

## Tragedy, ambition and education reform

By John Hilton O'Brien, 17 August, 2023

A horrendous tragedy in education took place this summer when respected Ontario principal Richard Bilkszto [killed himself](#) after suffering relentless bullying by a group led by a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) coordinator.

It was led by the KOJO Institute — an organization that had received at least seven figures in grants from the federal government. It wasn't just tragic — it was the result of an [egregious abuse of power](#). It is certainly likely to figure into the looming backlash against such 'woke' agendas.

However, the most interesting commentary has come from an article in a self-described socialist newspaper. [The Militant](#) cites the government tribunal which found that Bilkszto had suffered from workplace bullying and worse.

Most interestingly, they cite a Marxist theorist who thinks "today's spreading 'cancel culture' among privileged middle-class layers in the universities, foundations, media and government circles, as well as the profoundly anti-working-class, anti-science 'woke' politics they promote" is actually reactionary.

In other words, they see DEI and 'woke' ideas as a product of the right, not the left.

They may be correct.

Complexity scientist [Peter Turchin](#) noted ten years ago we seem to be [overproducing elites](#), which is likely to create instability in society.

Here's a snippet:

"Elite overproduction generally leads to more intra-elite competition that gradually undermines the spirit of cooperation, which is followed by ideological polarization and fragmentation of the political class."

"This happens because the more contenders there are, the more of them end up on the losing side. A large class of disgruntled elite-wannabes, often well-educated and highly capable, has been denied access to elite positions."

This may be what is driving our woke education politics.

Simply put, we have too many university degrees and too few jobs commensurate with their perceived dignity.

Do 'woke education politics' seem desperate? Does DEI seem like it is made-up? Perhaps it is: we have a class of people who are desperate for status.

What happened with Blitszko is, in part, a manifestation of the competition Turchin speaks of.

The livelihoods of the presenters from KOJO depend upon their prestige: their product is literally hot air — they produce nothing real.

As a result, they deal with any challenge in harsh terms — 'reactionary' is the word that *The Militant* uses, evoking an era of autocratic repression. The issue is systemic — Blitszko is not unusual, and unlikely to be the last casualty.

Turchin's prognosis is grim.

Civil war and policy responses to the worst economic depressions are the remedies he talks about. In educational

politics, however, another option may be available.

In a way, education has a lot of room for elites.

Simply put, university-educated, certificated teachers are, in fact, elites. The common issues of teaching create a real sense of collegiality amongst them, which tends to camouflage this.

Our issue is in the hierarchy of education: the offices which dictate to teachers how they may do their work. They are the ones creating the biggest problems.

The real problem may stem from how we handle teachers as professionals.

Right now, teachers are treated like auto workers. They are hired to do a job which is spelled out for them. The educational hierarchy will tell them how to do it. (Nurses suffer under the same model.)

To an alarming degree, unelected bureaucrats, such as the DEI trainers, try to tell these highly-educated professionals how to think and how to act.

Perhaps we would have better results if we treated teachers more like doctors or lawyers.

Like a doctor or lawyer, perhaps a teacher should be free to contract with parents directly. Arrangements can be made with other teachers: schools would form on the same basis as law firms. A more flexible arrangement could be made by the simple expedient of having the funding follow the student.

That doesn't mean there would not be vicious competition, of course.

Teachers would be competing for students. There would be winners and losers. However, if teachers were to work like lawyers, the object of competition is the service. And when people compete to offer a better service, improvements for the consumer are guaranteed.

Our current education budget spends roughly \$320,000 per classroom. The average teacher gets roughly a quarter of that.

A more flexible system will see a larger share of the pie go towards actual teachers — with room for much smaller classrooms and lower government expense. The people now teaching DEI courses could teach actual math and reading courses — and feel the satisfaction of offering a real service. Everybody wins.

As we head towards a new school year, these concerns merit serious consideration — particularly by Alberta's new Education Minister, Demetrios Nicolaides.

However, as *The Militant* points out, reactionary opposition looms: existing elites (sometimes called "The Blob") will defend their status, while delivering no direct benefit to students.

As evidenced by the tragic death of principal Richard Bilkszto, they can poison the whole environment of the school. If Nicolaides means to improve the school system, he will have to face up to the elites — which may be a real test of character.

***John Hilton-O'Brien is the Executive Director of Parents for Choice in Education, [www.parentchoice.ca](http://www.parentchoice.ca)***