

Fix schools by having funding following students?

By John Hilton O'Brien, 19 May 2023

An elephant walked across the floor of Alberta's Leaders Debate on Thursday night. (May 18.) Nobody admitted it was there, but you could see its footprints.

The first question from the panel brought it in — asking how the candidates would deal with increasing “complexity” in the classroom. Both leaders promised to spend money — with very different visions of how to get it to the front line.

Alberta has \$9.3 billion dollars budgeted for education. That's \$320,000 for a class of 26 students, on average. The average teacher is paid \$80,000. In no other industry — at all — is it acceptable for only 25% of the spending to go to the front line.

It's the elephant in the room: The problem isn't the amount of money spent — Alberta's Byzantine educational bureaucracy is inherently wasteful, and needs to be simplified.

The issue was referred to by a question in the leaders' debate which basically translated to “how will you get supports into actual classrooms?” Notley promised to hire more teachers and “restore” funding to specific programs. Smith promised to give more money to local school boards. In the context of our actual system, that's facile: neither response means quite what you think.

Decision-making goes through no less than five levels. The minister talks to the provincial bureaucracy, which talks to school boards, which talks to board administrations led by superintendents, who talk to school principals, who talk to teachers. The lines of authority are

not straight: boards are elected separately from the minister (though almost nobody votes,) but the Minister has the right to dissolve them. Elected officials are only allowed to hire their head bureaucrat — teachers and principals do not respond to them. Against this complex coastline of bureaucracy washes a tide of academics, union officials, contractors, and activists, each insisting on their right to influence or determine processes, and gaining power, prestige, and wealth from their interventions. It is the latter which create the most complexity.

Funding is complicated. The education levy on property tax doesn't go to the local schools, but to the province. The Legislature adds that money as a small portion of the overall education budget. After the provincial bureaucrats take their cut, a labyrinthine Funding Manual details how educational authorities access the share of funding that goes to each student. Differing amounts are provided per student for differing sorts of school authorities and students, and special “program” monies accessed through complex procedures. The ministry pays to build facilities — but local authorities are responsible for maintenance.

As in any very complex ruleset, opportunities to game the system abound.

However, much money we shovel into the system, hierarchs at all levels can show that they need more cash simply by manipulating the numbers according to the complex ruleset.

When Notley promises to “restore” “PUF” funding, she's promising to return a very complicated mechanic to the Funding Manual. Her promise to hire teachers may not help students that much. She will have to add a level of bureaucracy to ensure that the money is spent actually hiring teachers. As Smith pointed out, Notley's previous effort at classroom size reduction was not just futile — it was untraceable. It also won't help the rural jurisdictions most likely to have unmanageable class sizes (when an area has precisely 32 grade 1-3 students, you won't get a second classroom.) The move does bring \$6 million in annual dues to the Alberta Teachers' Association, whose poohbahs she had previously put in charge of curriculum development. Her proposal adds complexity to the already insane bureaucratic system.

Smith's proposal amounts to simply increasing the base funding amount per student in the funding manual. In the existing system, this is the least wasteful way of getting money to local school boards. It does not address waste at local levels, or ensure that money is spent on her priorities. However, it is manifestly the better of the two proposals.

Neither leader really addressed the elephant:

How can we simplify Alberta's Kafkaesque educational bureaucracy?

Two methods are available, that have been tested in other jurisdictions. The first is to dissolve school boards and govern directly. That eliminates one of the five decision-making layers. It also removes a layer of accountability —

the tide of union hierarchs, activists and contractors will have even less check on their activities. This is the model that Quebec has chosen. The savings in cost are probably made up for by the increased opportunities for waste.

The second is to embrace educational pluralism. It's the single-payer system of education. Funding follows the student, strictly, unmediated by bureaucrats. Every school has the same broad outlines — curriculum, teacher

qualifications, discipline, fees. Students who agree to the particular idea of the school — whether general-service, Catholic, First Nations languages, or something else — cannot be refused. The relationship between teachers and Alberta Education becomes the same as that between doctors and Alberta Health.

It's an idea that puts classroom teachers and the families they serve firmly in charge. There are some wrinkles — the

needs of rural schools, for instance — but the general outline seems good.

Schools are free to be part of any supportive system that meets their needs, or stand on their own. And if we want to get real supports into classrooms, it may be the best way forward.

John Hilton-O'Brien is the Executive Director of [Parents for Choice in Education](#)