Carleton University

Challenging the Harris Government's Mandate to Improve the Quality of Public Education with Less Public Expenditure: The Political Economy of Public Education Reform in Ontario

**A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts**

Institute of Political Economy

by

Adele Lisa Mugford

Ottawa, Ontario

**August 2002
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Thesis Supervisor

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Abstract

The impetus behind the Harris government's restructuring agenda for Ontario's public education system comes from changed political perceptions of the best way to produce the 'right' conditions for economic growth and prosperity. Pointing to an expanded political focus on restoring corporate profitability, including educating for a *different* type of citizen, this thesis explores some of the relationships – new and old - among public education, citizenship and capitalist culture. Beginning with an historical overview of public education's major waves of reform, this paper aims to shed light upon the Harris government's education restructuring agenda in terms of both its location along a continuum of education reform in Ontario and its historical specificity. Guided by the government-outlined restructuring objectives for *more affordability*, *greater accountability* and *higher quality* education, this paper is an investigation of claims and counter claims surrounding the Harris mandate to improve the quality of education with less public expenditure.

Acknowledgements

I am incredibly grateful to Bruce Curtis for agreeing to be my supervisor and for his consistent faith and help throughout this project. I am also very thankful to Hugh Armstrong, as my committee member, for his helpful comments and discussions during the initial and final stages of this thesis. A huge thanks must also go to Barry Wright, Rianne Mahon, and Donna Coghill.

A humongous thanks to my family, especially my Mum, Dad, and Nanna – I could not have finished or even begun this project if I did not have their immediate and undying faith in me to begin and finish the MA, their understanding (for missed holidays, grumpy phone calls, etc.) and their constant all-round support. I would further like to acknowledge my Grandpa – Geoffrey Hayes - who passed away at the beginning of my second year of this project.

I would also like to recognize Teresa Healy, Mark Neufeld, and Sara Blackstock for inspiring and encouraging me to take on this challenge, as well as Sara Cond Flower for helping me get through the last year in particular!

And last but not least, I would like to thank Buckwheat. If not for his unwavering love, support and understanding throughout the duration of this thesis, I would not be writing these 'thank-yous'.

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By definition, education is political. Literacy and knowledge enable citizens to make choices concerning their future and to acquire beliefs about people, systems and priorities. Education is power; power is political.¹

INTRODUCTION

The Harris Government's Education Reforms: More Affordability, Greater Accountability & Higher Quality

Ontario's public education system has served in many ways as a political-testing ground in connection with the core social and/or economic concerns plaguing the province. Seemingly a relatively easy target for the government of the day, and regardless of its party affiliation, public education has existed on a continuity of change since its inception. In part, this continuity can be attributed to the constant tension stemming from its dual purposes: to produce citizens for a democratic society and to discipline labour for the capitalist market economy. Where public education has been historically characterized as both a source of and remedy for problems in the economy in the "inclusive" sense, the Harris government has been no exception to focusing its political efforts on restructuring public education in the name of preventing an economic crisis and fostering economic growth and prosperity.

On June 8th, 1995, the Harris government took office at Queen's Park with 82 of 130 seats and 45% of the popular vote.² Although historically Ontario has favoured Conservative governments (the exceptions being the three terms prior to the Harris election – a coalition Liberal-NDP and majority Liberal governments under David Peterson, and the Bob Rae NDP government), the Harris victory, has in many ways signaled a pivotal change in the province's political economy. The context preceding the Harris government's election to office included a growth in the public debt, deficits, higher taxes, high rates of inflation, declining productivity, and a rise in unemployment.

These conditions, however, must be further couched in a wider context, including the end of the Cold War, post-Fordism with a dilution of the Keynesian Welfare state, as well as an enhanced concern with science and technology in light of the post-industrial, increasingly globalized society. Although it is difficult to contain any of these descriptions under a single definition by virtue of their shifting and multilayered meanings (which I expand on in chapter 2), they represent some of the major forces surrounding the Harris election in Ontario in 1995.

Where the Harris government's election represented a sharp shift to the right, or what some deem the 'new right,' a similar shift had begun approximately two decades earlier in the USA and the UK. As a result of the particularities of Canadian society and the province of Ontario more specifically, the Harris policies would focus on fostering economic growth and prosperity through a combination of methods, new and old, many of which resembled those employed in the USA and the UK. At the same time, however, a number of the Harris government's measures for reform were implicitly and explicitly connected to past provincial governments. Explicitly, it framed most of its reform measures as responses to problems and/or issues created by poor governance under non-Conservative party leadership. Implicitly and contrary to its claims, the Harris government's bid to reduce public expenditure on education follows a continuity of education spending reductions by a provincial government

The Harris government's explicit contrasts between its methods of governance and those under the NDP and the Liberals were especially critical in gaining a plurality from the Ontario electorate. Specifically, the Harris government claimed, through its platform and later in the legislative assembly, that one of the core reasons for economic

stagnation, debt and the debt/economic crisis was due to poor governance under the Bob Rae NDP and the Liberal-NDP Peterson governments in light of rampant *overspending* and concurrent overtaxation. Accordingly, Conservative member Dave Johnson emphasized that it would be imperative “to rethink how we use taxpayers’ dollars to deliver public services... to find and implement ways to bring permanent change to the public sector; to make government smaller and more efficient and to bring quality services to Ontarians who really need them.”³ He further explained that in order for this to happen, we had to be certain that we were spending every dollar we had as wisely as possible.⁴ In other words, as stated in the Common Sense Revolution, this government would eliminate all “non-priority government spending.”

As one of the biggest public expenditures, public education was immediately criticized for being overly “bureaucratic” and excessive and wasteful in its spending practices. Thus, spending wisely or eliminating “non-priority government spending” would entail eliminating waste and duplication in the education administration or “bureaucracy.” More specifically, the Harris government promised it would restructure the public education system to offer higher quality education by spending less public revenue. This promise would ultimately be addressed in light of a set of core objectives: to make education *more affordable* and *accountable*, as well as *higher in quality*, all of which depended upon a clear distinction between activities and spending inside and outside the classroom.

The thesis I argue here is that based on its claims and arguments in the Hansard, its public documents and surrounding its bills of legislation, the Harris government would not be capable of improving the quality of public secondary school education in Ontario

and the education system in general by spending less public money. In fact, by using privatization initiatives to foster greater ‘cost-efficiency,’ and by centralizing more control over education policy, financing and governance, while downloading increased work and responsibility to local school boards, schools, and individual families, the Harris government has likely reduced the public education system’s capacity to reflect and address public needs and therefore, has hindered the “quality” of *public* education. I further explain how the Harris government’s measures for education reform go beyond fiscal restraint and into the realms of citizenship and culture. I developed these arguments based on my explorations of the contradictions and faulty assumptions among many of the government’s arguments for reform and promises of more affordability, greater accountability, and higher quality in education.

While it is important to note that the former system was by no means perfect and that many of the Harris reform measures were suggested and/or supported by both the NDP and Liberals, the Harris government has seemingly exacerbated old problems and created new ones. It has done this by continuing to focus on restoring corporate profitability to post-war levels (as did the former NDP and Liberal governments) yet under changed perceptions of the “best” way to foster economic growth and prosperity. In other words, the Harris reforms to public education are reflections of these changed perceptions where the benefits of lower tax rates by reducing public expenditure on education through privatization initiatives have been advanced in conjunction with educating for a different type of citizen over rights and obligations for social, economic and political equality.

In chapter one, I explain the theoretical and methodological influences guiding my arguments and conclusions. As such, I locate my project among some of the major theoretical traditions surrounding the political economy of education. However, where these traditions typically examine the tension between education for citizenship and education that trains labour in the interests of capital, this thesis seeks to expand on these traditions by considering the Harris education reforms as a case of hegemonic politics given that the actors responsible for bringing about policy changes are political parties which cut across social classes. In particular, it has been useful for me to explore historical, on-the-ground, empirical issues. I have explored and revealed the contradictions in the Harris government's arguments through a 'periodization' methodology with reference to Lee Harvey's critical social research approach of "digging beneath the surface" and addressing a wider context. This involved looking at the historical contexts surrounding education restructuring over a twenty-year period. I have merged this periodized investigation with a contemporary investigation of the government's discussions and debates in the legislative assembly, its public documents available over the web and of its actual bills of legislation. In addition to explaining my research material choices, I also expand on a number of notable exclusions, all of which have generally informed my research.

In chapter two, I explore the legislation the government described in connection with its objectives to make Ontario's public education system *more affordable* and *accountable*, both of which underscore the Harris government's overall mandate to produce an education system that is "less costly" to operate but higher in "quality." Based on the assumption that the former NDP and Liberal governments had been

overspending, and therefore, overtaxing Ontarians, the main focus to developing a more affordable system was to reduce public expenditure on education. However, with reference to works by Bob Gidney and by Paul Axelrod, I explain how the government's surface analysis of the historical contexts surrounding education financing led it to the faulty assumption that problems in the education system existed as a direct result of overspending. Contrary to its campaign of providing Ontarians with a different leadership on the issue of education financing, the Harris government's fiscal retrenchment on education has actually followed a continuum of provincial de-funding, beginning in 1975.

Nevertheless, and coupled with its budget cuts, the government legislated expenditure reductions through a number of "efficiency" measures in the financing, functioning and governance of secondary schooling. And, as a guarantor of sustaining less public expenditure on education, the Harris government claimed to enhance fiscal accountability through increased reporting on all financial transactions and "cooperative" agreements.

Subsequently, I end this chapter with a series of counter claims in connection with its assumption that activities and/or spending inside and outside the classroom took place in isolation from each other. Based on the core assumption that public education was suffering from a legacy of overspending, the further assumption that the government could reduce school boards' budgets, resources, and staff without negatively affecting the inside of the classroom, was shown to contradict its own list of school board duties, where school boards were cited as responsible for furnishing classrooms, hiring teachers and providing education programmes. Further contradictions came to light in considering

the government's goal for cost-efficiency, an objective in the name of students and taxpayers. Specifically, by making cost-efficiency an end or an objective, as opposed to a means or an instrument to an end, as the Harris government did in its restructuring plans for Ontario's public education system to be more affordable and accountable, the likely implications would be greater inefficiencies. This is would be especially conceivable where educating a diverse and multi-need student population is inherently inefficient. Moreover, Janice Gross Stein points out that it is pointless to focus on a means to achieving a particular goal prior to establishing what the goal(s) or purpose(s) are going to be. In accordance with the Harris government's reforms, penny pinching for "taxpayers" necessarily supercedes the importance of an education system that is capable of meeting diverse student and/or societal needs in Ontario and the global "economy" in general. The government's claims surrounding the benefits to a more cost-efficient system were perhaps most contradictory, however, upon considering the way in which these measures have seemingly served to hollow-out the sole democratic component to public education. For now school boards must increasingly focus on making ends meet by "deciding" what to cut, where and how, which corporation to support for fundraising or resource purposes, and/or how to recruit "qualified" and an adequate number of volunteers.

Claiming that everything it did revolved around its concerns for quality education, the Harris government also explained, albeit in notably circular ways, many of its financial reforms as improving not just the cost-efficiency, but the quality of education. I explored some of these among other arguments for "higher quality" education in chapter three. Beginning with the promises of reinvestment in the classroom, suddenly reducing

costs outside the classroom was connected to the inside. Similarly, removing education from the property tax base out of concern for the overburdened taxpayer would also foster higher student achievement and higher quality education by allowing the government to fund all students across the province with the *same* per-pupil amounts regardless of where they lived. Moreover, removing this power from school boards and trustees was said to allow these actors to focus *more* attention on local education matters.

The Harris government claimed that having students spend more time, both with teachers and in school, in addition to meeting more rigorous standards in curriculum and setting more demanding graduation requirements would also enhance student achievement and bring about higher quality education. In addition to improving the quality of education through financing and curriculum, the government would further enhance the quality of education through its measures to increase school board “local autonomy” and recognize differences among localities. This increased local autonomy was equated with expanding boards’ “choices” in terms of offering (or not offering) certain programmes that had been made mandatory and were fully funded by the province under non-Conservative leadership, and by increasing their responsibility and “ability” to “find” additional “savings” and/or develop local solutions to the spending “crisis.”

Yet, based on some of the same contradictions discussed in chapter two, in addition to contradictions revealed in chapter three, the government’s arguments to improve the quality of public education by spending less public revenue did not make common, or any, sense in their own terms. The confusion or non-sense surrounding its claims for enhancing the quality of education was especially poignant where the Harris

government centralized control over education financing, policy, and governance while decentralizing or downloading its mandate - to make the education system operate with less public expenditure - onto local school boards. Ironically, despite the government's reforms to *fix* the education inequities due to differences in per-pupil funding by providing the *same* per-pupil funding to all boards, the crux of the problem has remained intact. In fact, it is likely that the government's "new" method of funding has actually increased the inequities among boards and students for at least three interrelated reasons.

The first involves the government's erroneous assumption that school boards, like the province, had been overspending. Based on this inaccurate assumption, the government wrongfully assessed the differences in per-pupil spending by boards to be connected to a combination of school boards' varying abilities to fundraise different amounts through setting and collecting property taxes and to self-serving administrative bodies (school boards), as opposed to any connections with a historical context of inadequate funding. And third, where the government's "equal" funding was devised in association with a standardized funding formula, the funding amounts did not recognize adequacy or specific needs among school boards. In other words, the "simpler," more "equal" methods of funding not only failed to address the fact that differences in per-pupil funding existed as a direct result of underfunding, but they also ignored differences in costs to run schools as a result of older facilities, different wage standards and school board locations (i.e. rural vs. urban). Consequently, by ignoring these among other differences, and by removing school boards' ability to fundraise publicly through property taxes, boards would be forced to operate with *less*, not more, power to make improvements. Specifically, school board governance would be redesigned to make

decisions about soliciting volunteers, which program(s) to cut, how much user-fees should be for certain courses, which staff to 'let go,' and/or which corporation to support in order to avoid the worst case scenario – school closure.

Contradicting its arguments to improve student achievement by requiring students to spend more time in school and with teachers was the government's recent reform to reduce secondary schooling from five years to four, claiming there was apparently "no added value" to a fifth year of schooling. For not only would a fifth year offer students increased time in secondary school, it would provide them with more time with their teachers. Equally problematic was the government's equation of increased difficulty in the standards and requirements students would need to meet in order to pass a course and graduate with improved quality of education. Yet, at the same time as the government characterized an improved quality of education in terms of increased demands and expectations (on students and school boards), it decreased the supports and investments that would otherwise help students to meet these more rigorous requirements and allow school boards to make improvements. These conditions have been further exacerbated by the government's reforms to "enhance" local autonomy in school boards. Similar to the effects on students, school boards have experienced an increase in demands and workload in a context of less funding, fewer staff, fewer resources, and less power. And, it is on account of these conflicting conditions that the public system has likely had to reduce its education provisions and services and/or increase its reliance upon private expenditure, all of which will most certainly have implications for the most disadvantaged and society as a whole.

Finally, I conclude with an overview of my main arguments. Specifically, I address the continuity in the Harris government's approaches to restructuring public education in Ontario in terms of fiscal retrenchment. However, the Harris government's public spending reductions go beyond fiscal retrenchment and must be considered in connection with an agenda to restore corporate profitability, which further includes educating for a 'new,' more *economic* citizenship, as a direct result of changed perceptions of how to produce suitable conditions for economic growth and prosperity.

Endnotes

¹ Maude Barlow & Heather-Jane Robertson, *Class Warfare* (Toronto: Key Porter Books Ltd., 1994) 112.

² Bob Gidney, *From Hope to Harris; The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) 233.

³ Dave Johnson, "Spending Reduction," *Hansard* (September 28, 1995) 12.

⁴ Dave Johnson, "Spending Reductions," *Hansard* (September 28, 1995) 12.

Chapter One

Theoretical Framework

The purposes behind public education have typically shifted between schooling for enriched democratic citizenship and schooling as labour discipline. Accordingly, the major theoretical traditions surrounding the political economy of education that I have explored consider the political, social and cultural ramifications of shifts in education policy in terms of the different approaches to achieving these purposes. However, where the theories of democratic and/or capitalist education are pitched at high levels of abstraction, with respect to social classes, class relations, and class interests, there is a gap in terms of explaining on-the-ground issues. Moreover, where I have focused on the changes that a specific political party has made to education policy, financing, and governance, the fact that parties build coalitions across social classes creates yet another explanatory problem if I were to remain solely within these major theoretical traditions.

Therefore, given that the actors responsible for the changes to education policy in Ontario are political parties and not social classes, it is particularly important to consider how political parties are focused upon reelection, which requires that they demonstrate their leadership capabilities. One of the ways the Harris government did this was to distinguish its approach from the decade under non-Conservative leadership. Generally, it characterized the period of non-Conservative leadership as one of overspending and of poor governance, which it ultimately linked to an apparently looming economic or debt crisis. Therefore, as a case of hegemonic politics, it is accordingly useful to look at concrete on-the-ground changes in order to understand some of the implications of the Harris government's education restructuring plans. For although it appeared on the surface as though the government had shifted education policy away from citizenship and more in the direction of labour discipline,

this explanation proved to be inaccurate upon exploring the contradictions between the government's claims and its legislation. In particular, these contradictions highlighted the government's efforts to educate for a more economic citizenship and to train labour in connection with increased calculability and individual responsibility in the name of corporate profitability, trickle-down-economics and reelection. Inasmuch as my research and explorations have focused on the hegemonic politics of education restructuring under the Harris government, however, they are nevertheless informed by the major theoretical traditions that I review in this chapter. In so far as this review will help to locate my project, I will complement it with a discussion of my research question, thesis and methodology, including an explanation of some of my choices and exclusions.

Major Theoretical Traditions: the Political Economy of Education in Review

Mass education was not an accident. Rather, it was a consciously planned, political effort that grew, developed and has been continuously reformed out of conflict and struggle. These conflicts and struggles – new and old – surround the operation and contents of what we know as *public education*.

Although largely a church function until the rise and consolidation of the nation-state,¹ the dawn of modern *mass* education should be understood, at least in part, as a 'civilizing' mission for the 'new' bourgeois societies taking shape across Europe and North America. One of the features of the new cultural authority - the bourgeoisie - that Benedict Anderson highlights was the cultural shift that took place with the emergence of nationalism. Specifically, he explains how "the eighteenth century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism [and the century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism] but the dusk of religious modes of thought [in Western Europe]."² The major influences on the development

of mass education therefore include religious, nationalist, capitalist, and Enlightenment discourses. Bruce Curtis elaborates on the Enlightenment's influences on the development of public education in his book *Building the Educational State: Canada West 1836 – 1871*.

The cultural shift from religion to capitalist democracy meant “schools were seen by their proponents as outposts in the moral wilderness of popular culture, and as institutions whose social role would be to civilize and humanize a barbarous population.”³ While this cultural shift from a society ruled by religion to one ruled by secularism was neither smooth nor automatic, it was largely possible because of stringent political will and concerted efforts to educate for a different type of citizenship, in large part, through education policy. Curtis explains:

The process of educating the population in Canada West after the reforms of 1846 to 1850 involved the construction of routines and rituals of obedience. The creation in the population of new habits, attitudes, orientations, desires; the channeling of popular energy into particular regulatory forms supportive of a bourgeois social order – these were the objectives of education. Over time, these objectives have been absorbed into the texture of state schooling. They have become implicit, taken for granted, normal.⁴

Where this new social order required certain identities and relationships among the nation state, the capitalist economy and culture, the evolving public education system was instrumental in this type of production. This meant that the core purposes behind public education policy would rest with developing national “citizens” and training labour for the capitalist market economy. Therefore, inasmuch as public education was a product of a cultural shift, there was a dialectical effect where it would also help to bring about cultural change.

Yet, inasmuch as mass education would help to establish modern national capitalist economies, Clarence Karier argued that it was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century in Germany and the first half of the twentieth century in America that schools

became notably important vehicles for political and economic control.⁵ While this is perhaps subject to debate, due to limitations in terms of both time and space, most of my research has focused upon the post war period, particularly from the 1970s onwards. The history of the development of Ontario's public education system seems to fit with Karier's claims, where it was not until the late nineteenth century that high schools and collegiate institutes became truly distinct, identifiable architectural structures.⁶ And, this physical change to the school buildings themselves would attest to a growing importance in the role of and purposes behind public education during this time.

Coupled with the concurrent physical expansions to school buildings, the purposes behind mass education also expanded in connection with four key functions. First, there was a new cooperation with business and industry in assisting youths to fulfill occupational requirements. Second, schools tested and sorted students in connection with economic privilege. Third, schools served a holding function by keeping children out of the labour market. And fourth, schools were responsible for nurturing national awareness and identities. It was these four functions that guided education into its modern state and the second wave of major education policy transformation.

