over a decade. This means K-12 class-rooms are now filled with a surplus of vulnerable children. Many classes may have four additional children requiring extra support that we could have prevented through family policy investments well before the children started school.

No wonder teachers are frustrated, and adamant that class size must remain a matter for contract negotiation. Society is expecting them to deal with our collective failure to address a seismic decline in the standard of living for the generation raising kids. In effect, we ask teachers to supplement their work as educators with additional roles as social workers, corrections officers, and health promotion officials. That is not a context conducive to excellence in pedagogy, despite teachers' best intentions.

But where in the dispute between teachers and the government is a discussion of why classrooms typically have so many children needing extra support? What is the root cause?

A primary cause is our policy failure to adapt to the declining standard of living for Canadians under age 45 before their kids reach school. For years now, UNICEF and the OECD have reported that provincial and federal governments in Canada lag behind most industrialized countries when it comes to supporting parents to afford time at home with a new-born, find and afford quality child care services, and balance employment with family time.

The implication? We watch as the generation raising young kids struggles when their children are under age six, and then hope elementary and high school can solve many of the problems that arise. It's a classic Canadian example of addressing problems after the fact, rather than preventing them in the first place.

Just think what teachers could do with four fewer children requiring extra support per classroom. Existing dollars could stretch further, as could teacher time. Some day the government and BCTF may even settle on a teacher-student ratio that welcomes an additional student per class than they would under current conditions when seven children have extra support needs, instead of three. This trade-off could save provincial coffers millions per year.

Regardless of the teacher-student ratios on which BCTF and the Ministry of Education converge (we hope), we can dramatically improve education outcomes for students if we put in place a New Deal for Families to reduce the strains on Gen Squeeze and their kids. University of B.C. colleagues and I have had the opportunity to examine anonymously the school achievement for an entire population of B.C. children as they move from kindergarten to Grade 4. We then examine achievement for the population moving from Grade 4 to Grade 7, and Grade 7 to Grade 12, or into the criminal justice system. Examining what goes on for an entire population takes a lot of the guesswork out of research. It shows that so long as 30 per cent of kids start kindergarten vulnerable, only 42 per cent graduate with grades that make them

eligible to attend the best post-secondary programs. But were we to reduce to 10 per cent the proportion of Gen Squeeze's kids who arrive at kindergarten struggling, the share of students eventually graduating with grades good enough to go to university would improve by one-third (to 56 per cent).

This dramatic improvement can be achieved just by getting it right before kids get to kindergarten, without changes to the K-12 system.

Steve Barnett, a leading U.S. economist, has carefully reviewed the hundreds of academic studies about early child education and care services that examine child development outcomes. His exhaustive review shows that the New Deal's \$10/day child care ser-vice recommendation could reduce the vulnerability rate among children under age six from 30 per cent to far closer to 10 per cent. The proposed investments in New Mom and New Dad benefits and Flex-Time could close the remaining gap, while also addressing the time squeeze that parents face at home where it is important that they remain their children's first educators.

So, as the education debate continues, it's time to broaden the discussion. Improving the quality of K-12 schooling, and its outcomes for kids, teachers and taxpayers, will require a New Deal for Families.

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