- THE 'SECOND WAVE' OF EDUCATION REFORM

Although education experienced change between its inception and prior to the postwar era, the postwar period was particularly significant where it marked another moment of cultural transformation that took place throughout the Western world. Characterized by, among other things, the Cold War, Keynesian Welfarism, technological advances, a more open global economy, dramatic increases in both private incomes and expenditure, and social resistance to the societal ills related to the growth in scope of the global capitalist market

economy, this cultural shift was neither immediate nor absolute. Consequently, and in connection with these and other influences, the political imagination spanned the political spectrum in terms of the types of policies that were implemented in an effort to promote capitalist economic growth and address societal needs and/or issues. However, these policies and efforts failed to bring about any radical socio-economic change, which was partially due to their existence within a capitalist culture. This is not to diminish the social advances that were made during this era (i.e. workers rights, women's liberation, greater access to higher education, and so on), but by and large, social inequalities prevailed as education or 'life chances' did not significantly improve for most people.⁷

Nonetheless, the changes in large-scale production from industrial manufacturing to more technologically-based industries, Keynesian Welfarism and changed perceptions as to the best way to foster and sustain economic growth and prosperity were especially notable for their influences on government policies, including education policies, over a twenty year period. Specifically, the combination of new technology and a more open economy meant that a greater percentage of society's labour force would need to attain relatively higher levels of education. Coupled with the postwar political changes in social policy under Keynesian Welfarism, which focused on redistributing wealth by expanding and extending welfare rights to all citizens.

The content of public education was subsequently 'vocalized' and expanded in terms of its supports and provisions due to these changed ideas of how to foster economic growth and expansion. And while educating more people for longer periods of time and at higher levels was also supported in connection with welfare rights and redistributing wealth, program expansion was also about 'opening up' to a more diverse student population in

connection with concerns for social justice and meeting public needs. Public education subsequently took on a superhero-like status among political campaigns and reform measures, especially in connection with crisis periods, where it was deemed to resolve major social and economic issues. While the intentions behind the changes made during this postwar era were honourable, the assumption that politicians could solve all social and economic ills by simply changing education policy was not only shortsighted and unrealistic, but it also placed the institution in a demanding and clearly untenable position. And although some significant improvements were made to public education between the mid-1950s to mid 1970s in terms of access and programming, overall, there were no radical social or economic changes on the ground. John Porter explains that,

...there is much besides luck that creates inequality of income: the rigidities of the occupational structure, the capacity of workers, manual as well as professional, to control entrance and acquire differential bargaining power and to seal off exclusive jurisdictions for themselves. No amount of educational reform can overcome these entrenched privileges.⁸

Thus, societal problems did not rest uniquely with the education system; rather, many of the socio-economic problems we faced (and continue to face) as a society go beyond institutions. Contrary to this consideration, however, it was public institutions that were attacked after the 1970s Oil Crisis for their inability to prevent the ensuing economic recession. Where the subsequent reforms following this crisis period were indicative of the beginnings of another cultural transformation, public education entered its third major and most recent wave of reform.

- THE 'THIRD WAVE' OF EDUCATION REFORM

Where the New Right subsequently gained ascendancy in political leadership positions, the 1980s, in many countries in the Western world, unfolded with a series of

attacks on the public sector in connection with debt and ‘overspending.’ Although the Welfare state has by no means completely disappeared, its policies and its conceptualization of a public good have been increasingly challenged by the shift to post-Fordism, which has seen a “major reorientation of social policy: away from redistributive concerns based on expanding welfare rights in a nation-state towards more productivist and cost-saving concerns in an open economy.”⁹ Where these policies have issued attacks on the public sector, post-Fordism can also be linked with the creation of neoliberal states and international institutions and moreover, with another cultural transformation.

To reiterate from above, no cultural transformation is absolute or immediate. Furthermore and not unlike the context surrounding the initiation of public education, conscious political efforts were made to activate and “encourage” this cultural shift. And, where these shifts typically followed some type of crisis or political upheaval, it is possible to trace the beginning of the shift away from Welfarism and towards more “Right” wing policies to the economic downturn following the 1973 Oil Crisis. Although it was linked to the Oil Crisis, the subsequent cultural shift occurred because of a political shift. Specifically, the ‘New Right’¹⁰ successfully campaigned on the explanation that the economic fall-out, including the recession, high inflation, the decline in both consumerism and productivity, and the increased unemployment, stemmed from leftist welfare policies. And, as Shields and Evans explain, the ‘New Right’s’ success led to a major reorientation of the state and its relationships to the public and the market. They write:

The declining political capacity of Keynesianism’s administrative state contributed to a fundamental reconsideration of the overly optimistic assumptions regarding the capacity of the state to affect and manage the postwar political economy. Consequently, the administrative state was increasingly identified as failing to solve social problems and as contributing to the politicization of social issues and programs. The New Right maintained that this produced overly powerful and unaccountable

public managers and politicians, and that it protected professional incompetence, condoned fiscal mismanagement and stifled public participation and open decision-making. In short, the New Right drew a sharp distinction that counterposed the market's effectiveness and efficiency to allocate resources with those of the politically-driven welfare state.¹¹

Unable to prevent an economic crisis, the Right reoriented the state to encourage greater 'independence,' increased cost-efficiency, enhanced fiscal surveillance and a marketized public sector that would be both more streamlined and more fiscally responsible. These changes were made, according to Bob Jessop, in light of changed ideas of the "conditions making for economic expansion." He writes:

...as the crisis of the Keynesian Welfare State unfolded and efforts to restore the conditions for postwar growth through economic austerity and social retrenchment failed, the emphasis shifted to attempts to restructure and reorient the state in light of significantly changed perceptions of the conditions making for economic expansion.¹²

In addition to the "marketization" of the public sector, these changed perceptions of the conditions "making for economic expansion" would serve to pare down the former structural supports of the "long postwar boom."¹³ Public education was clearly not exempt from neoliberalism where it would undergo policy reform that would see it increasingly operate under the guise of marketization and 'pared down.'

Inasmuch as neoliberal policies and approaches differ among nations, regions within nations, and communities within regions, they have not gone unchallenged. Rather, civil society groups have been equally diverse and strategic in their challenges and opposition to neoliberalism. However, where a common effect of this shift into a more neoliberal, decreasingly welfare, orientated states has been to centralize more government control, the public voice and ability to affect political change has also been markedly threatened. John Shields and B. Mitchell Evans explain some of the common purposes or justifications

behind, as well as other common effects from, a neoliberal approach. In particular, they highlight the concept of “marketization”

... as the proper means of reintroducing effectiveness and efficiency into the public sector. The fundamental principles of the state marketization thesis are the conversion of citizens into customers and the commodification of public goods. The restructuring of the public sector through privatization, commercialization and contracting out provides the means for imposing market discipline upon public sector organizations by demanding competitive delivery of public services and establishing trends towards user pay systems, economic incentives for improved efficiency and more stringent financial accountability.¹⁴

While these changes should not be understood as either absolute or monolithic, there has been a shift in the assumptions about the role of government and the rights of citizens under the guise of neoliberalism.¹⁵

Although neoliberalism - loosely defined - appears to have affected Canadian policies more incrementally than in the U.K., the U.S.A. and New Zealand, the reform strategies under the Harris government’s Common Sense Revolution (CSR) were anything but incremental. In many respects, the Harris government education reforms appear to fall under the rubric of neoliberalism, where the education system has been restructured along principles of “efficiency,” competition and stringent financial “accountability.” At the same time, given that no shift is absolute, neoliberalism alone does not accurately capture the Harris government’s entire approach to restructuring Ontario’s public education system.

Michael Peters claims the impacts of neoliberalism on public education have required heavy investments for economic growth by “redesigning the system so that it meets the needs of business and industry.”¹⁶ The Harris government, however, has actually *divested* from, as opposed to *invested* in, the education system as a whole with a view to securing increased foreign investment and restoring postwar levels of corporate profits by reducing public expenditure and lowering tax rates. However, while Peters is silent about reducing

expenditure on education in the name of providing tax cuts, for example, we still need to address these measures as means to an end that is concerned with a narrow perception of economic growth and prosperity in terms of corporate profitability and trickle-down-economics.

Restructuring public education with privatization initiatives has not only profited corporations in terms of the lower tax rates, these initiatives have also helped to create and/or expand the market in education where reduced public expenditure has resulted in a reduction in education provisions and services. And importantly, these privatization initiatives have helped to dilute or redesign public education's former purposes which, based on past trends, would suggest that we are entering a third wave of education reform in connection with another cultural shift. Especially considering the large-scale public protests, strikes and walkouts, conditions under the Harris government are reminiscent of the shift that took place with the inception of mass education and the second wave of education reform. Where these cultural shifts have been neither smooth nor automatic and typically require stringent political will in order to make comprehensive and lasting change, there is evidence that we are in the midst of another cultural shift. This time, however, we appear to be shifting away from the public good and towards a society that places a greater emphasis on individualism and a specific type of "freedom to," the latter of which Jane Kelsey explains as

[allowing] every individual to determine her or his own behaviour and destiny, [but does] not [include the] freedom to enjoy positive outcomes....Inequality is accepted as an inevitable and necessary condition of a free market in which there is no predictability, and of a society where progress is achieved by providing rewards for initiative.¹⁷

The freedom Kelsey refers to is seemingly enshrined in the Harris reforms to public education where the government explained that *clarifying* the graduation and course

requirements was necessary for improving student achievement. More specifically, by clearly outlining the required learning criteria, the success or failure in meeting these requirements would rest in students' hands. This philosophy not only assumes testing and education are neutral and objective, it also connects with Peter Miller's work surrounding the increasingly Western phenomenon to create the economic "calculating" citizen by making more public spaces quantifiable and therefore, "calculable."¹⁸

In addition to attempting to institutionalize this individual *freedom to*, the Harris government also claimed to address a 'freedom from,' that is, a freedom from an economic crisis and/or the burden of *over*-taxation by reducing public funding for education and providing tax cuts. Yet, while the government has been recently accused of inadequately funding public education in Ontario, it is important to note that fiscal retrenchment in public education actually began under the Davis Conservative government around 1975. In particular, Bob Gidney's work was helpful in explaining much of the context surrounding some of the history of education funding.¹⁹ I also looked at Paul Axelrod's *Scholars and Dollars* to make sense of and understand the wider context within which the province has been operating, making its decisions and developing its policies.²⁰

Where the Harris government justified making changes to education policy in light of the "economy," I interrogated its assumptions of a narrow conceptualization of the economy using Bob Jessop's work, which understands the economy from a Gramscian perspective. Jessop writes that because

...economic activity is both socially embedded and socially regulated, an adequate account of the economy must adopt an "integral approach...to paraphrase Gramsci, the "economy in its inclusive sense." This can be defined as comprising an "accumulation regime + mode of social regulation." The state is in an important structural and strategic force in this regard and has major roles in securing the expanded reproduction and regulation of capitalism.²¹

Therefore, where the Harris government completely divorced all social considerations from its conceptualization of the economy, this narrow understanding has allowed it to reduce public expenditure on public education and has likely narrowed the education provisions and services in the name of a prosperous “economy.” In other words, public education (as well as public institutions in general) has been restructured based on a surface or narrow understanding of its roles and relationships in and to society and in connection with a view to restoring corporate profitability and a belief in trickle-down-economics.

Convinced of clear distinctions among financing, education provisions and socio-economic inequality, the Harris government’s narrow dollars-and-cents understanding of the economy is perhaps most evident in its quest to make education “more affordable” through (cost-) *efficiency* measures. Yet, where the government made cost-efficiency a goal of public education restructuring, Janice Gross Stein’s work helps to explain some of the particular problems in applying such an approach to a public institution.²² Although she distinguishes different types of efficiency, she makes the argument that cost-efficiency should not made an end in itself. In restructuring it represents a method for resource allocation in the process of achieving goals, but should not be made a goal on its own.²³ Gross Stein emphasizes that before we decide on the means or instruments to an end, we need to establish what the end or goal is. From there she explains that we need to ask a number of questions, and specifically whether we are accomplishing what we set out to accomplish. In other words, we need to assess the effectiveness of our methods for achieving goals. She writes:

Before we can determine whether we are efficient at providing [public education] we first need to establish whether [the education] being provided is effective...Are public schools effective? We can’t answer this question until we understand the purposes of education. Effective at what? At producing literate students? At producing critical thinkers? At producing engaged young citizens? Would we want a system of public

education where the majority of our high-school students know nothing of Canadian history or values but excel at science and mathematics? What, in short, are the goals of education...in Canada? Without a discussion of these goals, we cannot even begin to talk about efficiency.²⁴

Although the Harris government outlined a mandate and three objectives to restructure the public education system in Ontario, it remained virtually silent about the purposes behind the institution. Yet, where the central goal to restructuring public education was for improved cost-efficiency, the government embraces the very situation Gross Stein warns against. Consequently, by making cost-efficiency a goal in the restructuring process, I suggest it has produced greater inefficiencies with respect to *public* education's intended purposes – to address public needs in an integral economy.

Coupled with its objective to make the education system more cost-efficient, the Harris government claimed to decentralize provincial governance or enhance local governance by removing financing powers on one hand, and downloading added responsibility and work on the other hand. With reference to Bruce Curtis' work, however, I was able to bridge the gap between improvement and power in terms of the roles that local school boards fill in their respective localities. Specifically, the government has effectively limited a school board's ability to facilitate any improvements to the education system where it has removed school boards' fundraising powers, reduced the number of elected school board trustees and enlarged the geographic areas (and therefore, the number of schools) that a given board must administer. This is especially true where this reduction in power rests within a context of inadequate funding, and an increased workload.

These are some of the sources that have helped to inform my understanding of some of the flaws and misguided assumptions in the Harris government's claims and legislative/regulatory actions under its mandate to improve the quality education by reducing

public expenditure during its first three years in office under the ministry direction of John Snobelen (the first Minister of Education and Training under the Harris government). The research question I posed accordingly looked at whether or not it was possible for the Harris government to achieve this mandate in connection with its arguments and claims. I asked this question in light of the seemingly significant body of counter claims surrounding the government's agenda, the public opposition (in terms of the large-scale protests) to its reforms to public education generally and the polarized debates in the Legislative Assembly surrounding future implications to the reform measures.

Thesis

Where the government's arguments and claims on what and how to improve the education system with less money were based upon flawed and/or misguided assumptions, I challenge the claim that it was possible for the Harris government to do more with less. Rather, it is more likely that the government has reduced the quality of public education where its restructuring agenda has extended and expanded the legacy of underfunding at the same time as it has centralized power and decentralized an increased workload. And while it seems as though the Harris reforms have diluted and/or narrowed the former purposes of public education, it would be perhaps more accurate to describe the effects of the Harris reforms in connection with educating for a different type of citizen and worker given the changed political perceptions of how to achieve economic expansion.

I explain the likelihood of the government's reform measures lowering the quality of public education with reference to the added limitations they have placed on school boards' ability to operate with public funding alone. And coupled with the reform measures for "increased local autonomy," the probability that quality of education has been diminished

increases considering that school boards' have necessarily had to focus more attention on making ends as opposed to facilitating improvements. This focus includes, for example, recruiting more volunteers, implementing user fees and accepting corporate intrusion as a means of fundraising and/or attaining the necessary education resources. Ironically, the government's changes to education funding and local education governance have likely served to increase, as opposed to decrease, the inequities among school boards as well as students where the opportunities or capacity to make ends meet will differ in connection with the localities (e.g. urban versus rural) and socio-economic issues. These circumstances have emerged, in part, from the government's centralization of power over education financing, policy and governance and its decentralization or downloading of increased work and responsibility. They also stem from the government's central concern of reducing public expenditure on education which, despite its claims, is actually part of a continuum in education reform that has seen provincially allocated education funding - as a percentage of the education costs - decrease since 1975.

Methodology

The Harris government claimed it would produce higher quality education with less public expenditure – more for less. Opposition and third parties countered the government's ability to do this, despite their agreement with and actual responsibility for the design of many of the Harris reforms. Coupled with the public protest and opposition, including the teacher strike in October of 1997, the Days of Action, and the flood of petitions to MPP offices, the evidence of competing visions of education is clear. While I cannot comment on any measurable or comparable significance in terms of how this resistance ranks in the history of opposition and protest surrounding education reform, its presence is nevertheless

indicative of heightened tension and/or contradiction in the Harris government's public sector restructuring plans, especially those directed at changing the education system.

The government's election platform promised to revolutionize the way public services would operate, and guaranteed a new type of leadership, especially in contrast to former methods of governance and leadership. Thus, where the government's overarching leadership mandate was based upon claims surrounding faults with past governance, I periodize matters in a wider context with a view of determining where and how the Harris government's approach to restructuring public education was different to those of past provincial governments. I limited my analysis, however, in connection with three core components. I looked at the restructuring mandate for public education under the first Minister of Education and Training – John Snobelen. Second, in light of the immense volume of reforms during the first three years, I limited my research to education-specific policy changes. And third, where the volume of education-specific changes was also sizeable (i.e. the *Education Quality Improvement Act, 1996* - Bill 160 - alone encompassed just under 200 pages of reforms that touched every aspect of the education system), I looked at the legislation that dominated the debates and discussions in the Ontario Legislative Assembly. Using these parameters, I specifically looked at the *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act, 1995* (Bill 30) and the *Education Improvement Act, 1996* (Bill 34) as well as components of the *Fewer School Boards Act* (Bill 104) and *Education Quality Improvement Act, 1997*.

The *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act* established the arm's-length agency that would be known as the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) and that was given the mandate to design and implement a new, more rigorous curriculum; to

design and implement mandatory province-wide standardized testing in grades 3, 6 and 10; and to report on student test results to parents, taxpayers and the ministry.²⁵ Described as a toolbox for school boards to help them find savings while enhancing their local autonomy, the *Education Improvement Act* was said to provide school boards with the ‘choice’ of whether or not to offer junior kindergarten and/or how to offer adult education.²⁶ It was also described in connection with ‘allowing for’ local solutions to the affordability issue as well as with providing for greater accountability where school boards would be *permitted* to develop cooperative agreements with other school boards, public and private organizations, groups of people and agencies and required to report on any agreements made, proposed, and not realized with an explanation of why. The *Education Improvement Act* would furthermore *permit* school boards to make “equalization payments” to the Minister of Finance (which I do not address because of the specificity of this issue to the larger boards – namely, Toronto and Ottawa-Carleton – just as I do not address the specifics related to the smaller boards or the Northern Ontario school boards, for example) and to negotiate teacher sick days.

The *Fewer School Boards Act* amalgamated the 129 school boards into 66 “district school boards,” and reduced the number of trustees from approximately 1900 to 700.²⁷ Although this act made a number of other changes related to issues surrounding school board governance, the Municipal Elections Act and a new government agency (the Education Improvement Commission), these elements were not major discussion points in the Legislative Assembly. However, because of that very observation and coupled with their implications for the nature of public education in Ontario, these aspects clearly warrant future studies.

Epitomizing the overwhelming scope of change that has taken place under the Harris government's 1st session of its 1st term of office, the *Education Quality Improvement Act* encompassed just under 200 pages of reform details.²⁸ Although its contents are too immense and complicated to review and discuss in their entirety here, the government summarized the scope of this act in a compendium document, dividing it into three major sections. Under these three major sections, the government went on to list several subheadings, which I will list here as testament to the massive undertaking that would have been required in order to address all aspects of this enormous piece of legislation, let alone its predecessor (the *Fewer School Boards Act*).

Under "Part I – Amendments to the Education Act", the government lists the following headings: Ministry of Education and Training; School Attendance; Miscellaneous; District School Boards; School Authorities – Roman Catholic; Extension of Roman Catholic Elementary Schools; School Authorities – Protestant; Boards; Board Members – Qualifications, Resignations and Vacancies; Finance (which is further divided into six more sections from A - F); Collective Bargaining by Teachers and Boards; Supervisory Officers; Language of Instruction; Governance of French-Language Instruction; Matters related to 1997-1998 school system reform.²⁹ Parts II and III are statements of intent and enforcement, which do not contain any subheadings (I do not address these sections).

I have excluded bills that were not specifically drafted by the Ministry of Education and Training (e.g. Bill 26, *Savings and Restructuring Act, 1995*) despite their implications for the education system. I have also specifically excluded components of bills that have created new governing bodies (such as the Education Improvement Commission from Bill 104, the EQAO from Bill 30, and the Parent School Councils from Bill 160³⁰), as well as entire

education bills that surround the teaching profession (i.e. Bill 31, the *Ontario College of Teachers Act*). Exploring and discussing these dimensions would also be insurmountable with respect to the quantity and temporal limits already guiding this project. However, in highlighting these particular exclusions, they too represent relevant and important possibilities for future studies.

I have also limited my investigation of the Harris government's restructuring plans for Ontario's public education system in connection with its panels (elementary, secondary, post-secondary), its languages of instruction (English or French) and its affiliations (secular or Roman Catholic). Specifically, I elected to investigate English public secondary schooling in the areas of financing, curriculum and governance. These choices were made based on the assumptions that most secondary school students fall under English public school boards and that secondary schooling has undergone more profound changes than elementary school as a result of the changed graduation requirements, for example. For given the obvious volume of material, an adequate exploration of all the changes affecting each of the panels and different schooling options (French Public or Roman Catholic; English Public or Roman Catholic), would be equally unwieldy and immense. The fact that changes in public education have continued throughout the Harris government's leadership up to and including today, further serves to reinforce the need for specific research limitations.

Lastly, I have established temporal or periodized limits in connection with Bob Gidney's findings that provincial fiscal retrenchment began in the 1970s (under the Davis government) and the Harris government's claims that problems in education financing, etc. emerged under non-Conservative leadership (from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s). Yet, despite these aforementioned limits on my research, the purposes of my explorations and of

what I have revealed include contributing to the literature and knowledge surrounding education policy in Ontario. I have done this by highlighting some of the contradictions in the Harris government's mandate and the corresponding objectives for the public education system as a whole. This exploration not only sheds light on competing visions of education, it also points to a cultural-economic shift where the purposes of public education have been redesigned in the guise of restoring corporate profitability.

As my source of empirical evidence in terms of the government's arguments and actions, I looked at the recorded Legislative Assembly discussions and debates among the government, opposition and third parties in the Hansard. I complemented these investigations with a study of the Ministry of Education and Training's online publications in addition to its actual bills of legislation. Often providing an immediate source of contrast between what the government claimed and the actualities of its legislation, all three sources provided a comprehensive understanding of the government's arguments for restructuring the public education system to be more affordable, accountable and higher in quality with a view to improving the education system as a whole, by spending less. However, it was Lee Harvey's critical social research approach that led me to "dig beneath the surface" and to adopt a "wider context" of investigation for researching the government's arguments, as a way to interrogate its assumptions, claims, and leadership qualities.³¹ By making "critique an integral part of my research process,"³² I have aimed to "shatter the illusion of observed 'reality'"³³ that the Harris government was capable of improving the quality of public education by spending less public money. I did this by deconstructing the government's claims in light of reconstructed contexts and conditions surrounding the history of public

education financing, policy and governance, all of which necessitated “materially grounding” my research by locating it in its historical contexts.³⁴

As a “process of constant engagement with ‘neutrally’ coded messages and taken-for-granted knowledge,”³⁵ I specifically researched the Harris reforms to public education with reference to Harvey’s ideas of the case study and radical historicism – two of the critical social research approaches he outlines. The Harris reforms to public education serve as a particular case study in terms of the general plans for Ontario public sector restructuring and more specifically, as a piece of the education reform continuum in Ontario and the greater global political economy. Where changes in education policy have typically held a dialectical relationship with major crises and their ensuing cultural shifts, looking at the particular and extensive changes the Harris government has made, also seem to speak to relationships among public education, citizenship and the role and/or priorities of government. As Harvey explains, “[the] case study is not the end in itself, rather it is an empirical resource for the exploration of wider questions about the nature of oppressive social structures.”³⁶

In connection with Harvey’s *radical historicism*, I specifically adopted a critical perspective or worldview in my reconstruction or reconceptualization of the past surrounding education reform in Ontario and the links to the recent reforms under Mike Harris. According to Harvey, “[the] reconstruction process of history takes place alongside the structural analysis: it both informs and is informed by it.”³⁷ Likewise, in looking at the history of education financing and its operation within its wider historical context, I deconstruct the government’s reforms that were based upon the premise that problems in the education system were essentially caused by overspending by both the province (under non-

Conservative leadership) and (self-serving) school boards. I am able to reconceptualize the history of education financing by exploring a wider historical context, which helped to explain, for example, how provincial funding could both increase in amount yet decrease as a percentage of the total education costs. Thus, as a project that “shuttles back and forth between concepts and data, structure and part, past and present, theory and practice,” I have aimed to contribute to the continual process of knowledge development surrounding public education policy, financing, governance and reform in Ontario.

Endnotes

- ¹ Clarence J. Karier, "Business values and the educational state," *Schooling and Capitalism: A Sociological Reader*, eds. Roger Dale, et al. (London, GB: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1976) 22.
- ² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (NY: Verso, 1991) 11.
- ³ Bruce Curtis, *Building the Educational State: Canada West, 1836-1871* (London: The Falmer Press, 1988) 370.
- ⁴ Curtis, 366.
- ⁵ Karier, 22.
- ⁶ R.D. Gidney & W.P.J. Millar, *Inventing Secondary Education: The Rise of High School in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990) 296.
- ⁷ Brown, 397.
- ⁸ John Porter, *The Measure of Canadian Society: Education, Equality and Opportunity* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1987) 253.
- ⁹ Bob Jessop, "Towards a Schumpeterian Workfare State? Preliminary Remarks on Post-Fordist Political Economy," *Studies in Political Economy* (Vol.40, Spring 1993) 17-18.
- ¹⁰ With reference to Terry Wotherspoon, the "New Right" is understood as "an amalgam of disparate forces such as the pro-family movement, business lobbyists, opponents of the welfare state, neo-liberal and neo-conservative groups, and other populist forces that seek to return to 'traditional' values." Terry Wotherspoon, "Contemporary Educational Challenges and Reforms," *The Sociology of Education* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998) 198.
- ¹¹ John Shields and B. Mitchell Evans, *Shrinking the State: Globalization and Public Administration "Reform"* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 1998) 54.
- ¹² Bob Jessop, "Towards a Schumpeterian Workfare State? Preliminary Remarks on Post-Fordist Political Economy," *Studies in Political Economy* (Vol.40, Spring 1993) 9.
- ¹³ Bob Jessop, "Towards a Schumpeterian Workfare State? Preliminary Remarks on Post-Fordist Political Economy," *Studies in Political Economy* (Vol.40, Spring 1993) 9.
- ¹⁴ John Shields and B. Mitchell Evans, *Shrinking the State: Globalization and Public Administration "Reform"* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 1998) 56.
- ¹⁵ Janine Brodie, cited in John Shields and B. Mitchell Evans, *Shrinking the State: Globalization and Public Administration "Reform"* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 1998) 55.
- ¹⁶ Michael Peters, "Foucault, Discourse and Education: Neoliberal Governmentality," *Post-Structuralism, Politics and Education*, eds. Henry Giroux and Paulo Freire (USA: Bergin & Garvey, 1996) 89.
- ¹⁷ Jane Kelsey cited in John Shields and B. Mitchell Evans, *Shrinking the State: Globalization and Public Administration "Reform"* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 1998) 80.
- ¹⁸ Peter Miller, "Accounting and Objectivity: The Invention of Calculating Selves and Calculable Spaces," *Rethinking Objectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).
- ¹⁹ Bob Gidney, *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

²⁰ Paul Axelrod, "More Scholar for the Dollar 1968-73," *Scholars and Dollars: Politics, Economics and the Universities of Ontario 1945-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

²¹ Bob Jessop, "Towards a Schumpeterian Workfare State? Preliminary Remarks on Post-Fordist Political Economy," *Studies in Political Economy* (Vol.40, Spring 1993) 8.

²² Janice Gross Stein, *The Cult of Efficiency* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2001).

²³ Janice Gross Stein, *The Cult of Efficiency* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2001) 68-69.

²⁴ NB – In Gross Stein's original discussion, she discuss the aspect of goal setting in connection with health care and education. She mentions asking the same questions of health care to public education, however, in attempts to focus on education in light of this project, I replaced the initial entries of 'health care' with 'public education' in view of shortening an already lengthy quote. See Janice Gross Stein, *The Cult of Efficiency* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2001) 70.

²⁵ Bill 30: *An Act to establish the Education Quality and Accountability Office and to amend the Education Act with respect to the Assessment of Academic Achievement*. Statutes, Ontario, 1996, chapter 11, vol. 1, 36th Legislature, 1st Session. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1997.

²⁶ Bill 34: *An Act to amend the Education Act*. Statutes, Ontario 1996, chapter 13, vol. 1, 36th Legislature, 1st Session. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1997.

²⁷ Bill 104: *An Act to improve the accountability, effectiveness and quality of Ontario's school system by permitting a reduction in the number of school boards, establishing an Education Improvement Commission to oversee the transition to the new system, providing for certain matters related to elections in 1997 and making other improvements to the Education Act and the Municipal Elections Act*, Statutes, Ontario 1997, chapter 3, vol. 1, 36th Legislature, 1st Session. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1997.

²⁸ Bill 160: *An Act to reform the education system, protect classroom funding, and enhance accountability, and make other improvements consistent with the Government's education quality agenda, including improved student achievement and regulated class size*. Statutes, Ontario 1996, chapter 31, vol. 2, 36th Legislature, 1st Session. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1997.

²⁹ Ministry of Education and Training, (1997) "Education Quality Improvement Act, 1997: COMPENDIUM," [online] available at: <http://mettowas21.edu.gov.on.ca:80/> [January 30, 2001].

³⁰ In reality, "Parent School Councils" were established by the NDP government just prior to the Harris government's coming to office, which is another reason I declined in looking at this measure for 'greater accountability'.

³¹ Lee Harvey, "Basics," *Critical Social Research* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990) 1.

³² Harvey, 3.

³³ Harvey, 196.

³⁴ Harvey, 4.

³⁵ Harvey, 212.

³⁶ Harvey, 202.

³⁷ Harvey 202.

Chapter Two

More Affordability through Measures for Greater Cost-Efficiency: Increased Private Expenditure, Decreased Public Expenditure

Generally, the Harris government argued that it would be necessary to restructure the public education system in connection with three main, interrelated objectives: more affordability, greater accountability and higher quality. The purpose of this chapter is to explore and consider the government's arguments for restructuring the education system in light of the need for *more* "affordability." I will address the government's arguments surrounding accountability in this chapter as well as in chapter three, where the goal for greater accountability is about guaranteeing affordability *and* quality in education. The government's arguments surrounding the need to improve the quality of education in Ontario will be addressed in chapter three. All of these arguments are explicitly and implicitly interrelated, however, which helps to explain the overlap between chapters two and three in terms of some and/or components of bills discussed. Notably, many of the Harris government's arguments for more affordability and higher quality education were made in connection with the same pieces of legislation.

The government's initiatives for more affordability in education have been generally associated with overspending and the potential for an economic crisis. Specifically, it claimed that the province had been overspending on education, as had the education "bureaucracy" or administration. Moreover, all of this 'overspending' had apparently benefited the *outside* classroom sphere to the exclusion of the inside of the classroom or students. Where the Harris government claimed these circumstances were evidence of "poor" governance under non-Conservative leadership, it distinguished and highlighted the benefits of its Conservative leadership and governance proposals in contrast to these

problematic conditions. It also explained the need to address the overspending issue with a degree of urgency where overspending was deemed responsible for creating a possible crisis or threat of a crisis to Ontario's regional economy by virtue of the accumulated debt.

Therefore, I will begin with a discussion of overspending in connection with the implications behind forecasting a possible crisis and the specifics of the government's claims surrounding this threat. Although I follow this discussion with an explanation as to how and why the government was misguided in its assessment of both the source and reasons for problems with the education system, I go on to address some of the government's other arguments for more affordability through efficiency and greater accountability. This chapter concludes, however, with a deconstruction of these other arguments by highlighting the contradictions between the government's claims and the reality of its legislation due to flawed assumptions, narrow frames of reference, and/or surface analyses.

The Context of Overspending: Threats of an Economic Crisis

We have been spending beyond our means. As evidence, in 1995, the newly elected Harris government pointed to the provincial debt.

Government spending has doubled over the past 10 years and our debt has almost tripled, to a total of nearly \$100 billion. When we took office in June, we found the real deficit was \$10.6 billion. Clearly, this is not sustainable. This year alone, the province will spend nearly \$9 billion on interest costs.¹

The government attributed this debt to the former Liberal and NDP governments' fiscal mismanagement and overspending. Furthermore, it is to this triad of debt, mismanagement and overspending that the Harris government claimed to be responding through its public sector restructuring plans. Conservative MPP Baird for Nepean explained that the Harris government:

...wouldn't be in this position of having to try to balance the budget if [it] didn't have governments that over the last 10 years spent like drunken sailors, put this province in a terrible financial mess, taxed us to death, killed jobs. [The Harris government] wouldn't be in this situation if we weren't governed so badly over the last 10 years. That is the real point that's got to be put on the table, that we wouldn't be in this situation if it weren't for the bad government over the last 10 years.²

And thus, as one of the highest spending institutions, public education was given a central role in the Harris government's restructuring plans to reduce public spending on public institutions.

Based on the assumption that the education system had been overspending, the government promised to develop a more *affordable* system through cost-efficiency measures and greater accountability. Described in terms of a win-win situation, the government's plans to make the education system more cost-efficient would allow for more public money to be spent inside the classroom *and* for a reduction in tax rates. The former condition would serve to improve the quality of education for students. The latter affect would help to increase consumer purchasing power as well as corporate profits, and, based on beliefs in trickle down economics, it would boost the economy and create more jobs. At the same time, the government was concerned with developing an education system that would be more accountable in terms of ensuring sustained *value*, that is, affordability *and* higher quality education. And third, the government argued its reforms would improve the *quality* of education in connection with both affordability and accountability. Accordingly, the government has worked to change the way the system as a whole operated by making changes to the system's financing and governance.

The case against the current education system began with the government pointing to a series of comparative analyses. One of the first comparisons said to indicate overspending in education highlighted links between test results and per pupil spending. For example, the

government concluded that Ontario had been overspending where the other provinces produced the same and/or better student achievement results while spending less public money.

We spend close to \$1 billion more than the average of the other provinces, which comes to approximately \$500 more per child in Ontario. Yet judging by Ontario's results in national tests, student achievement in Ontario is not much better than in the other provinces. Clearly it is spending beyond our means, not underfunding, that...threatens the futures of Ontario students.³

Where the Harris government made the average amount that the other provinces spent the standard, the fact that Ontario was shown to exceed this standard, coupled with the debt, had apparently generated dire consequences for Ontario students' in terms of their futures.⁴

Another Conservative MPP cited a lack of international and national academic awards as an indication of overspending in Ontario. Tim Hudak posed the question that if "our students are not winning their share of awards internationally or even in Canada, what do we have on our mantle to show for our spending over the past 10 years?"⁵ The government went on to explain this perplexing situation in connection with the division between education spending inside and outside the classroom, where expenditure had been overly concentrated in the latter and insufficient in the former.

These circumstances, the government claimed, were why it would have to make some "tough" decisions. And, according to John Snobelen – the Harris government's first Minister of Education and Training – these tough decisions would have to come sooner rather than later considering that every day it delayed reform, it would be further limiting young people's horizons in Ontario.⁶ Some of the tough decisions Snobelen was referring to surrounded the affordability objective, which would see a reduction in public expenditure on public education in light of the past decade of apparently spending beyond our means. Yet as

“tough” as these cuts to public spending on education might be, Snobelen assured the public that everything it had done was in the best interests of students.

The government is committed to working with its public sector partners to ensure that the people, especially the children of our province enjoy public services that are not only excellent but also efficient and affordable. We want students in our schools to have the best education. We want them to be able to use that education in a prosperous future, rather than find themselves entangled in a massive public debt... Some of the choices are difficult but we owe it to our children to make these choices, which have been too long postponed.⁷

In other words, focusing on students/children’s interests would mean taking the necessary steps to avoid a future crisis, even if one of those steps involved cutting education spending. Moreover, this relationship between the potential for crisis and students’ interests not only supported the government’s plans to restructure the education system to operate with lower costs, it further helped to justify immediate action. In response to a potential debt crisis, the Harris government outlined its mandate to safeguard public services for future generations by reducing public expenditure on education, for example, through the *Education Amendment Act* (which will be discussed in more depth later in the chapter). John Snobelen explained:

...I believe [the *Education Amendment Act*] is good news for the young people of Ontario because this education system in Ontario must be accountable, must be high quality, but most importantly, it must also be affordable so we can protect the social services that those young people will come to depend on in this province, as I have in my lifetime.⁸

Yet, inasmuch as these restructuring plans to make the education system “more affordable” were necessary with regard to students’ futures, the government also claimed to be concerned for Ontario taxpayers and the regional market economy. Specifically, past Ontario governments had over-taxed Ontarians by overspending and, based on the Harris government’s perceptions of how to foster economic expansion and job creation, they were indirectly responsible for “killing” thousands of jobs. In summary, the Harris government

claimed that it was necessary to restructure public education in order to create a “better education system that [would meet] the needs of the people it [served]: the children in our schools and the taxpayers of Ontario.”⁹

MPP and cabinet minister Dave Johnson explained the dismal conditions that “future taxpayers” in Ontario would face should Ontario continue to *overspend*:

The real issue behind these [cost-cutting initiatives] is simply this: Can we continue to spend beyond our means today and expect future taxpayers to pay for the services we use today? How will we be judged five, 10 or 20 years from now by Ontario residents who must not only pay for their own health care, education and social services but will also pay for the debt we pile on today?”¹⁰

Seemingly, there was little room for debate or discussion based on Johnson’s presentation of the choices between cuts to public services, or ruin. However, this no-choice situation would understandably speak volumes to parents given that it would be their children who would supposedly be forced to grapple with the disaster and the ensuing economic instability. Again, where the government framed the public’s “choices” in either-or terms, there was really no choice but to reduce public expenditure.

Although a prediction is just that - a prediction, which may or may not actually transpire - forecasting a crisis in connection with the market economy was particularly powerful for at least three reasons. First, the Harris government did not speak of its prediction as one of many possibilities. Rather, the scenario presented to parents and taxpayers was very clear cut and definite: should we continue to overspend, Ontarians would experience an economic crisis. An economic recession marked by high unemployment, no social safety net, and high taxes would ensue. Second, part of the government’s air of certainty could be related to a combination of inculcating fear and hope. For inasmuch as people would be fearful of an economic crisis and subsequent economic downturn in light of

recent memories of crises followed by recessions during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, by virtue of the significant rise in the middle class's prosperity and purchasing power during the post-war era, hope and support for focusing political efforts on restoring those post-war conditions were secured through promises of "improvement" and greater prosperity.

At the same time as the Harris reform measures were deemed to be immediately necessary, however, the crisis situation was described in manageable terms. Thus, while it conveyed a sense of urgency to restructuring the education system, the Harris government was confident of the benefits of spending less and further deemed its "affordability" measures as simple and insignificant. It explained, with reference to the Sweeney Report commissioned by the previous NDP government, that 47% of the total amount spent in Ontario's education system was spent "outside the classroom" and that realistically, this figure could be brought down to 40%.¹¹ Accordingly, we were reminded that the Harris government was only cutting 1.8%¹², 2%¹³ or 3%¹⁴ of the total \$14 billion spent on public education. Moreover, in addition to being manageable, the government promised none of its cuts would negatively affect the classroom. In other words, there were problems but there was no need to panic.

The government's plans to reduce the overall budget for public education and to reorient the spending ratio were made possible in connection with the government's conception of distinct spheres of activity and spending inside and outside the classroom. In other words, making a change in spending outside the classroom was promised not to negatively affect what happened inside it. Specifically, the government promised to eliminate waste outside the classroom through cost-efficiency mechanisms that would adjust

the size and functions of the education administration. This in turn would generate savings and make the system more affordable.

According to the Harris government, the education administration, or what it called the bureaucracy, operated outside or apart from the classroom. Described as inflated, excessive and wasteful, however, it represented a main source of overspending in the education system. And, considering the links the government established among overspending, debt and crisis, this meant that the bureaucracy, as it existed under the NDP and Liberal governments, was a cause of the crisis potential and therefore a threat to both Ontario students and taxpayers. Accordingly, school boards would need to be restructured immediately in both form and function. Yet, considering the Harris government would only be cutting up to 3% of the total education budget in its first round of budget cuts, and where all education administration/school boards were regarded as excessive and wasteful or *inefficient* in their governance and spending, the public was assured there would be no negative impact on the classroom given that these entities existed *outside* the classroom.

The Harris government claimed that the education system *needed* to be restructured along more affordable, less costly lines in order to prevent an economic crisis that was said to be looming from the decade of “overspending.” Accordingly, the government professed that its cost-efficiency measures were in the interests of both students and taxpayers alike. However, and in connection with Lee Harvey’s critical social research approach, which demands that we dig beneath the surface and take account of education spending, for example, in a wider historical context, the Harris government’s assumptions and claims were questionable. By adopting a wider context and range of considerations, we can understand an emerging tension between the provincial mandate to broaden the scope of public

education in Ontario during the early 1970s on the one hand, and a contrasting legacy of reduced funding by the province since 1975, on the other.

Continuity among the Parties: Underfunding Ontario's Public Education System

Contrary to the Harris government's assessment of the other parties simply wanting to maintain the status quo, all three parties agreed there was a fiscal situation in Ontario that had to be addressed. James Bradley the Liberal member for St. Catherines, for example, stated that:

Everyone in the House recognizes that we have to address the financial challenges that face Ontario. There isn't any doubt about that. There's a good consensus in our society that we have to face those particular financial challenges, so the argument and debate is over how we shall go about doing that.¹⁵

Yet contrary to both Bradley's claim of an existing debate over how to deal with Ontario's financial predicament, and to the government's promise to restructure in an entirely new way, public expenditure on education has been reduced by provincial governments alike for approximately twenty years prior to the Harris government's election to office in 1995.¹⁶ Specifically, as a percentage of the total education costs, provincial spending on education had been in decline since 1975.¹⁷ Furthermore, many of the financial reforms to education currently associated with the Harris government can be found in both the Liberal's 1995 red book of campaign promises and the NDP's final policy proposal.

However, inasmuch as these shared ideas surrounding specifics on how to reform the education system are noteworthy and certainly counter the government's claim that the NDP and Liberals were determined to maintain the status quo, the most important point to explore for our purposes is the suggestion that the province had not been overspending under the NDP and Liberals as the Harris government would have us believe. Rather, upon deeper investigation of a wider context, these former non-Conservative governments were

responsible for reducing public expenditure on education as the Harris government has done more recently. This finding was particularly important to explore in light of the Harris government's fundamental rationale for restructuring public education to operate with less public expenditure, which was based upon the premise that the former NDP and Liberals had been "overspending." This characterization of a past of overspending was also an integral part of the Harris government's campaign with regards to its "distinct" leadership qualities and approach.

The Harris government blamed the problems it faced on the provincial governance under the Liberals and the NDP as a direct result of their overspending. Some government members went so far as to accuse these former governments of "reckless overspending."¹⁸ If one were to look at the recent history of provincial funding under the Liberals and the NDP out of context, the Harris government might seem correct in its findings. On the surface, provincial expenditures on education did increase substantially under these governments. However, if we look beneath the surface in connection with the particularities of the time and context, we encounter a much different understanding of the history of education funding in Ontario. Specifically, we discover that provincial expenditures, as a percentage of the education costs, actually decreased under both the Liberals and the NDP.

Provincial funding for Ontario's public education system had emerged as a core political issue by the mid-1970s. In light of the conflicting situation of increasing costs, due to rising inflation and programme expansion, the province's fiscal retrenchment essentially downloaded the responsibility for making cutbacks and/or increasing the revenue pool onto school boards. Remembering that public education in Ontario, until the recent Harris reforms, had been jointly funded by the province *and* local municipalities, we can begin to

understand the complications that arose with education financing by exploring the divisions of who funded what percentage of the education costs and how.

Municipalities paid for their portion of education funding through a combination of residential and industrial/commercial property taxes. The province, on the other hand, paid for education using “a variety of sources including provincial sales tax, levies on items like gasoline and liquor, and provincial income tax...”¹⁹ Clearly the province had access to a much larger revenue pool and, coupled with the fact that public education was a provincial jurisdiction, it seemed appropriate for the province to commit to paying for at least 60% of the education costs.

It was important for the province to pay for most (at least 60%) of the education costs for at least two interconnected reasons. Where municipal fundraising for education relied on property taxes, the more the province paid, the more equal education funding might be, given the differences in property tax revenue pools among the localities. It was also important to consider the fact that property taxes were a “consumption tax” and where proportionately speaking, the poor spent more of their income on housing, especially with respect to rental accommodation, which was typically taxed at higher rates and ironically represented the type of accommodation the poor would be most likely to inhabit as opposed to owner-occupied housing. In other words, it would seem to be in the best interests of the poor for school boards to rely less on property taxation as a source of education funding, provided that property tax rates would at least remain stable or ideally be lower for rental and/or low-income housing. However, in an era (1960-1980s) marked by expansion in terms of both student population and the provincial education mandate, education costs rose significantly, seemingly much more than the province had anticipated.

This rise in costs was due primarily to increased demands on the education system and a sharp rise in inflation. The demands increased as a result of a number of interrelated variables, including a fluctuating schooled population, societal changes and an expanded education mandate. Although the size of the schooling population has fluctuated over the past thirty years, it has generally increased in connection with the baby-boom and its echo, changed immigration policies, and a broader education mandate. At the very least, all of these variables have led to a more diverse classroom with respect to ethnicity, first language, religion, mental and physical abilities, and socio-economic backgrounds.

The baby boom, for example, had a series of implications for the education system in terms of the numbers of students entering and exiting the education system at the same time. Where the first phase of the baby-boom was notable for its significant increase in demands on all aspects of the education system, the second phase represented a corresponding decrease in the demands as this same generation of students graduated from the system. The most recent phase, however, known as the baby-boom echo where baby-boom babies have had children who began entering the education system during the late 1980s and early 1990s, has since led to another wave of increased demands on the education system.

The baby-boom effect was not the only factor responsible for increasing the size of schooled population, however. At least two other variables can be linked not only to increasing the schooled population but also, along with a third variable, they helped to notably change the composition of the classroom populations. Where increases in the schooled population created additional, more concrete demands on the education system in terms of requiring more facilities, staff and resources, changes in classroom composition generated more specialty demands. While the underlying assumption was that everyone

deserved a formal education, this was joined by recognition that not everyone learned in the same way(s) or needed the same type of education.

Generally speaking, classroom composition was altered in connection with notable changes in society. These societal changes spanned everything from changes in the notion of a family to include same-sex parents, to an increasing number of students from single-parent homes, to an increase in the number and/or awareness of students from “disfunctional” homes. Regardless of the changes, however, they would impact students’ needs in relation to learning and classroom dynamics in countless ways, which would further impact teacher training, curriculum, resources and funding needs. Coupled with these societal changes, the education system also faced added demands from Ontario’s commitment to broaden the education mandate during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Add to the broader education mandate the changes in federal immigration policy (which also contributed to schooled population growth), and one can understand how the demands on and the costs of the education system increased dramatically.

To address and accommodate these growing demands, more money would have to be invested in the research and development of curriculum, teaching methods and learning materials, for example. Add to these the rising costs of simply educating more students and a sharp rise in inflation, and we begin to understand the concurrent rise in both costs of and need for increased public expenditure on education. Yet, where the province promised it would pay for 60% of these costs, any increases in education costs meant the province would have to contribute more in funding. Seemingly, these costs rose more than the province had anticipated, as suddenly funding became a major issue, beginning with the Davis Conservative government. In order make sense of how and/or why costs rose more than the

province might have anticipated, I turn now to the context of rising inflation during the 1970s and 1980s.

In particular, Paul Axelrod's work helps to explain a number of the factors or contexts that contributed to the sharp rise in education costs and declining provincial spending from the 1970s onwards.²⁰ Although on the surface, these conditions appear to contradict one another where expenditure on education increased but provincial funding to education actually decreased, adopting a wider scope of analysis within the greater political economy helps to make sense of this contradiction among others. Specifically, I want to address how and why provincial funding for education increased, how and why property tax rates rose in a context of increased provincial funding, and how the province could simultaneously exercise fiscal retrenchment to education as of 1975. Although the first two descriptions seem to support the Harris government's claims, the latter situation challenges the government's reforms for "more affordability" and further serves to show how it was the municipalities and/or school boards as opposed to the province, who were responsible for realizing education as a more inclusive public good. The fact municipalities attempted to do this at the expense of the poor by raising property tax rates in order to compensate for the lack of funding in a context of dramatically rising education costs, however, must be largely attributed to the provincial government under Davis, Peterson and Rae.

Understanding the significant rise in education costs requires that we explore the context of rising inflation. Axelrod begins his narrative of rising inflation in Canada with the investment shift in the major economic mode of production, from manufacturing to industrial technology, during the post-war years.²¹ Where this investment shift focused on non-human, as opposed to human, capital, the effect of these structural changes within industry, which

began to be felt by the late 1960s and early 70s, was a marked growth in unemployment.²² Subsequently, “Canadian governments financed their own massive expansion [between 1961 and 1971]” with a view to restoring corporate profitability and combating rising unemployment levels.²³ Axelrod explains that the implications to these measures, however, were ‘spiraling’ levels of inflation. For in order to fund these government-sponsored projects, tax rates had to be raised but when program costs began to exceed public revenues, inflation soared. Thus, in response, governments capped and/or reduced public spending. Axelrod explains:

Since the private sector remained the main engine of economic growth in Canada, conventional wisdom dictated that taxing corporations too heavily would discourage private investment. On the other hand, higher taxation of individuals, whose contributions to government revenues were already far outstripping those of corporations, might inspire political discontent and further fuel inflation by pushing up wage demands to compensate for these rising taxes. By the early 1970s, the solution attempted by most governments in Canada to this dilemma was to encourage private expansion and limit public spending.²⁴

The Davis government was no exception to Axelrod’s findings and correspondingly capped its public spending, not excluding public education. However, spending caps resulted in an almost immediate contradiction to the recent provincial commitment to realize a broader education mandate, which translated into increased demands and a corresponding increase in costs. In other words, where provincial spending was capped to a maximum amount as opposed to a percentage of the costs, and where education costs had risen significantly because of a provincial mandate, population increases and inflation, the end result was an actual decrease in the percentage of the government’s support for public education despite what appeared on the surface as a rise in provincial public expenditure on education.

Initially the Davis government established per-pupil-spending ceilings for all boards. However, due in part to the combination of ensuing public dissatisfaction and protests over

the provincially mandated expenditure ceilings and an upcoming election, the ceilings were lifted from mandatory status after five years.²⁵ Instead, the expenditure ceilings were maintained in the form of a “prescription,” signaling how much a board *should* be spending per pupil. Boards nevertheless retained the right to and did fundraise and spend beyond the government prescribed amounts. The province, on the other hand, would fund its portion of education expenditures in accordance with government calculations as to the costs of education. Gidney explains the overall effect of this situation:

What Ontario now had was a vigorous policy of provincial expenditure restraint *and* no direct controls on local taxes. Between 1976 and 1984, government grants to elementary and secondary education sometimes matched inflation or were set slightly above it; just as often, they fell slightly below. So government expenditure rose only modestly. With grants capped in this manner, school boards turned to their only other source of revenue, the local property tax, to meet their obligations and to meet as well what trustees conceived to be the education needs of their communities. The result was a precipitous rise in the *total* spending on the schools and a sharp shift in the source of funding...²⁶

Therefore, regardless of the actual education costs, as of 1975, the province would fund school boards with 60% of the amount *it* determined the costs of education *should* be. Where these calculations fell short of the realities in education costs due to the increased demands on the education system and the rise in inflation, school boards turned to raising property tax rates to compensate. Moreover, these attempts to compensate ultimately led to a shift in who was responsible for realizing the provincial mandate. Where school boards were unable to expand programming with the provincial grants and the then current revenue pools, they raised property tax rates. This meant that the regressive nature of property taxes would be enhanced where the poor would be taxed relatively higher than all other socio-economic groups in society.

The government's calculations of the education costs fell short of the reality of the costs where 60% percent of a lesser amount did not equal 60% of the education costs. The Davis Conservatives paid for 45% of the total education costs. This percentage of costs paid by the provinces was further maintained under the Liberals, only to fall to its lowest level under the NDP.²⁷ Yet, despite reductions in provincial funding, there has never been any type of retraction in terms of the commitment to a broader education mandate, which meant that education costs would continue to increase in connection with demands and plans for improvement. Thus, the provincial decision to pay a set amount as opposed to a percentage of the costs subsequently placed the onus on local municipalities to grapple with the decision to make cuts (to programs, staff and/or resources) and/or to raise property tax rates.²⁸ Yet, considering the socio-economic advantages that were promised with a highly educated public, and by virtue of the "needs" of a post-industrial economy that required workers to have more education given the technological advances, cutbacks were more or less inconceivable.

Thus, in attempts to meet the increasing education demands in a context of reduced provincial funding, municipalities raised property tax rates. Although less regressive than user fees, relying on property taxes to pay for the largest portion of public education costs meant students in different localities would receive different funding amounts and therefore, students would receive different degrees of education opportunity as a result. Specifically, where as much as 60% of education funding needed to come from municipalities in a context of high rates of unemployment and inflation, lower income and rural boards were especially limited in their fundraising capabilities. Consequently, funding and therefore, education programming gaps widened between rich and poor, urban and rural boards. And, to reiterate

from above, where property taxes already taxed the poor disproportionately, raising rates would only serve to exacerbate these systemic inequalities. These conditions raise the question as to how public education would help to alleviate social inequalities when those students from low-income, poor families would have to attend school on an empty stomach and/or under increased stress, for example, due to the significant reduction in incomes with the higher property tax rates.

Although the problems with education financing seemed to emerge under the Davis Conservatives, they continued through to the Harris government. In at least one sense, the Harris government was correct to blame the former NDP and Liberals for many of the conditions it faced in education when it took office in 1995. And indeed, *some* taxpayers – namely the poor – had been overburdened by property taxation in general, but particularly with the rate hikes for education funding needs. However, as these aforementioned details can attest, these conditions were not spurred by overspending under the NDP and Liberal governments. On the contrary, these former non-Conservative governments were responsible for reducing public expenditures on public education just as the Harris government has done. And as such, we can point to a stream of continuity among all three parties, which immediately challenges the Harris government's claims of applying a revolutionary approach to education financing. Moreover, where education financing has undergone a continuity of *underfunding*, a number of questions get raised about and highlight contradictions in the government's arguments surrounding the *need* to reduce public expenditure and make education "more affordable." Keeping this in mind, I will move on to discuss the government's arguments for "more affordability" through efficiency and greater accountability.

Making Public Education *more* “Affordable,” making the System *more* “Cost-Efficient”

The Harris government promised to develop an education system that “we” could *afford*. Where affordability connotes a sense of limitation in that something that is affordable rests within a set of parameters, the government claimed we had apparently been spending beyond or outside these fiscal boundaries at the expense of taxpayers and students. Therefore, an affordable education system for the Harris government would be one that would cost taxpayers less in taxes. One of the ways the government promised to bring education back among the affordability parameters was to reduce public expenditure on activities that took place “outside” the classroom (i.e. education administration) by making it *more efficient*.

The Harris government established a link between affordability and efficiency based on the assumption that a more efficient education system would lower operating costs, thereby making it more affordable. Accordingly, the government explained the main purposes of an efficient education system would be to eliminate waste and duplication in order to facilitate improved spending practices, which meant, for the Harris government, that more money should be spent “inside,” as opposed to “outside,” the classroom. And where the Harris government found that waste existed in very concrete, easily eliminated forms, its efficiency measures were correspondingly concrete and “simple.” For example, where more people were employed to do a job than it deemed necessary, the government considered this a waste of taxpayer dollars. Therefore, the solution would be “simply” to reduce the number of employees. It also found waste in productivity to time ratios where a particular operation could be completed in less time and/or could be done using less costly methods of operating, which would ultimately produce fiscal savings. Regardless of the cost-efficiency strategy,

the Harris government linked *good* governance with cost-efficient practices that would maximize the use of resources, time *and* money in order to lower costs and spend less. Based on this assumption, the government amended the current education act under the guise of cost-efficiency.

Broadly speaking, the changes the government touted in terms of affordability and eliminating waste included changes to secondary schooling, to the use of school space and to the form and functions of the education administration. These reforms that were aimed at developing a more efficient system were based upon the assumption that school boards had also been overspending where they had apparently raised property tax rates in addition to what the government had declared was an increase in provincial funding. Based on these inadequate details, school boards were described as self-interested bureaucracies that funded “educrats” as opposed to students’ education needs. And where Liberal and NDP government spending were apparently wasteful and had contributed to a growing public debt, both the province and the school boards were deemed responsible for over-taxing Ontarians and, consequently, for threatening students’ futures and causing the Ontario economy to “fall behind.”

Although the government generally attributed overspending in education to an inefficient administration, changes were also made to at least two structural components in secondary schooling. Linking the amount of time students spent in Ontario secondary schools as well as lower populated schools to waste meant these were areas inside the classroom where fiscal savings could be found or, in other words, these were areas that could be made more cost-efficient. Accordingly, the government reduced the ‘normal’ number of

years it should take students to achieve their Ontario secondary school diploma and redesigned the pupil accommodation funding formula.

In light of secondary schooling in the other provinces, the Harris government reset the secondary school completion standard from five to four years. John Snobelen claimed there was no advantage for students in Ontario to spend an extra year in high school in comparison to students in the rest of Canada.

Ontario is the only province in Canada with a 5-year secondary school system. All the available information, including research done by the Royal Commission on Learning, tells us there is no added value to the 5th year. When the 4-year program is fully implemented in 2001, savings for taxpayers will amount to some \$350 million annually.²⁹

Where there was no “added value” linked to the fifth year of secondary schooling and, more importantly, where the same job – to educate and prepare students – could apparently be done in less time, the fifth year of high school represented a waste in education spending. By making secondary schooling more efficient, the government would save taxpayer money and help to secure students’ future wellbeing.

In relation to the reduction in the amount of time students would be henceforth expected to spend in high school, the government reorganized curriculum standards at all levels. While I will address the changes to the curriculum in more depth in chapter three, they are not a main focus of this inquiry. However, it is notable here that the Harris government reorganized curriculum, in large part, to compensate for the termination of the fifth year in secondary schooling.³⁰ In other words, students in Ontario should now expect to learn ‘more’ at a younger age. On the one hand, the changes in curriculum were framed in the interests of students by providing what were described by government sources as necessarily more rigorous standards. On the other hand, the push to have students learn more

at a younger age was related to the Harris government's drive for a more cost-efficient system where maximizing the use of time, money and resources would save taxpayers money and restore corporate profitability by lowering tax rates and increasing taxpayer consumption as well as creating expanded and/or new markets with a reduction in public education services.

The suggestion to reduce the period of secondary schooling in Ontario from five to four years was not a new idea, however, and was by no means exclusively supported by the Harris government. Yet, the adjustments to the pupil accommodation grant (see Appendix A), which aimed to eliminate inefficient use of space and inefficient schools generally, were specific to the Harris government. The government redesigned the pupil accommodation grant with a view to ensuring efficient use of both physical space and resources in education facilities. Working to reduce public expenditure and alleviate some of the burden taxpayers faced, this formula proscribed a number of cost-efficiency ratios to guide school boards in organizing and operating their schools in a "less costly" manner. The government did this by reducing the costs of actually running a school (heating, electricity, maintenance and repair) down to a standard amount per square-foot. Each secondary student was then allotted a standard number of square feet plus a standardized allowance for hall and entranceway space. This funding formula accordingly made a school's facility funding dependent upon the number of students it had enrolled and registered, thereby eliminating schools deemed to be inefficient or 'too small.' The accommodation grant funding formula would also have a long-term effect on school board priorities. In particular, it would *encourage* schools within a given locality to compete for students in order to increase, or at least maintain, adequate facility funding. At the same time, it would discipline local educational administrations to be

continually aware of how they spent taxpayer dollars and to be on the constant look-out for “savings.”

Although initially this funding formula assumed 100% school operating capacity, this was later altered to 80% in November of 1998.³¹ Regardless of these operating capacity assumptions, however, this method of funding was ultimately about encouraging school boards to be more conscious about the links between space and expenditure. Where the government claimed boards had been wasteful and excessive in their spending, the pupil accommodation grant was not simply about efficient use of space, it was also about restructuring the way school boards operated.

In addition to encouraging boards to be more aware of their spending practices and use of space, the government further restructured school boards in their form or size and functions. In the following section, I will look at *Fewer School Boards Act*, the *Education Amendment Act, 1996*, and the *Education Quality Improvement Act, 1997*. All three helped to redesign local school governance in terms of its form and its functions, with the specific intentions of inculcating cost-efficient methods of operation. The *Fewer School Boards Act* reduced the number of school boards and trustees, made changes to the municipal elections act as it related to trustees, and created the *Education Improvement Commission (EIC)*,³² which was set up to monitor and aid school boards in their transitions to becoming larger “district school boards.” The *Education Amendment Act*, however, was described by government sources as a toolbox for school boards to find savings and to increase their local autonomy. And while the *Education Quality Improvement Act* was massive in scope, I review two of the changes it made to school board governance, including the switch from a

salary to an honourarium for school board trustees; and that control over tax rates was taken over by the province.

According to the Harris government, too much money has been spent outside the classroom and in the boardroom.³³ Snobelen elaborated on some of what the sphere outside the classroom included with reference to the *Education Amendment Act* and the areas in which school boards would be expected to *find* savings.

Boards will...be expected to find savings of \$65 million in 1996 by reducing expenditures on central administration, instructional supervision and custodial maintenance services. Central administration expenditures include the costs of trustees, offices of directors of education, senior administration and business functions. Instructional supervision expenditures include supervisory officers, coordinators, consultants and costs of curriculum development.³⁴

Boards were mandated to find savings to make the education system more affordable, which would necessarily relieve the Ontario taxpayer, help to restore corporate profitability and ultimately boost the market economy. “Encouraging” boards to find savings also represented one of the ways the government intended to reorient the spending ratio outside to inside the classroom, and this “encouragement” was evident in the government’s cost-efficiency measures.

Prior to the government’s restructuring plans and according to the Sweeney report, headed by former Liberal John Sweeney and commissioned by the former NDP government, 47% of education tax dollars was spent outside the classroom. Based on these figures and apparently in connection with the report’s recommendations, the Harris government promised to reorient education spending to reflect a 40:60, outside to inside spending ratio.³⁵ Although opposition and third parties were critical of the 47% figure, arguing that it in fact included components that existed inside the classroom, the government claimed they had simply misinterpreted the information. Conservative member Margaret Marland for

Mississauga South, for example, explained that while “47% of the cost education outside the classroom may well [include] teachers,” the Harris government wanted “the money spent on teachers within the classroom, not the administration of the board.”³⁶

The government assured the public that reducing expenditures outside the classroom would not have any negative effects inside the classroom; rather, the opposite would be true. Both students and taxpayers would stand to benefit from making cuts to spending outside the classroom, ultimately helping to produce a more efficient system. The Harris government claimed that reducing expenditure outside the classroom would allow the proverbial fat to rise to the surface and facilitate school boards’ own reduction of waste and duplication. Based on the assumption that this process of making the system more cost-efficient would produce savings, the government promised to reinvest the “savings” in students (on computers in the classroom, for example), as well as in taxpayers as consumers (through tax cuts).

While the benefits to students would come in the form of higher student achievement (as will be discussed in chapter three), the economic impacts of tax cuts would be, according to the government, multiple. For in addition to increasing taxpayer-as-consumer’s purchasing power (which would help to spur higher productivity levels), corporate profitability would also be restored through increased consumption and lower tax rates.

Mike Harris explained how the government would

...proceed to make sure we [moved] towards tax rates that [would be] (a) competitive and (b) [would] stimulate the economy and create the jobs and growth that we all want...Our tax cut [would] be designed to put more money into the hands of the working people of this province, to give them more purchasing power so they [could] buy cars and create jobs, so they [could] buy houses and create jobs, so they [could] stimulate job growth and creation in this province of Ontario.³⁷

These conditions were subsequently connected to students' interests in terms of providing expanded job prospects and therefore, more opportunities for recent graduates to remain in Ontario to work and raise a family.

In order to provide these purportedly necessary tax cuts and to have more money to invest in students, the government claimed it had to restructure the sphere outside the classroom (the education administration/school boards) to be more efficient and more accountable. Elaborating on its critiques of an overly bureaucratized system and generally outlining what it promised to *fix*, Conservative member Tim Hudak pointed to a seemingly incongruous growth in education costs and administrative staff in contrast with declining enrollment. He stated:

From the beginning of the 1980s to about 1991, the school-age population in Ontario dropped and the number of students enrolled increased by barely half a per cent annually, pretty much at a constant rate. Running against this trend, local government spending in education tripled, while school board employment – jobs at the board, not in the classroom – showed an average yearly increase of 2%. While population grew by 2% at the boards, remuneration increased by over 9% per year. At the same time, our secondary schools saw the number of consultants grow by 80%. The number of teachers and principals working outside the classroom has increased by 128% in that time. Obviously the minister and this government have inherited a highly bureaucratic system with between 40% and 47% of spending taking place outside the classroom, as verified by the independent Sweeney report.³⁸

Where the government equated the increases in administrative staff with excessive bureaucratic expansion, Conservative MPP Margaret Marland collaborated with MPP Hudak on a different occasion with respect to her own experiences as a trustee. She explained:

When I was a trustee between 1974 and 1978 in Peel, we were at that time the third-largest public board in Canada. We had about 73,000 or 74,000 students, as I recall. We also had, as I recall, fluctuating between eight and 10 superintendents. Well guess what? Twenty-two years later, the Peel board of Education is now the largest public board in Canada, with about 103,000 students, and they have – the last count I was told – 26 superintendents. Isn't it interesting? They have two and a half times as many superintendents and of course all the staff who tier under each superintendent's office, but not even a full third more students.³⁹

These depictions were particularly telling for the taxpayers that had been funding this supposedly inflated and self-interested bureaucracy.

Where school boards housed these “inflated” education administrations, the *Fewer School Boards Act* was designed with the specific intentions to reduce both the number of school boards and the number of trustees, which would save taxpayers “at least \$150 million” tax dollars.⁴⁰ School boards, now called “District Boards”, have been reduced in number from 129 to 66, through an amalgamation process,⁴¹ and the number of trustees has been cut by two thirds, from roughly 1900 to 700.⁴² These were among the cost-efficiency measures the Harris government used to restructure the education administration to function with fewer people, and therefore with lower costs for taxpayers.

Where the *Fewer School Boards Act* began, the *Education Quality Improvement Act* continued the government’s restructuring of local governance. With its aim to “fix” the education administration, the Harris government replaced trustees’ salaries with a \$5000 honorarium, which would serve to prevent trustees from making a career out of their positions and would also act as a filter to sort out those people who would be truly dedicated to education as opposed to the lure of a career as an “educrat.” The government also claimed that the *Education Quality Improvement Act* would allow the roles of the school board and the trustee to be redefined and restored, in part, by taking education off the residential property tax.

Since the province is now assuming the lead in setting standards for student achievement, and taking education off the residential property tax, school boards and trustees can get out of the taxation business and will now be able to concentrate on their core objective of being guardians of education in their communities. This will allow boards to renew their focus on the students in the school; to devote their efforts to student achievement, reporting and curriculum implementation... Also, we are redefining the role of the school board trustee. We want to restore trustees to their

traditional and effective role as guardians of local education.... The trustee's role will be to provide policy direction and support – not to be hand-on, day-to-day managers in the schools.⁴³

The government attested that inasmuch as these changes were made to lower administrative costs, they were also being realized in the interests of students and parents.⁴⁴

Prior to the *Education Quality Improvement Act*, school boards were responsible for funding the biggest portion of the education costs from revenues gained through property taxes. Accordingly, school boards, in conjunction with their local municipalities, would set and collect residential, industrial and commercial property taxes. These revenues would then be supplemented by provincial grants. Under this act, however, education funding was removed from the residential property tax base and made an entirely provincial responsibility. In a news release entitled “Reform to take education off property tax, meet students’ needs,” the government justified this move by claiming that residential property tax payers could no longer afford to bear the burden of funding education.⁴⁵ Notably, this was a long awaited reform for both the NDP and Liberals.

Although the Harris government rescinded school boards’ right to fundraise through property taxes, it highlighted the *Education Amendment Act* as having actually expanded a board’s role in and responsibility for education and education policy. The new powers bestowed through this act will be discussed in greater depth in chapter three in connection with increased local autonomy. However, this act is particularly relevant in this discussion with respect the ways in which the government restructured local governance to make it more affordable. Described by government sources as a “tool box” to help boards deal with increased responsibility for finding additional savings, the *Education Amendment Act* was also about making the outside of the classroom sphere more cost-efficient. Specifically, the

Harris government claimed it had enhanced school boards' roles in terms of serving both students and taxpayers by providing boards with the tools and/or responsibility to find savings and to adopt more "fiscally responsible" spending practices through the cooperative-agreements clause, for example. Snobelen explained that this clause would increase

...cooperation with other local boards and other public agencies by authorizing school boards to enter into cooperative agreements with other boards, public sector agencies and other organizations as prescribed by regulation, and [requiring] school boards to report annually on cooperative initiatives taken or explored to improve efficiency.⁴⁶

Where the Harris government linked efficiency to reducing costs, the *Education Quality Improvement Act* and the *Fewer School Boards Act* have helped to restructure school boards and the education administration to be more cost-efficient in both form and function. By amalgamating and reducing the number of boards and trustees, and by replacing trustees' salaries with an honorarium, the government has made the administration smaller and therefore, presumably, less costly. In terms of governance, while boards are no longer *required* to set and collect property taxes, they have been given the most important responsibility - to find additional savings for the benefit of their students, taxpayers and the province as a whole. These cost-efficiency measures would only guarantee sustained "affordability," or lower costs, however, through the government's measures for greater accountability.

Ensuring Efficiency, Value and Quality – Greater "Accountability" With Increased Reporting

While there are many forms of and/or ways to achieve accountability, its core purposes remain constant. Accountability, writes Gross Stein "is about evaluating performance, meeting legitimate standards, fulfilling legitimate commitments, and holding responsible those who fail to meet the standards."⁴⁷ Yet, inasmuch as these core purposes

remain the same, the content or subject that requires accountability is equally, if not more varied than the accountability measures. In terms of public education, the Harris government claimed accountability was inadequate or completely lacking for parents and taxpayers with respect to ensuring that public money was being spent *wisely* and that students were receiving *quality* education. In a bid to have Ontario produce the most “scholars” for the least amount of taxpayer “dollars,” the Harris government would provide *greater* “accountability” by making everything quantifiable and therefore, immediately calculable with a view to ‘more accurately’ evaluating a school board’s “fiscal responsibility,” an individual school’s performance, and/or the “value” taxpayers were receiving for their tax dollars based on the provincial level of student achievement, for example.

As the education financiers, taxpayers were made central to the spokes of accountability with a view to guaranteeing greater *value* by visibly showing that public education was operating in more *cost-efficient* ways. Where the Harris government outlined the standards in connection with comparative analyses between Ontario and the other provinces (such as per-pupil spending; the number of school boards and trustees; national test scores), its mechanisms for greater accountability would indicate how Ontario fared in relation to these particular standards. Although the government’s measurements were entirely extrinsic to the content of schooling, the fact that Ontario was alleged to have spent the most compared to the average of the other provinces, and yet ranked near the bottom on national standardized testing, nevertheless provided the necessary evidence for the government that Ontario had been overspending and that taxpayers lacked value for their education tax dollars.

For the Harris government, providing “better” value to taxpayers meant developing an education system that would operate with less public expenditure *and* produce higher “quality” education. This was promised in connection with increased reporting on all of school boards’ financial transactions, savings initiatives and student test results. In particular, the government highlighted Bills 34 and 30, which would require school boards to submit annual spending, financing and savings reports, and that the EQAO publish student test scores from the province-wide standardized tests in association with students’ respective schools. Where these different numbers would allow the taxpayers, for example, to evaluate school board performance in connection with its ability to meet the government’s standards, the government claimed it had fulfilled its commitments to *improve* the accountability to taxpayers, especially where it had provided increased “transparency.” By virtue of this transparency, school boards would also be immediately *motivated* to spend tax dollars wisely and become more fiscally responsible and efficient administrations. In terms of the test results reporting, the administration, as well as students and teachers, would have concrete incentives to be *more* productive where again the published results would visibly represent their efforts. In summary, the Harris government’s measures for greater accountability would increase the surveillance of public education operations to ensure that provincial standards were being met.

The government claimed it would provide accountability for efficiency through “better financial reporting by school boards to parents and taxpayers.”⁴⁸ It legislated for this improved financial reporting in at least two ways under the *Education Amendment Act* where it was made mandatory that school boards fill out a financial statement/report card and that

they report on their cooperative agreements – past, present and future. According to the ministry guide book entitled *Excellence in Education: Student-Focused Funding for Ontario*,

The government will develop a “**Financial Report Card**” which all school boards will be required to fill out each year. The report card will show in a clear and consistent way how the board spent the money it received from property tax and from provincial grants.⁴⁹

This report card, in other words, would publicly monitor a school board’s spending practices.

Yet one of the problems the government encountered upon legislating these new financial reports stemmed from formerly inconsistent ways of reporting spending, thereby making school board performance comparisons complicated.⁵⁰ Thus, in developing a new “Uniform Code of Accounts” for all school boards to use, the government claimed it would be able to “provide reliable information and improve accountability.”⁵¹ In addition to improving accountability and by virtue of being published and compared to other boards, the ‘financial report card,’ would also serve to standardize school board spending practices and foci while providing an incentive for boards to operate in “fiscally responsible” ways.

The *Education Amendment Act, 1996*, further required school boards to report on their cooperative agreements, that is, the ways in which they found and/or intended to find *additional* “savings” or how they had become more cost-efficient. Accordingly, boards should submit an annual report detailing a description of all cooperative measures initiated over the year in conjunction with an estimate of achieved savings as a result of these initiatives. These cooperative measures reports should also include

a projection of savings to be achieved by the board in future years as a result of cooperative measures taken...; a description of co-operative measures that the board is considering taking...; a description of co-operative measures permitted...that the board considered during the year but decided not to take; [and] the reasons for any decision [not to take a particular co-operative measure].⁵²

While the contents of these reports revolved around financial issues, the implications, according to the Harris government, were ultimately about producing higher quality education. Likewise to Dave Johnson's assurances that "we [would] all benefit most from a province which wisely [managed] its finances and [provided] services where they [were] truly needed,"⁵³ the same could be said of school boards and the education system.

Although the above reports were legislated as a type of guarantee for cost-efficiency or cost-effectiveness, and while the government established a relationship between cost-efficiency and higher quality education, they did not, in and of themselves, point to enhanced student achievement or, for the Harris government, better test results. Thus, the government legislated the *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act* with a view to guaranteeing 'value' and 'quality.' While many of the details surrounding this bill and its components will be more thoroughly explored in connection with higher quality education in chapter three, it is relevant briefly to explain and elaborate on some of its aspects here in terms of the type of accountability it promised to provide.

The *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act* established an arm's length agency to develop and conduct annual standardized testing in connection with a new curriculum, and to report on and publish student results from the standardized tests. However, where the Harris government connected higher quality education with improved student achievement, which would become visible with students' test results or "performance indicators," the reporting of student test results was also one of the government's ways to ensure tax dollars were being spent wisely. Specifically, test results would provide clear indications of the areas to which students in the province and/or individual schools needed to pay greater attention, which would further help school boards to use tax dollars more

effectively by directing funds where they would be *most* needed. Ultimately, spending “wisely” would lead to “better” educated students and better value for the tax dollars spent.

Based on a faulty analysis of the historical context surrounding education financing under non-Conservative leadership (one of overspending), the Harris government promised to reduce public expenditure by making the education system more efficient and more accountable in the interests of students, taxpayers and parents. However, the problems with the government’s arguments go beyond a faulty or a surface analysis. By adopting a wider context and “digging beneath the surface” of the observed realities in education financing, I reveal a number of contradictions and move to offer an alternative analysis in order to make sense of the conflicting claims and the social tensions between the Ontario government and those opposed to its reform measures. Revealing these problems is also important with respect to the implications for both the government’s mandate (to provide higher quality education by spending less public money) and its leadership (in terms of providing something different to past governments).

Contradictions in Public Education Restructuring: More Affordable for Whom?

Education financing has remained a contentious issue in Ontario politics since 1975. Yet contrary to the Harris government’s claims, the source of this contention rests with a legacy of *inadequate funding*, as opposed to overspending. As was discussed above, this marks one of many contradictions and flawed assumptions in the government’s arguments surrounding its common sense restructuring plans for public education. The following discussion elaborates on still further problems with the government’s claims, however, and raises questions concerning its agenda. Specifically, these contradictions point to restructuring plans that fundamentally challenge the purposes behind education as a public

good and, moreover, seem to support those arguments which suggest we are in the midst of another cultural shift.

Generally the contradictions and flaws in the government's arguments and assumptions emerge from its surface and/or narrow account of conditions and/or people, which ignore and/or exclude certain details over others. As a result, the Harris government's restructuring plans have been initiated in connection with an inaccurate assessment of the problems surrounding the public education system and according to a homogenous view of students, taxpayers and school boards. Consequently, these flawed foundations have produced a number of disjunctures between what the government has claimed and the realities of its education restructuring policies.

Related to its inaccurate assessment of the history of education financing were the Harris government's links among reducing public spending, job creation and producing more appropriately "skilled" workers. In one sense, the government was correct to highlight a loss of jobs that, while non-specific to the former NDP and Liberal governments, has indeed plagued the 1980s and 1990s. According to a variety of sources, *full-time* jobs have been in decline in Canada since the 1970s.⁵⁴ The government would have been even more accurate in its claims that many Ontario workers were *improperly* skilled upon entering the labour force if surviving on part-time work and reduced wages could be considered skills. However, its lack of clarification - in terms of the type of work being lost (the government simply claimed that jobs were lost in general when in fact "bad jobs" offering non-standard forms of employment have been on the rise since the 1970s⁵⁵), its misguided explanation as to why jobs have been lost (the government singularly blamed welfare, as opposed to corporate, policies), and its inaccurate claims of when the job loss began to take place (the government

claimed jobs were lost during non-Conservative leadership yet full-time work can be shown to be in decline in the early 1970s) - make its rationale for restructuring education to operate with less public expenditure in connection with job creation dubious at best.

According to Henry Veltmeyer and James Sacouman, there have been layoffs, a decline in wages, and a decline in the number of full-time jobs at the same time as there has been a “disproportionate growth of ‘bad jobs’ offering ‘non-standard’ forms of employment and conditions of work.”⁵⁶ Veltmeyer and Sacouman outline this notion of “bad – non-standard forms of employment – jobs” in connection with “part-time work schedules, short-term contracts, low rates of pay, few or no benefits, and economic insecurity.”⁵⁷ And they link the emergence of this significant rise in the number of “bad jobs” to falling rates of corporate profits during time of economic slowdown or recession. Contrary to those arguments which attribute the growth of non-standard forms of employment as a response to worker needs and choices, these conditions represent concerted efforts and strategies by both government and business to address the interests and needs of global capital, as opposed to those of workers. Veltmeyer and Sacouman’s arguments are especially convincing considering that the growth in “bad jobs” has been largely involuntary where most people working in these non-standard forms of employment and conditions of work would prefer to have full-time work with benefits.⁵⁸

A tension emerges, therefore, with the Harris government’s claims to restructure public education in connection with the “new” globalized world and the interests of students where, on the one hand, *encouraging* students to become more competitive through instituting more rigorous standards might prove useful for some in light of the limited number of full-time employment and/or “good jobs.” On the other hand, the measures

responsible for reducing public expenditure on public education have likely reduced education provisions and programmes that would have otherwise “better” equipped students for the labour market, for example. This raises yet another tension whereby the government’s mandate to reduce public expenditure on education both caters to and counters the needs of a market economy. Yet regardless of these tensions, enforcing the public education system to operate with less public revenue with a view to lowering tax rates must be considered in connection with the “bad job” creation trend. Specifically, tax cuts are another example of the political will that is focused upon restoring short-term profitability to the private sector – the “engine” of *economic* growth – in connection with short term political election interests.

Another significant disjuncture in the Harris government’s rationale for restructuring the education system arose when it promised to address the people it served – students and taxpayers. For although the government hollowed-out the concept of citizenship by emphasizing individualism and market values over social entitlements/rights, it ultimately served to produce a *different* type of citizenship. It did claim to recognize the significance of public education in educating for democratic citizenship with reference to some of its new secondary school graduation requirements, namely, a mandatory civics course and 40 hours of community service. However, this recognition seemed to be more of an adjunct in light of the complete absence of any mention of social rights among the government’s reforms to education financing and local governance, narrowly equating social citizenship with volunteering. Given that the content of schooling is directly related to funding, policy and local governance, the absence of any considerations or mention of public citizenship or social rights in the government’s education policy reforms seems to further support this condition

of hollowed-out citizenship. In contrast, taxpayers were paramount in the government's discussions of its legislation for more affordability as well as greater accountability and higher quality education. In other words, this *different* type of citizenship is seemingly concerned with educating a heightened awareness of tax rates, consumption and tracking monetary "value."

It is important to consider, however, that "citizenship is a social construction, [and] as such, it varies across not only space but also time."⁵⁹ In other words, citizenship is never static and changes in connection with "political circumstances" of a nation state or a particular region/province. Although these changes are never immediate nor simple (as was discussed in chapter one), the political circumstances in Ontario (and Canada for that matter) have largely shifted in connection with different ideas of how to foster sustained economic growth and prosperity. Correspondingly, the Harris government's public sector restructuring measures, especially those surrounding public education (which has as one of its core objectives, the responsibility to educate citizenship), reflect a "regime shift" where not just institutions, but identities, are reformed.

John Shields and Mitchell B. Evans, in their explanations of some of the major societal alterations that the Harris government policies have initiated and/or enhanced, make similar suggestions about a different kind of citizen for a different kind of society. They write, with reference to Janine Brodie that:

In the post-war period, citizenship was constructed as a concept that entailed entitlement to social rights which:

conveyed the idea that poverty was not always an individual's fault and that all citizens had the right to a basic standard of living. The general consensus underlying the creation and maintenance of the welfare state was that Canadians should not have to repeat the harsh lessons in public administration dealt out by the Great Depression of the 1930s. The postwar consensus held

that the public could enforce limits on the market, that people were not forced to engage in market activities that denied their safety or dignity, and that the national community was responsible for the basic well-being of its individual members.

In contrast, neo-liberalism redefines citizenship away from the concept of entitlement to social rights and towards the idea of the citizen as taxpayer. This reconceptualization is important, as the legitimate customer of state services is one who pays the state bill.⁶⁰

Notably, by reconceptualizing citizenship, the Harris government has altered its roles and responsibilities. The government has framed its role to address falling rates of corporate profits in the interests of the public over the need for social and economic equality, as evidenced by its marketization of the education system and its emphasis on greater individual “responsibilization.”

Jane Jenson and Susan D. Phillips elaborate on the implications of changes in citizenship and regime shifts in connection with the aspect of ‘crisis’ or a ‘crisis periods.’ Specifically, they note that “the division of labour between state and market, between public and ‘private’ and between civil society and the state are re-opened for discussion” in “moments of fundamental restructuring of the role of the state,”⁶¹ which typically follow a crisis or crisis period. The Harris government, however, has helped to change the meaning of citizenship and re-open discussions of relationships between the public and private through an *anticipated* crisis. This proves to be problematic considering that the government’s premise as to why a crisis was imminent was based upon the faulty assumption that previous government’s had been overspending. At least four additional concerns arise, however, with the government’s assessment of the public debt as a crisis indicator.

Based on the government’s actions alone, one can detect a degree of contradiction whereby reforms to reduce public expenditure were justified in connection with needing to

safeguard students' futures and pay down the debt in one instance. Yet, in another instance, the government provided a 30% tax cut. Although it argued for tax cuts as well as a reduced debt, how and/or why was the government able to provide such a substantial tax cut in the wake of such a looming threat? Perhaps it was because the government was aware that Ontario's *public* debt did not signal a future crisis; rather, and according to most economists, it was and is necessary for a stable currency. Or maybe it was based upon the understanding that money borrowed X years ago was no longer valued at the same amount next to inflation and therefore, over time, Ontario's debt would actually decrease.

Regardless of the reasons the government was able to forego paying down the debt, we also need to consider that the data the government used were constructions. In other words, the public debt is not like a mortgage, but represents what is owed to the public. Notably, the Harris government has substituted "*government*" for the concept of "*public*," citing for example, the need to reduce *government* expenditure or non-priority *government* spending and completely divorcing the concept of public from debt and spending.

These semantic choices appear to be related to the government's dichotomous thinking, where it divided and separated what would otherwise be non-separable or interrelated aspects. In particular, the government claimed that students would not be negatively affected by its funding cuts happening outside the classroom among school boards. However, in considering the government's own list of school board responsibilities, for example, it is not only clear that the spheres outside and inside the classroom affect one another, they are interdependent. The Ministry of Education and Training stated that:

School boards are responsible for:

- determining the number, size and location of schools;
- building, equipping and furnishing schools;

- providing education programs that meet the needs of the school community, including needs for special education;
- prudent management of the funds allocated by the province to support all board activities, including education programs for elementary and secondary school students, and the building and maintaining of schools;
- preparing an annual budget;
- supervising the operation of schools and their teaching programs;
- developing policy for safe arrival programs for elementary schools;
- establishing a school council at each school;
- hiring teachers and other staff;
- helping teachers improve their teaching practices;
- teacher performance;
- approving schools' textbook and learning materials choices, based on the list of approved materials provided by the Ministry of Education;
- enforcing the student attendance provisions of the Education Act; and
- ensuring schools abide by the Education Act and its regulations.⁶²

Based on this core assumption that the inside and the outside classroom spheres did not affect one another, the government essentially claimed none of these aforementioned duties on the ministry's own list were relevant to classroom activity. Therefore, the reductions in school board staff, resources and finances, and the concurrent increases in boards' responsibilities as a result of amalgamation and increased reporting were deemed by the government to be inconsequential to students and the classroom. Yet given the list above, the activities inside the classroom would not be able to take place if it were not for the work of school boards, especially considering their roles in hiring teachers, furnishing and equipping schools, and coordinating and organizing all education programs in schools. Moreover, it is dubious of the government to argue that another round of provincial government funding cutbacks, to a system that has experienced financial retrenchment since the 1970s, would be inconsequential to students and the quality of their education as a whole. The government's initiatives were not simply a case of fiscal restraint, however, especially considering the effects funding reductions have had on local governance in terms of education leadership and management.

The government has expanded a board's responsibilities and duties (through amalgamation, its measures for greater accountability, etc.) at the same time as it has reduced these larger district school boards' resources and funding. As result, there has been a domino effect in downloading an increased workload throughout the education system, which has meant that education staff inside and outside the schools have more than likely experienced a reduction in the amount of time and energy they would typically have for students.

Additional tasks for teachers, principals and support staff include ordering and organizing books and/or educational materials, taking control over the upkeep and implementation of audiovisual technology, filling out more paper work on financial transactions and student assessments, and organizing for standardized testing.⁶³ These conditions of more work with fewer resources further raise the question about the legitimacy of the government's quest to *improve* the "quality" of education *by* spending less public money.

In attempts to bridge or resolve any confusion, the Harris government equated staff and funding reductions in school board administration with efficiency. While there was nothing necessarily contradictory in reexamining the ways in which public education was administered and financed with a view of developing smoother operations, for example, there are a number of problems and conflicts with the government's arguments and assumptions surrounding its particular conception of *efficiency*. To begin, there are at least two immediate contradictions with the government's goal to make the education system more efficient and to propose to do so by reducing expenditure. Ignoring for a moment the broader education mandate that the province adopted in the early 1970s, students are not a homogeneous group. Rather, they learn in different ways, at different speeds and at different levels, and this alone makes education inherently inefficient in terms of the limited methods of teaching,

operations, goals, and program design that can be standardized and simply applied to all. Couple this with a broader mandate, however, and we have immediately committed to a monetarily expensive education system whose core purposes would be to address and recognize different needs. However, where education that recognizes different needs serves as a proactive measure in fighting crime, for example, we must look below the surface of these monetary costs. While important not to romanticize the capabilities and effects of public education, it is nevertheless important to keep its costs in wider context – namely in connection with the needs of an integral economy.

In addition to its narrow and therefore, misconceived notions of efficiency, the government was erroneous to make cost-efficiency a goal or value to be striven for upon restructuring the public education where it represents an instrument or a means to an end. As Janice Gross Stein highlights in her book *The Cult of Efficiency*, it is pointless even to discuss efficiency in relation to the public sector without a preceding discussion as to the goals and purposes behind these institutions. In other words, we cannot talk about *how* to go about doing something until we know where and/or what we are trying to accomplish. Efficiency is about goals; however, if the goal is to reduce costs, this will lead to increased inefficiencies in service, where schools, for example, will not have enough money to meet students' education needs. The government's assumptions about the links between reducing costs and efficiency are further flawed, however, where they hinge on the claim that the province had been overspending.

Additionally, the government proposed to make high schooling more efficient by eliminating the waste in terms of maximizing time and space where secondary students should spend four instead of five years to complete their diplomas, and inefficient schools

should be closed. The government legislated these measures in connection with producing *savings* for taxpayers. However, like students, taxpayers are not a homogenous group as the government seemed to suggest and as such, the savings the government claimed to offer taxpayers would be received differently, depending on the tax bracket of a particular taxpayer – the bigger the bracket, the more money returned.

In ways similar to tax cuts affecting a heterogeneous group of taxpayers differently, the reform to reduce secondary school from five to four years will conceivably affect students in different ways given their socio-economic differences. Specifically, post-secondary education expenses have not only been downloaded into private hands sooner, private individuals/families have further been required to pay more of the costs for education. Thus, reducing the amount of public schooling students in Ontario receive represents one of the ways the government has privatized public education and the public sector in general. The public and private sectors are not “dichotomous, readily separable entities”; rather, they should be understood as “interpenetrating and complex categories that shift over time in relation to content and degree of separation.”⁶⁴ The government’s use of privatization initiatives to restructure public education was revealing of an agenda motivated beyond spending reductions. Specifically, the Harris government’s education reforms would change “the expectations as well as the rights and responsibilities of workers or citizens [and students], more generally.”⁶⁵

The government’s efficiency measures have also weeded out “inefficient” schools, that is, those schools with smaller student populations, by redesigning the funding formula under the pupil accommodation grant. Although the government does not explicitly assign a specific number of students per school to distinguish between efficient and inefficient

schools, this is implicit in the formula which, according to Hugh MacKenzie, Research Director at United Steel Workers of America, works from benchmarks as opposed to the needs of the system. MacKenzie explains further:

In determining how much space [the government] would fund, instead of funding the actual number of square feet that a board has to operate in order to accommodate its students, it funds a fixed number of square feet per elementary student and a fixed number of square feet for each secondary student. In that fixed number of square feet, there is a standardized allowance for hall space and entrance way space etc.⁶⁶

The problems with the government's methods of determining its standardized funding formulas, by standardizing the square foot funding amount, for example, came to light in the court challenge to the *Education Quality Improvement Act, 1997* that was initiated by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association and the Ontario Public School Boards' Association. Of the 396 sections to the Education Quality Improvement Act, the two groups challenged 14 aspects, which were further boiled down into six issues by the judge. These six issues include the funding and tax system as it applies to public schools; the Minister's authority to supervise all boards in financial difficulty; that the Education Quality Improvement Act infringed upon the constitutional right of public schools; the authority of the government to regulate all school boards in regard to things like school councils, class size, trustee honorariums and tax rates; the authority of the Minister of Finance to set local tax rates for school purposes; and the right of separate school boards only to levy taxes on their own supporters.⁶⁷ Although the judge upheld the government's position on five of these issues (the latter issue went in favour of the complainants), the government nonetheless revealed a number of insightful details pertaining to its financial reforms. Specifically, it was revealed that the government had taken the median of all the boards in terms of their facility operating costs (heating, hydro, etc.). From this median figure, the Harris government

proceeded to reduce it to a per square foot amount and while initially based upon a 100% operating capacity and later amended to an 80% student population, the government went on to standardize the number of square feet per secondary student.⁶⁸ MacKenzie explains the significance to understanding how the government developed its funding formula and the standardized figures that would ultimately determine how much a given school would receive for operating its facility when he demonstrates how these standardized amounts would translate into 20 school boards being underfunded by a \$1.00 or more per square foot.⁶⁹

MacKenzie further elaborates on the implications of this situation in a piece that reviews the problems in the government's funding policy in the *Education Quality Improvement Act*, with reference to information presented by the government to the courts in its defense of the *Education Quality Improvement Act* constitutional challenge. He explains how, despite the revised pupil accommodation formula, which now assumes 80% capacity in schools, as opposed to 100%, the government admittedly ignores differences among the boards. He writes:

What is even more disturbing is that the government has admitted in cross-examination in the Bill 160 case that it did not even consider such factors as differences in pay and benefits for custodial staff among boards or among communities, differences in heating costs or differences in building design. According to the provincial government, the facts – that labour costs are higher in large urban areas in Ontario or that older buildings with high ceilings and poor insulation are more costly to heat – are irrelevant in determining school operating costs.

However, as school boards across Ontario have been experiencing, these differences are relevant to not just operating schools but to the content and provisions of public secondary schooling. The consequences will likely come in the form of increased inequities among boards, where those boards whose costs are not covered by the accommodation grant, will be forced to either cut education programming (i.e. junior kindergarten) or close select schools.

In terms of the latter case, students would then be bussed out of their communities to other more *efficient* schools. Terry Wotherspoon explains that while closing schools with “low” enrolment, or increasing class sizes or tuition fees, or prioritizing education programs that contribute to high student achievement and employment may make “economic” sense based on a narrow “cost-benefit” analysis, “[viewed] in pedagogical and social terms...educational reform and decision-making are much more complex matters that are often compounded by uncertain or conflicting evidence.”⁷⁰

Disregarding the roles school facilities play in smaller communities outside schooling is an example of both the complexity surrounding public education and of contradiction in the government’s education reform policies. Where small community school closures represent a loss of community space, the government’s emphasis on cooperation among schools and the larger community (namely in the *Education Amendment Act*) becomes suspect. Furthermore, closing a small school that is supposedly *inefficient* in light of the government’s narrow or surface definitions of the economy and efficiency has also meant that many of the community’s part-time workers, for example, will no longer be available after school where they will have to be bussed to and from another town or county.

Highlighting the government’s seemingly surface understanding of the roles education and schools play in Ontario communities, combined with its ignorance of the diversity of taxpayers, students and communities, suggest that the entire system has been restructured around an agenda that is not necessarily focused upon public education’s intended purposes (to educate for democratic citizenship and labour discipline). Rather, it appears the government has restructured public education more in concert with concerns for restoring corporate profitability. And where this pupil accommodation grant is one of many

measures that has also served to fundamentally alter the form and function of local governance, it has specifically helped to direct an increasing amount of a school board's time, energy and resources towards budget and finance issues as opposed to improving the quality of education.

Other measures working to redesign school board governance goals and focus stem from the government's assumptions surrounding its provisions for greater accountability. Where the government aimed to ensure taxpayers' education tax dollars would be spent "wisely," it legislated for increased reporting to both the government and the public. Given that these reports would be exclusively focused on where and how a board spent its public funding, coupled with a detailed account of the savings it had found through cooperative agreements (past, present and future) there is little question as to the government's priorities. And in making these reports mandatory, the Harris government has essentially redesigned local governance to adopt its focus on reducing public expenditure in the interests of capital. As a result, school boards have been forced to rely on the voluntary sector, corporate intrusion (partnerships) and/or to make cuts to *non-priority* education programming, provisions or staff in order to meet the government-imposed standards of "fiscal responsibility" and "cost-efficiency."

Although the cooperative agreements clause in the *Education Amendment Act* has been praised by all three political parties, and has been noted for the benefits it would bring with increased cooperation among boards in terms of bussing, this clause allows for cooperation among more than other boards. Where the third point in the *Education Amendment Act*'s "explanatory note" explains that "School Boards will be permitted to enter into agreements to co-operate with other school boards and with municipalities, hospitals,

universities, colleges and *other prescribed persons or organizations*, for certain purposes...” (italics added), a board now has the *option* to “choose” corporate sponsorship and/or corporate means of fundraising. Given the context of inadequate funding, many boards have already come to depend upon what may appear to be lucrative *cooperative agreements* in exchange for corporate intrusion. In exchange for equipment (e.g. computers in the classroom) or fundraising mechanisms (e.g. vending machines), schools open their doors to corporate advertising for a captive audience. In this sense, the government is funding corporate interests by privatizing public education and the public sector.

By virtue of its narrow approach to diverse and complex issues, the Harris government has subsequently dismissed a number of critical pieces of the education-financing puzzle. Revealing these missing pieces has in turn helped to explain some of the problems with the government’s claims and, moreover, how and why there has been notable public opposition to its education reforms in particular. Exposing its selective inclusion and exclusion of details also challenges the legitimacy of both the Harris government’s arguments and its leadership. In particular, I query the government’s concerns for the public good where restructuring for more affordability has required school closures, corporate intrusion, that the system offer less support and more work for school boards and individual students, and that local governance focus more on penny pinching for taxpayers over improving education for students, staff and the public good. In other words, the government’s reforms for more affordability arguably pose a series of challenges to the concept of *public* education, and beg the question as to more affordability for *whom*.

While the Harris government was openly focused on reducing public expenditure in the name of “more affordability,” it nonetheless maintained that all its reform measures were ultimately about improving the quality of education in the classroom. Snobelen stated:

...I want to say very clearly to all members of the House and to every parent and to every businessperson concerned about the quality of graduates, and I want to say directly to every student that everything we are doing is 100% for better-quality education in the classroom.⁷¹

With this in mind, coupled with the problems surrounding the government’s measures for more affordability, I turn now to explore and consider its arguments surrounding its promises to enhance the quality of public education in Ontario.

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Chapter Three

Higher “Quality” Education: Increased Demands, Decreased Public Supports

The Harris government outlined the three predominant objectives directing its restructuring initiatives in public education as affordability, accountability and quality. Based on the assumption that Ontario had been overspending, the Harris government aimed to make the system more “affordable” by making it more *efficient*, which it associated with lowering costs in and reducing public expenditure on education. In order to ensure that expenditure would be kept under control, however, it promised it would provide greater accountability through increased reporting. Yet, inasmuch as it claimed that it was necessary to develop a less costly education system, the government maintained that its central concern rested with improving the “quality” of education in the classroom. Accordingly, this chapter will focus on the government’s arguments and claims surrounding the type of “quality” it intended to improve upon as well as how it would achieve this higher quality. Specifically, I address these arguments in connection with the government’s initiatives said to improve student achievement and local democracy. Yet, similar to its arguments for more affordability and efficiency, the Harris government’s arguments for *higher quality* education were also flawed given their basis upon misguided analyses, misrepresentations and narrow assumptions.

Essentially, the government claimed that its objectives for more affordability and higher quality were mutually reinforcing, where the quality of education would improve *on account of* spending less. The government further explained how education needed to be restructured in concert with both affordability and quality in light of the people it served: students and taxpayers. Where students would benefit from higher quality education,

taxpayers would receive *better value* for their tax dollars. Snobelen explained, for example, how

Quality and value are the hallmarks of this reform package, because every student deserves the best-quality education we can provide and every taxpayer deserves the best value for his or her education dollar.¹

Moreover, in the same vein as its measures for greater accountability to guarantee more efficiency and fiscal responsibility, the government legislated for greater accountability in schooling by instituting a standardized testing program and publishing the test results. In addition to helping school boards spend *more* wisely, the government promised the annual standardized testing and reporting of results would further serve to improve student achievement by providing both parents and students with *clearer* indications of students' performance and capabilities. Thus, while affordability and accountability were clearly key components in improving the quality of education in Ontario, they did not reflect *all* of the government's concerns for quality.

In a Ministry of Education and Training news release entitled "High school reform increases emphasis on math, language and science; promotes responsible citizenship," the government explained that it was committed to a secondary school education "that [would] improve student achievement and prepare students for success in a highly competitive global economy."² This commitment to quality in secondary school education included at least 4 components: reinvestment; equality; more time both in the classroom and spent with teachers; and standardized testing. In addition to its concerns for Ontario students in the context of a competitive global economy, the government purported to recognize different education needs related to differences among the localities. Accordingly, it set out to

enhance school boards' local autonomy by increasing their range of options and responsibilities.

“Quality” Education as indicated by Higher Student Achievement

In a Ministry of Education and Training guide book entitled *Excellence in Education: Student-Focused Funding for Ontario*, the Harris government outlined its commitment to “high-quality” education for all Ontario students:

We are reducing the number of school boards and school board politicians, and streamlining administration so we can put more resources into the classroom. This is a building block in our plan to improve student achievement through

- a rigorous and demanding new curriculum;
- clear, measurable, and consistent standards for all grades;
- regular, province-wide testing;
- a more effective and fairer way of funding education³

By reducing the number of school boards and trustees, as well as making the administration more efficient, the government aimed to reorient the spending ratio to allow for tax cuts, to reduce the public debt and to reinvest inside the classroom. Although the government linked all three elements to students' interests, the promise to reinvest was especially notable where it was highlighted as a *building block* to higher student achievement.

- FOSTERING HIGHER STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT BY INVESTING IN STUDENTS, NOT THE BOARDROOM

According to Snobelen, “Ontario has not kept pace with other provinces or countries.”⁴ With a view to catching up to or keeping pace with education reform among the other provinces, the government reduced the “bureaucracy” and claimed to eliminate wasteful spending outside the classroom. By the same token, these education reforms were necessary in light of the relationship the government outlined between spending practices “outside” the classroom and available funding for inside the classroom. Specifically, the

government claimed that while reinvestment inside the classroom was necessary given the mediocre to below average student achievement, it was dependent upon school boards reducing their excessive/administrative spending.

Where reducing school board spending would come by making boards smaller, more “efficient,” the government emphasized the relationship between student achievement and the number of school boards and trustees in a Ministry of Education and Training news release entitled “Ontario must keep pace on education reform.” Describing the *Fewer School Boards Act*, as a “building block in a comprehensive plan to move students to the head of the class,” Snobelen explained how,

...Alberta, whose 16-year old students ranked first in the country on national science and math tests last year, reduced the number of boards from 181 to 57, and cut the number of trustees by almost two-thirds, starting in 1994. In New Brunswick the provincial government has eliminated all of its school boards, replacing them with eight superintendents, who are advised by district councils. New Brunswick ranked ahead of Ontario on the same tests, as did British Columbia, which reduced its number of school boards [in 1996]. The intent of Ontario’s *Fewer School Boards Act* is to reduce the number of major school boards and trustees and streamline administrative overhead to ensure more resources are focused on the classroom.⁵

The *Fewer School Boards Act* subsequently reduced both the number of school boards and the number of trustees by almost half and by two thirds, respectively. Reducing the size of the administration would not only reduce expenditure outside the classroom, more importantly, the government-claimed savings found would allow for increased investment *inside* the classroom on students.

This act represented a concrete example of how the government’s notion of quality was intimately connected to its notion of affordability where it argued that reducing the bureaucracy was about cost-efficiency (as was described in chapter two) at the same time as this reduction would improve the quality of education for students by generating additional

funds for the classroom. However, reducing the size of the bureaucracy only represented a portion of the projected savings according to the Sweeney Report, which was a report commissioned by the NDP to investigate, in a comprehensive manner, the strengths and weaknesses of Ontario's public education system. Any additional reinvestment funds for the inside of the classroom would have to come from school board efforts to be more "fiscally responsible" by *finding* additional savings outside the classroom.

The Harris government claimed that additional savings existed without adopting a "Big Brother Government" approach as the NDP and Liberals had supposedly done. Rather, with reference to the Sweeney report figures and recommendations, the Harris government claimed it would *encourage* school boards to make local decisions that would allow for further reinvestment inside the classroom. Specifically, the government highlighted the report's findings that 47% of education tax dollars were spent outside the classroom.⁶ It also detailed how this sphere could conceivably operate using 40% of the education budget.⁷ Based on this assumption, the government explained how realigning the spending ratio to one of 40% outside and 60% inside the classroom would boost spending in the classroom and help to improve student achievement. In other words, the more savings that would be found *outside* the classroom, the more there would be for students *inside* the classroom. Assuming funding levels remained the same, this claim *could* have implied a veritable transfer of funds, allowing for lower student-teacher ratios or more education programs, for example. However, the Harris government excluded all discussion of the fact that it had reduced the overall education budget during its reinvestment discussions, and as such, its reinvestment plans were not indicative of any real budget increases. The government's "reinvestment" strategies for one area of the education system simultaneously required disinvestment from

another area, all of which depended upon the government's clear distinction between inside and outside classroom activities and spending.

The act of reducing the education bureaucracy and improving student achievement subsequently involved realigning the spending ratio between inside and outside the classroom. However, these steps did not address the differences in per-pupil spending which the Harris government deemed responsible for producing differences in the quality of education across the province. Therefore, the Harris government promised to improve the quality of education by providing equal opportunity to all students, regardless of where they lived, by restructuring the way education was funded.

- HIGHER STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT - RESTRUCTURING FOR "EQUALITY"

The Harris government explained that too much money had been spent in education to the detriment of students' futures, which were being increasingly threatened by the growing public debt and public spending and as their education needs were not being addressed because the spending was happening outside, as opposed to inside, the classroom. Adding to these unfavourable conditions were poor student achievement and per-pupil funding inequities among school boards. The government further attributed these circumstances to a combination of poor governance and a faulty method of funding under the NDP and Liberals.

Public education in Ontario was essentially funded through a combination of provincial grants issued by the provincial government of the day, as well as residential and industrial/commercial property taxes which would be set and collected by municipalities and school boards until the government passed the *Quality Education Improvement Act*. Gidney explains the significance of using property taxes as a source of revenue for education:

The Ontario Ministry of Revenue places a dollar value (or an assessed value) on each piece of property in the province and then each municipality charges the owner a certain percentage of that value. This is what is meant by a property tax, and such taxes are paid by the owners of almost all property in the province, residential, commercial, and industrial alike. The money raised is spent by the municipalities on local services ranging from roads and sewers to police and [firefighters], and by school boards to finance the elementary and secondary schools... The total value of property in different localities can vary enormously depending on the wealth of their residents or the size and number of their businesses and industries.⁸

According to the Harris government, it was because school boards maintained the arbitrary capacity to set and, therefore, raise and then collect the property taxes that differences existed among school boards' per-pupil spending, "from a low of under \$5000 per student to over \$7000 per student in some of [the] more high-spending boards."⁹ Specifically, the government was critical of this situation because of the varying degree of that capacity which was determined by the local wealth of the area and/or locality. In other words, core per-pupil funding was directly tied to a students' place of residence.

The government further explained the consequences to these per-pupil funding differences in connection with education inequities, where the wealthier boards' student population would have access to "better" and/or more diverse education programs, provisions and resources. The Harris government also linked these circumstances to poor student achievement. Gidney elaborates on this condition further and suggests why funding equality was seemingly impossible under the former system:

To raise the same per-pupil amount [that the assessment-rich boards raised], assessment-poor boards would have had to tax their property owners extremely heavily...[R]ich boards[, on the other hand] could and did raise enormous amounts beyond [the provincially suggested amount]. By doing so they were able to raise money for all kinds of educational programs that poor boards could only dream of offering their students.¹⁰

In addition to problematizing the source of funding, the Harris government also attributed blame for these inequities among school boards to poor governance on behalf of the former

NDP and Liberal governments for devising an overly complicated and ineffective method of financing. Therefore, on these grounds, the Harris government developed what was described as a new, more simple and improved method of funding to meet the needs of students, regardless of their local residence. Committed “to the goal of having the highest student achievement in Canada and providing that education in the most cost-effective way,”¹¹ the government justified its plans to change the way education would be financed.

Snobelen stated that the government would

...be looking to change the funding of education in Ontario, not just to make it more affordable to the taxpayers of Ontario – although surely that’s one of our goals – but also to provide an equal opportunity for every child in the province of Ontario.¹²

While cost-efficiency entailed reducing public expenditure on education, funding for equal opportunity was about “spending the same money on every child...”¹³ Thus, reducing expenditure was to efficiency as providing the same funding was to equality, both of which were about higher quality education and would be realized through the government’s *Education Quality Improvement Act*. Setting out a new funding formula, which encompassed a three-pronged approach, this act was notable for taking education financing off the residential property tax base, prohibiting boards from incurring debt and/or deficit financing, and standardizing per-pupil funding through its *foundation grant*.

Claiming to lift the burden from school boards in the same breadth as ensuring equal opportunity, the government justified removing school boards’ fundraising powers and making education financing an entirely provincial responsibility to take education financing off the residential property tax base. Coupled with outlawing deficits and debts, these changes represented the foundation for the new funding formula to provide “equal” or the *same* funding for all students, regardless of where they lived. Based on its calculations of the

costs of education, the Harris government devised what it called a student-centred funding formula with which to allocate the basic per-pupil amounts to all school boards. According to a ministry brochure, “[s]tudent-focused funding will put more resources into the classroom to improve student achievement and be based on a fair and realistic estimate of what it costs to provide high-quality education.”¹⁴ More specifically, this brochure outlined how this new funding system would work:

The student-focused funding will replace the existing thirty-four different types of grants with nine, and a school board’s budget will now be based on three components:

1. *A foundation grant* will provide for the core education of every student in Ontario. [See Appendix B]
2. *Seven special purpose grants* will recognize the different circumstances faced by students and school boards. [See Appendix C]
3. *A pupil accommodation grant* will pay for the cost of heating, lighting, maintaining, and constructing schools.¹⁵ [See Appendix A]

It is notable that the special purposes grants are supplementary; that is, they were allotted in addition to the foundation grant in view of compensating for differences among students and school boards. Specifically, they include:

1. Special Education Grant
2. Geographic Grant and School Authorities Grant
3. Learning Opportunities Grant
4. Language Grant
5. Adult and Continuing Education Grant
6. Transportation Grant
7. School Board Administration and Governance Grant¹⁶

If we were to adopt a surface analysis of the new funding formula, it would appear the government recognized and addressed differences among students. However, in taking Lee Harvey’s critical social research approach, we discover there were at least three variables which made the government’s recognition of difference inadequate and moreover, illusory.

First, it is important to consider how the foundation grant that would provide the core funding for a school board's budget has been allotted at a reduced amount based on the false assumption that all school boards had been overspending. This has consequently enhanced the inadequate funding context. And second, the special purposes grants have also been reduced compared to their former amounts, which further compounds the inadequate funding situation. Hugh MacKenzie points out, for example, how the government's funding reductions made its special purposes grants and so-called provisions for difference questionable and difficult to understand. He writes:

Funding for special education, touted by the Government as one of the achievements of the new formula, is actually at least \$50 million less than the level provided by school boards under the old system, after inflation and enrolment change have been accounted for. Special funding to compensate for social and demographic factors that increase education costs (\$185 million) is less than half the amount recommended by the government's own Expert Panel (\$400 million).¹⁷

Snobelen also announced that adult education "[would] be funded at the lower rate of continuing education students", as opposed to being fully funded as day students.¹⁸

Likewise, where junior kindergarten had been fully funded under the NDP government, the Harris government would fund half the costs for this program, which meant that school boards would have to come up with the rest of the funding in a context of an already reduced budget. Given that the pupil accommodation funding formula outlined in chapter two was also explained to be insufficient, school boards would conceivably be forced to choose between maintaining their facilities and dropping *non-core* education programming, including special education, arts courses and junior kindergarten. Yet, where there would little benefit in offering special programs without the facilities in which to offer the courses, boards will more than likely "opt" to cut programs over closing entire schools.

Lastly, the government has funded school boards using a standardized formula that operates according to set or standard amounts for all three type of grants (foundation, special purposes, and pupil accommodation). Therefore, a board's funding for special needs students would only increase with increased enrolment of special needs students, for example, as opposed to funding a board's particular and actual needs. In other words, the formula was built upon assumptions about the costs to educate students regardless of the particular needs of individual schools and/or boards in connection with their local contexts.

Yet, regardless of its claims to address special needs, the standardized or same per-pupil funding amount issued through the foundation grant was paramount, according to the government, insofar as it would remedy former education inequities stemming from using property taxes as an education revenue source, along with overly complicated and ineffective methods of funding. Where the government equated sameness with equality, it claimed to provide equal opportunities for all students which, in turn, would improve student achievement. Based on this assumption, the Harris government reminded the public that everything it did, including and especially its financing reforms, was ultimately concerned with improving the quality of public education.

Reorienting the spending ratio to redirect more public expenditure towards students and eliminating funding differences among school boards represented two of the ways the government intended to enhance the quality of education to improve student achievement. The Harris government also aimed to improve student achievement in more concrete classroom-related ways, namely, it justified securing the right to determine how much time teachers should spend with students as well as the amount of time students should spend in school over the course of a year by categorizing these elements as issues of 'education

standards.’ In connection with studies and statistics from the Education Improvement Commission,¹⁹ the Harris government promised these changes would also help to improve the quality of education in terms of student achievement.

- IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT - TEACHERS SPEND MORE TIME WITH STUDENTS & STUDENTS SPEND MORE TIME IN SCHOOL

Based on a report from the government’s Education Improvement Commission, there was a direct relationship established between the time teachers spent with students and student achievement whereby “[t]he more time teachers [would] spend with students the better students [would] perform.”²⁰ Additionally, the Harris government pointed to secondary school students in Switzerland, England and Scotland as spending, on average, between 20 to 30 more classroom instructional days per year than Ontario secondary school students which, “[o]ver the course of a student’s school career, leads to significantly less time that a student spends learning.”²¹ These combined circumstances led the government to alter both teachers’ instructional time and the number of days students attend school through the *Education Quality Improvement Act*.

Specifically, a ministry news release explained that the *Education Quality Improvement Act* would

... improve the quality of education and foster higher student achievement by adding 10 days of instructional time to the secondary school year...[these] amendments...would...increase the number of days students spend in the classroom by adjusting the number of days used for secondary school exams from 15 to 10 and reducing the number of teachers’ professional development days by half...The amended legislation would[also]...move the instructional time for secondary school teachers to about the national average.²²

Prior to the *Education Quality Improvement Act* and according to an Education Improvement Commission report, Ontario high school teachers spent, on average, 3.75 hours of their working day teaching students.²³ This was in contrast to the report’s findings that calculated

the national average to be 4.5 hours of instructional time per day. Therefore, the Harris government legislated Ontario teachers to spend approximately 0.75 hours more teaching students.

Addressing these standards with respect to time spent in schooling represented another checkmark on the government's quality control checklist. Preceded by standardized funding, and reducing the size of the bureaucracy, and followed by new curriculum and a testing program, one by one, the government pointed to its own achievements in improving the quality of education in Ontario.

- IMPROVED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT WITH HIGHER STANDARDS IN CURRICULUM & PROVINCE-WIDE STANDARDIZED TESTING

The Harris government claimed standardized testing would benefit the province and better equip students, parents and teachers to address education strengths and weaknesses more effectively. Conservative member Tony Skarica elaborated on behalf of Snobelen:

The benefits of this testing program to the province will be considerable. For students, parents and teachers, the test result information will help to identify individual strengths and weaknesses and support appropriate improvements where needed. Test results will also provide important feedback to teachers on the effectiveness of their classroom programs and teaching practices.²⁴

In addition to providing students with the assistance they would need, the information obtained through the standardized tests would also benefit taxpayers in at least two ways. Knowing the weaknesses in the education system would allow for *better* use of education tax dollars. And second, as will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter, the government favoured publishing standardized test results with a view to providing the public with a concrete way to assess the quality of education in Ontario and account for the value of their tax dollars. As Skarica explained again on Snobelen's behalf, standardized testing was a central part of the plan to "achieve a responsive and effective system in which taxpayers

[could] see value for their investment and Ontario's young people [could] achieve excellence in their education."²⁵

The Harris government made province-wide standardized testing law with the *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act*. This act instituted a series of four components with a view to establishing what the government described as a comprehensive testing program. Specifically, this included the creation of the Education Quality and Accountability Office; a new curriculum; annual standardized tests in reading, writing and math skills; and public reporting of test results.

The Education Quality and Accountability Office was the first part to this four-part plan. Widely supported by all three parties, it would be an arm's length government agency, whose creation, according to Skarica,

...follows a recommendation of the Royal Commission on Learning and responds to public concerns regarding objectivity in the development of tests and the reporting of test results. The mandate of the Education Quality and Accountability Office will be to evaluate the quality of elementary and secondary education in Ontario. A significant part of this mandate will involve the province-wide testing of students' academic achievement and the reporting of results of these tests to the minister and the general public.²⁶

Described by the Harris government as part of the initiative to produce a high-quality, accountable and affordable education system, not only would the agency be effective at a cost of \$15 million (as opposed to the \$25 million agency proposed by the former NDP government), it would also demonstrate the government's commitment "to quality assessment and a long-term investment that [would] lead to ongoing improvement of student performance and of the entire education system."²⁷

The EQAO's mandate, as outlined by the Harris government above, was to 'update' curriculum and implement province-wide standardized testing. The government further

explained how the new curriculum and testing program were in fact developed in conjunction with each other:

The testing program meets the Common Sense Revolution's commitment to test the achievement of Ontario students on a regular basis. The program will be developed in conjunction with a demanding provincial curriculum setting high standards of achievement. It is a key component of the government's strategy for accountability and excellence in education.²⁸

Solidifying their association with one another, the new curriculum and testing program would be especially important in light of the new secondary school graduation requirements. Curriculum had to be redesigned to prepare students for the test whose score would not only be attached to student transcripts, but further helped to determine who should and should not graduate from secondary school where only students with passing scores would be eligible for secondary school diplomas.

Reducing the expected time (from five to four years) for secondary school students to complete their diplomas also required that curriculum be revisited and 'brought up to date.' According to a Ministry of Education and Training publication entitled *Ontario's Plan for Reform: Better-Educated Students for a Brighter Future*, "Ontario [would] be moving to a four-year high school program starting in 1998, and the curriculum [was] being revised for the new four-year program. Courses [would] prepare students for the future – either for jobs or for higher education."²⁹ In part, they would do this with "more compulsory courses, a Grade 10 literacy test and mandatory community involvement."³⁰ The new four-year curriculum would also set higher standards and improve student achievement by virtue of its reduced timeframe. In other words, encouraging students to learn more at a faster pace and a younger age represented some of the *higher* standards characterizing the new, 'more rigorous' curriculum.

Where the government further aimed to *encourage* a faster learning curve by disclosing marks for *all* courses taken,³¹ suddenly finishing high school more quickly represented a new goal that all students should be striving to achieve. In the past, students could upgrade their course marks by taking the same course over again to have the higher mark replace the lower one. Thus, by *hiding* the number of times a student had taken a particular course, the government's assumption was that the former system lacked standards or was overly lax, which it deemed responsible for diminishing students' incentive to apply themselves in the classroom immediately. And, consequently, the Harris government claimed these conditions were part and parcel of the low levels of student achievement in the province. Where it linked low student achievement with a lack of incentive and low standards, the government simply raised standards and subsequently deemed the increased demands and expectations on students as indicative of higher quality education.

Accordingly, Ontario's secondary school curriculum would be redesigned "with high standards" considering the role that standards would play in improving student achievement. A Ministry document entitled *Curriculum for Ontario Secondary Schools* elaborated on the government's position and assumptions surrounding standards:

The phrase "curriculum with high standards" is used frequently in a general way to mean a challenging curriculum that will allow Ontario students to develop excellent skills and knowledge to realize their potential and compete with students from other provinces and countries. The Ontario curriculum will have high standards in this sense.

In addition, "standards" has a more technical meaning. Standards are statements of required results whose meaning is made very clear by Performance Indicators. These Indicators are descriptions of what achievement actually looks like. The following is an everyday example of standards in action.

When buying a car, we say that the car must be fuel efficient. That is a standard. To define exactly what we mean by fuel efficiency, we have in mind a range of fuel consumption levels that are satisfactory, or even really good. These are the

Performance Indicators. If the car is more economical than the range, we rate it excellent. If it is less economical, we rate it unacceptable and refuse to buy it. The Performance Indicators allow us to describe what our standards look like in reality.

The government went on to relate the above example to students writing a five-paragraph essay. What was especially noteworthy in the Harris government's discussion of standards, however, was the imperative to make them clear and measurable with a view to providing clear indications of student performance. Thus, the aspects of clarity and measurability were considered indicators of "high quality" in terms of both the system and the education offered where they would allow for concrete and visible tracking of improvement and/or weaknesses. And, where practices and performance have been quantified into single figures, they would become immediately calculable and comparable, regardless of the content of schooling. Moreover, the government claimed that publishing these performance indicators would provide greater accountability for, and therefore, would guarantee, higher quality education.

Just as the government put the mechanisms in place to monitor school board spending, it mandated a comprehensive secondary school testing program with a new curriculum – in connection with the new, higher standards or expectations - to monitor and show whether or not students had learned what was expected.³² As with the new curriculum, standardized testing in secondary school was implemented in response to problems with the former system. One Conservative member, for example, described the former system as terrible, producing "uneducated kids" and daily complaints.³³ Snobelen further described the former school system as one "without the standards of achievement and accurate testing methodologies..."³⁴

In addition to guaranteeing that all Ontario secondary school graduates meet these "higher" standards, standardized testing was also advanced as providing clear and valuable

information regarding a particular school's strengths and weaknesses which, in turn, would enable boards to spend more wisely by directing funds where they *needed* to go. Where the test results would be published annually, the tests were also said to provide parents and taxpayers with greater accountability for the quality and effectiveness of Ontario's public education system in terms of the products – the students – in association with their ability to meet the required standards. Publishing test results in connection with a student's particular school would also serve a competitive incentive for individual schools to work hard for their students. But perhaps most importantly and much like the government's own analogy, test results from standardized testing (and using a uniform grading method) would allow students to be calculated and compared, to be rated within performance parameters of "excellent" to "unacceptable." Providing for and publishing what the government deemed to be visible indicators of student performance accordingly represented other checks on the government's quality control checklist for improving student achievement.

With reference to its quality control checklist, the government claimed it would improve the quality of education in a comprehensive manner. Specifically, it reoriented school board spending practices, implemented same/standardized per-pupil funding throughout the province, increased the time students would spend both in school each year and with teachers, and it implemented a new standardized curriculum and testing program. It completed this package of quality safeguards by requiring that student test results be published in association with their respective schools. Coupled with the annual financial reports from school boards, the government claimed its measures for greater accountability would ensure that higher quality education and fiscal responsibility, or in other words, "value," would be maintained.

Yet inasmuch as the government aimed to improve student achievement through changed provincial standards, it also claimed to recognize local differences in terms of different education needs among boards by providing for “increased local autonomy.” Touted as getting away from the top-down governance that had been apparently adhered to by the NDP and Liberals, the government professed its reforms would bring education policy closer to the people by offering boards more choice over programming, increasing their responsibility and providing a wider latitude with which to find local solutions to the affordability issue.

Enhanced “Local Autonomy”: More “Choice,” Increased Responsibility and a Wider Latitude to “Find Savings”

In addition to the above discussions and those in chapter two surrounding the *Education Amendment Act* measures for more affordability and its provisions of greater fiscal accountability, the Harris government also described this bill in connection with enhancing local autonomy. Conservative member Bart Maves, for example, explained that the second goal in this act was to build a framework to increase local autonomy among school boards.

The second goal of this legislation is to allow decisions and solutions to be locally driven. Our government realizes that a top-down, heavy-handed measure imposed by the Minister of Education on teachers, unions, school boards and students would be overbearing and would certainly violate our party’s principles of community and local accountability. Our government believes these local officials were elected by local people to do a job and that they should be allowed to do that job. Our government believes that education policy should be brought closer to the people because it allows members of the public greater accessibility to educational matters and also enhances local accountability. Our government realizes that one solution is not appropriate for all school boards across the province, and therefore we chose to advance a framework which will be shaped by local input.³⁵

This framework was said to recognize differences among regions and therefore, different educational needs.

With a view to addressing those different needs and as a way that would make the system more accessible for local input, the government *expanded* school boards' choice with respect to education programming among boards' respective schools. Specifically, and according to Maves, the *Education Amendment Act* would give school boards the right to choose whether or not to offer junior kindergarten, depending upon local needs; to decide the best way to address adult learners by choosing to place them either in day school or in continuing education courses; and to have more input into the administrative structure by providing boards with the *ability* to negotiate the number of sick days with teachers.³⁶ Furthermore, this act would *allow* school boards to find local solutions to saving taxpayer dollars by establishing cooperative agreements with other boards, universities, organizations, local businesses and corporations. Not unlike other reform measures, the government claimed these changes to increase school boards' local autonomy were prompted by poor conditions under the former non-Conservative governments.

The Harris government attacked the former NDP and Liberal governments for all the problems it had to contend with, especially the *tough* decisions it claimed it had been forced to make as a result of their poor governance. In connection with the issue of local autonomy over education governance, Conservative member Dave Boushy recalled, for example, that there were constant demands for more local control in accordance with needs specific to Sarnia. He explained how

Locally elected officials always [asked] for more control on the local level...more control of their destiny. I speak from experience. During my 22 years in municipal politics, the beef I had and my colleagues always had was the politicians in Queen's Park telling us they knew what Sarnia needed better than we did.

The Harris government cited the NDP legislation, which made junior kindergarten mandatory across the province as a clear example of this overbearing and self-righteous governance

under non-Conservative leadership. The government claimed that this legislation not only ignored local needs, given the lack of consultation, it further imposed a huge expense on taxpayers. MPP Maves stated that,

This mandatory requirement [that school boards offer junior kindergarten] is a clear example of education bureaucrats dictating the needs of a particular school board when it is apparent that there has been no consultation, no local input and no clear consensus in the community that such a service is desired... Before [Bill 34], the province fully funded JK. Prior funding arrangements not only undermined and ignored any local say in the delivery of junior kindergarten but it [sic] also was a costly arrangement for the taxpayers of Ontario.³⁷

In response to these conditions, Snobelen explained that the *Education Amendment Act* would make junior kindergarten a local option and that the province would share the cost with any board that decided to offer the program.³⁸ The government's critique of non-Conservative leadership regarding local governance and a lack of choice over programming also included adult education. Thus, not unlike the effects of making junior kindergarten a local *choice*, the Harris government's decision to provide more choice over adult education would produce savings *while* "better" addressing adult learners' needs.

Claiming to recognize the importance of adult education, Snobelen professed the fact that addressing the key differences between adult and adolescent education yielded savings was not necessarily the guiding principle behind the changes to adult education: it was simply an added bonus. The Harris government explained that adult students did not require the same type of programming as adolescents with regards to safety issues and class numbers, and therefore, there was no need to fully fund adult students as day students. In other words, the government's reforms to adult education were based upon an assumption that adult students would cost less because they apparently had fewer needs as compared

with adolescent students. In response to critiques by the then leader of the Opposition party, Snoblen explained how

...the province has a different responsibility to adolescents, and should have a different responsibility in terms of making sure they're safe during the school, and that's a different cost factor and a different delivery system; also that class sizes might be different. This is remarkable, that class sizes might be different for adults than they are for adolescents and we might offer those programs at a different time of the day. That will not be astounding news to most of the people of Ontario, but it astounds the Leader of the Opposition.³⁹

At the same time as the government highlighted these differences in connection with costs, it spoke to differences between the way we teach adults and the way we teach adolescents.

Specifically, the government was critical of the former education system for often treating adults like children.⁴⁰ Thus, the Harris government suggested that in addition to the overspending issue, school boards have ignored adult learner needs by placing adults in day schools alongside adolescent students.

Based on these claims, the Harris government would permit school boards to make decisions on the best way to accommodate their adult learners – as the more expensive 'day students' or as the less costly continuing education students – in a context that emphasized the need to find savings and reduce public expenditure. Conservative member Marland spoke to these particular improvements that the *Education Amendment Act* had to offer both boards and adults when she explained how,

Proposed amendments contained in sections 3 and 4 will permit a school board to direct certain adult pupils to take credit courses offered in the board's continuing Ed program as opposed to the regular day school program... we're saying to that local school board, "You have the autonomy and the independence to make that decision where you think certain adult students can take their credit courses in the continuing ed program." The advantage for that adult student...is that they will then be in a program that is customized to them as adults.⁴¹

Marland agreed there was a financial component to directing adult learners into continuing education programs where boards would be able to hire teachers on contract, as opposed to the full-time tenured teachers at the top of the salary grid, to teach the continuing education courses.⁴² However, she also pointed out that having contract teachers for continuing education programs would be in adult learners' best interests because they would be hired specifically to teach adults.⁴³

Described in the same vein as *forcing* boards to offer junior kindergarten and limiting them in their options surrounding adult education, school boards were apparently further limited in their abilities to save local taxpayer dollars with respect to the guaranteed twenty sick days in teacher contracts, for example. Conservative MPP Marland explained this as another case of excessive spending, on the one hand, and a disregard for local input, on the other, in terms of provincially mandated provisions prior to the *Education Amendment Act*:

The Education Act currently provides that each full-time teacher shall receive 20 days of sick leave. This is prorated for part-time teachers. The number of sick days may be increased at the discretion of the board. That is the current status...I say to the members opposite, do you receive 20 days of sick leave with pay? I don't think so. I don't think you will find that in the private sector.⁴⁴

Not only was this situation portrayed as excessive compared with the private sector, Marland accused these former governments of acting under the guise of "Big Brother Government" who came along and said: "You must do this."⁴⁵ With the *Education Amendment Act*, however, the government claimed it would make "the provision for boards to negotiate those sick leave provisions...[because] there are decisions that must be made by the local board and they must have the continued autonomy to do that."⁴⁶ Although testing and curriculum requirements needed to be standardized across the province, apparently teacher contracts did not warrant the same regulations.

In addition to *allowing* boards to decide what constitutes an excessive cost, the *Education Amendment Act* would also give school boards the “power” to develop local solutions to the affordability issue through a cooperative agreements clause. Said to foster local initiative, establishing cooperative agreements (with other boards, organizations, agencies, businesses and/or groups of people with respect to sharing “facilities, equipment, transportation and other support services,”⁴⁷) would help to reduce the burden on taxpayers by finding “additional” *savings* while protecting and/or increasing inside-classroom funding. As added incentive to opt for cooperative agreements wherever possible, the government further outlined in this act that boards would be required to report annually on their cooperative agreements past, present and future, as well as an account of, including the reasons for other agreements that were not taken. Thus, the more “cooperative agreements” boards established in light of operating in a less costly way by seeking out alternative resources and/or sources of revenue, the greater the amount of public expenditure would be available for inside the classroom and the more the taxpayer would be empowered to consume.

All of these examples, from mandatory JK to a lack of choice surrounding adult learners, to a non-negotiable number of teacher sick days, to a lack of cooperation, were pointed out by government sources as evidence of ‘big-government’ and represented concrete shortcomings to improving the quality of education prior to the Harris government’s the *Education Amendment Act*. However, as Marland suggested above, this act was designed with the intentions to replace the top-heavy governance under the non-Conservative governments with more decentralized, locally autonomous governance under the Harris government.

Government sources also claimed that allowing boards to make more choices in education matters was about bringing education policy closer to the local people it served and therefore, would enhance local democracy. Boushy explained, with reference to the *Education Amendment Act*, that

Decision-making must rest with the people directly affected by the choices that are made. That's what democracy is all about. Through [Bill 34] we're enabling local boards to make choices and find solutions unique to the areas they serve. In effect, the decision-making process will be more democratic because it is on the local level.⁴⁸

According to the Harris government, boards have been empowered to decide whether it would be in the best interests of “their” local taxpayers and students to offer certain programs (such as junior kindergarten) or not, and/or how certain programs should be delivered (such as adult education). Where boards would have to juggle concerns for costs, as well as learner and local needs, the *Education Amendment Act* was described as the “toolbox” legislation that would help to improve the quality of education and the operating system in general by providing *more* “choices.”

“Local Autonomy” in a Context of Inadequate Funding

The government claimed to have increased a school board's local autonomy and to have improved local education governance generally by removing the burden of taxation to allow boards to concentrate more on education matters; by bringing education policy closer to the locality through expanding school boards' responsibility and workload; by providing boards with *more* choice over local programming; and by allowing for greater *flexibility* in developing local solutions to the overspending issue, for example. Yet, in looking at a wider context and beneath the surface of the government's measures for “increased local autonomy,” we discover that school boards have actually experienced a loss of power. At the

same time as they have been forced to adopt increased responsibility to achieve provincially mandated goals they have experienced added funding reductions and significant cuts to staff and resources. In these respects, school boards have undergone a combined process of decentralization and centralization.

Generally, the government decentralized the onus for making the education system function with less public expenditure onto school boards. This seemed to be the case considering the amalgamation process, for example, which saw a reduction in the number of administrative staff (including trustees) as well as an expansion in the geographic area that a given district school board would have administer and therefore, an increase in the number of schools boards would have to manage. Requiring these district school boards to negotiate teacher sick days, to fill out more ministry reports detailing all financial transactions, to develop “innovative” budgeting strategies to “find” additional *savings* and to prepare and organize for the standardized testing represent some of the duties that have been added to its original tasks of meeting education needs in terms of staffing, equipping and running safe schools, and programming. Based on the assumption that school boards had been spending too much on staff and administrative duties outside the classroom, the government passed the *Fewer School Boards Act*. However, as was pointed out in chapter two, it is impossible to separate activities inside from those outside the classroom, especially where the school board administration is directly responsible for the day to day functioning of the classroom. Therefore, the consequences of reducing a school board’s staff and resources while increasing its responsibility to make ends meet with less power and less money, has likely meant that less, not more, time and energy would be devoted to education improvements and the interests of students more generally.

The Harris government has also centralized control over education policy where it has set provincial standards of achievement with respect to secondary school graduation and has secured control over public spending and budgets. Although school boards have been historically responsible for addressing educational needs in terms of maintaining hygienic conditions in and around the school, developing and implementing curriculum, maintaining and supplying equipment and educational materials, and so on, one of the key differences in these responsibilities now rests with the fact that boards must do this with fewer staff and resources, as well as more funding restrictions than ever before. Thus, the Harris government has seemingly increased the burden on school boards precisely because it has taken their fundraising power away, and misconstrued the act of downloading increased responsibility with bringing education policy closer to the people.

The government explained the removal of education from the residential property tax as a step to improving school governance⁴⁹ by eliminating the burden of taxation to allow them to “concentrate on their core objective” as the “guardians of education in their communities.”⁵⁰ Specifically, boards would be enabled to “renew their focus on the students in the school; to devote their efforts to student achievement, reporting and curriculum implementation.”⁵¹ Perhaps, if funding levels were to remain the same, then a degree of burden could have been lifted. However, where the province has exercised fiscal retrenchment in education financing since 1975 despite the increased costs in education as a result of the expanded mandate, increased enrollment and a sharp rise in inflation, the school boards’ ability to subsidize the province’s inadequate funding through property taxation was, in one sense, a key factor in allowing public education to be realized as a public good in some areas of the province. However, the consequence to having relied so heavily on

property taxation to pay for the largest proportion of the education costs meant that its regressive nature of disproportionately taxing the poor would be enhanced (as was explained in chapter two). The root cause of over-taxing the poor, however, rests with insufficient funding from the province and not self-interested school board administrations. Thus while the government's initiative to remove education from the residential property tax base was seemingly a positive step in consideration of the poor, this was not alluded to in its rationale for making education a provincial responsibility. While these conditions point to a far from perfect education system prior to the Harris government's election to office, the other reforms surrounding and including the measure to take education from the residential tax base have virtually hollowed-out the sole democratic component within the public education system, in part, on account of removing education off the property tax base. Having removed its only source of public revenue, in addition to reducing school board budgets, it is likely that school boards will be unable to realize their original purposes – to facilitate improvement and to train and build local talent – considering the increased workload and decreased supports. Rather, school boards have, in all likelihood, been forced to focus more on budgeting and *finding savings* for the economic citizen and restoring corporate profitability instead of on education matters and students, in order to keep schools from closing.

Paradoxically to their intended purposes, the Harris government has impeded improvement to public education at the local level where school boards have been restructured to operate with less, not more, local power. Bruce Curtis highlights the consequences to an absence of local power in his book, *True Government By Choice Men? Inspection, Education, and State Formation in Canada West*. In his discussion surrounding

the development of local governance in Upper and Lower Canada during the early to mid-1800s, he writes:

The absence of powers of local government impeded 'improvement.' Schools, mills, churches, and roads were lacking because local proprietors did not have the governmental means to organize them. More important, the absence of such governmental structures meant there was no 'room for talent' to find expression within the state system.⁵²

Therefore, not only will school boards likely be prevented from improving education on a local level, but the hollowed-out, district school boards will have an effect beyond the education system considering the role they played in providing an important stepping stone for developing politicians and "talent building."

Although touted by the government as enabling boards to find local solutions to the issue of overspending, and broadly supported by all major parties, the cooperative agreement clause represents another conflicting situation of decentralized or downloaded work and centralized power. While this clause was notable for encouraging greater cooperation among boards, regardless of their affiliation (i.e. Catholic, French, and English), cooperation was encouraged among more than other school boards. In particular, these *allowances* for corporate "cooperation" (or intrusions), in a context of inadequate funding, have subsequently *encouraged* school boards to opt for lucrative fundraising deals and/or equipment *donations* in exchange for advertising to a captive audience. The alternatives to these so-called *cooperative agreements* include user fees (which the government has openly criticized) and/or reducing what the government has deemed as non-essential education provisions (i.e. dropping junior kindergarten or reducing adult education to continuing education courses). Moreover, where cooperative agreements have introduced and/or increased a corporate presence in the public education system, public education represents a new market for corporate deals and has helped to educate for both increased consumption

and non-critical consumer identities. Therefore, despite government descriptions of increased local empowerment over where and how to save taxpayers money so as to increase classroom funding, the 'cooperative agreements' clause represents a fundamental dent in the quality of *public* education where these agreements have allowed for and encouraged increased corporate intrusion at the expense of students and the public at large. Given that establishing cooperative agreements was made mandatory where boards are required to report on their respective agreements past, present and future, and considering they are added tasks that have recently been assigned to an already lengthy list of school board duties and responsibilities, the cooperative agreements clause signals another example of how the government has seemingly shifted more of the education administration's time away from students and educational matters.

In sum, the Harris government has essentially replaced school boards' fundraising power with the task of deciding which programs to cut (i.e. junior kindergarten), how to reduce education provisions (i.e. replace adult education with continuing education courses) and/or which corporation to support in order to maintain certain programs and/or keep schools running due to the lack of funding. Claiming to get away from "Big-Government" and based on an assumption of overspending and that the administration was self-interested and whose work and efforts had no bearing on the inside of the classroom, the Harris government maintained that these so-called choices provided district school boards with increased flexibility. Yet, where the government designed its restructuring plans and education policies on the basis of inaccurate assessments (of history of education financing and the root cause of inequities among boards) and faulty assumptions (that it is possible to separate activities inside the classroom from outside), the government's arguments and

measures or increased local autonomy have raised a number of questions. Where it disregarded connections between power and funding, for example, the government's claims clearly contradict the implications of their reforms.

As parts of the restructuring package, the *Education Amendment* and the *Fewer School Board Acts* have served to hollow-out, as opposed to enhancing and increasing, democracy and autonomy in local education governance. This hollowing-out of local education governance is especially significant considering school boards contain the only democratic component of the public education system. Where trustees would have typically been elected in connection with their visions and plans for education programming, school facilities and/or equipment, the best trustee candidates today will be making promises to save money, not to cut certain programs and/or not to close schools. Replacing a democracy for the improvement of public education with a democracy for education survival, a school board's role has been redesigned to focus more on penny pinching for taxpayers. Moreover, the public education mandate has likely been narrowed in at least some boards as a result of underfunding and the changes to local governance.

In a sense, nothing has changed in local education governance considering that boards continue to be responsible for realizing education according to the *provincial* mandate. However, where school boards have been forced to rely more on the voluntary sector (which generally falls within certain socio-economic parameters), and/or that they have been coerced into making cuts and/or to "cooperate" with corporations at the expense of allowing for corporate intrusion in schools, the implications of achieving this particular mandate only seem to jeopardize the public good. Although the opposition and third parties were largely critical of the Harris government's reforms for local autonomy and higher quality education

in general, there were nevertheless a number of shared party positions among all three governments beyond the cooperative agreements clause in the *Education Amendment Act*. These shared party positions are especially important to highlight where they further indicate a degree of continuity in education restructuring.

Shared Party Positions

As it was pointed out in chapter two, the Harris government was not the first to grapple with education financing issues in Ontario. In fact, while it may be the first Ontario government to claim it would improve the quality of education by providing less public expenditure, it follows a legacy of funding cuts by both another Conservative as well as non-Conservative governments. All three parties have actually shared a number of positions on education issues and reforms despite the various claims of leadership distinctions on education. What becomes clear upon considering these shared positions is the extent to which a degree of continuity has existed in education restructuring across the mandates of successive governments. This not only points to agreement among the three parties, as Gidney suggests, but it contradicts the Harris government's premise that it has restructured public education in a radically new way. At the same time, where the government has fervently relied upon a sharp contrast among its approach to leadership and that of the NDP and the Liberals, especially with respect to grappling with the issues plaguing public education, these lines of continuity among all three parties raise questions about the Harris government's agenda for restructuring public education.

Contrary to the Harris government's claims, the Liberal and NDP governments both recognized and addressed the funding inequities among school boards. Although the Liberal and NDP efforts did not resolve the per-pupil funding differences among boards, all three

parties certainly agree that funding should not differ based on where a student resides. In fact, in their final policy proposal just prior to the Harris government's coming to office, the NDP specifically addressed funding inequality in more concrete terms, many of which are now associated with the Harris government.

Initially, the Liberal and NDP governments addressed the funding inequities among boards through what was termed an 'equalization adjustment.' Gidney explains:

Government grants are intended to help localities meet the costs of providing education at a standard determined by the provincial policies. They can be crudely divided into three types. One, commonly called a 'foundation grant,' provides all localities with a set per-pupil amount designed to pay for basic classroom services ranging from teacher's salaries and textbooks to classroom supplies and custodial services. Another is the 'categorical grant,' intended either to compensate for special costs and needs (for example, heating in northern Ontario, rural transportation, or English as a second-language) or to encourage boards to pursue policies or innovations that the government has identified as worthwhile. **The third is an equalization adjustment.** The total value of property in different localities can vary enormously depending on the wealth of their residents or the size and number of their businesses and industries. In order to ensure that each locality has at least the minimum amount of money to maintain the education services required of it, government compensates poorer communities by means of larger grants or by some equivalent transfer of funds.⁵³ (bold type added)

These equalization grants clearly had their faults and were, in the end, criticized for their ineffectiveness in connection with the fact that the province only funded to a set per-pupil ceiling which did not address what Gidney deems as "the core issue" - the differences in fundraising abilities.⁵⁴ The NDP intended to address the inadequacies by proposing to take education off the property tax roll and to make education funding an entirely provincial responsibility when it was replaced in the 1995 election. The Harris government took up both of these NDP proposals.

Additionally, despite its own claims, the Harris government's so-called new, *simpler* funding arrangements were also reminiscent of those proposed by the NDP. In fact,

according to Hugh MacKenzie, there were not many differences between the Harris government's funding arrangements and those of the NDP. He writes:

The old funding formula was condemned by the Government as excessively complex, with its 34 separate grant components. However, in cross-examination in the Bill 160 court challenge, the government's deponent admitted that there were at least 34 separate grants in the new funding formula, many of which in turn were divided into sub-categories. The witness acknowledged under oath that the difference in complexity was a matter of "semantics". In fact, a detailed analysis of the funding formula and its accompanying regulations reveals a total of 37 grants determined in dozens of separate calculations.⁵⁵

Without speculating as to why the Harris government claimed to have simplified the funding process amidst these details which suggest that not very much has actually changed, clearly education financing remains a complicated issue.

Additional positions or issues on which all three parties agreed include the initiation of the Education Quality and Accountability Office and province-wide standardized student testing. Therefore, inasmuch as the Harris government's restructuring plans for higher "quality" education were problematic (especially in light of its distorted claims), it is important to keep in mind that many of its reforms do not represent new ideas. Rather, these reforms stem from an evolution of historically specific ideas of "quality" education in relation to perceptions of how to achieve economic growth and prosperity. Regardless of these shared positions, however, and, as the party responsible for legislating several of these evolving reform measures, the Harris government's arguments were notably flawed given their basis upon misguided assumptions and surface and/or narrow assessments of people, school boards and contexts. By digging beneath the surface of observed realities, I reveal a number of contradictions beyond the fact that education has been partially restructured along a continuum. The corresponding gaps in the government's arguments not only challenge the legitimacy of its mandate, but its leadership.

Contradictions: Less Public Expenditure = Lower Quality *Public* Education

The contradictions among the Harris government's arguments for higher quality education not only reveal the implausibility of creating an improved *public* education system with less public expenditure, they also raise questions about the government's agenda for the public sector generally. Where the public education system has been financially malnourished by Ontario governments since 1975 because of their consistent funding reductions, the public system has seemingly had to operate at the ironic expense of the poor (given the property tax rate hikes) and some students (given the per-pupil funding differences among boards). Where the Harris government has exacerbated the inadequate funding conditions by making additional budget cuts *and* placing new restrictions and demands school administrations, it is probable that the quality of public education has deteriorated, as opposed to improved, under the Harris government considering the 1970s commitment to a broader education mandate. Where this broader mandate represents a historically specific notion of "quality" education, we can also detect a cultural or regime shift in connection with the works of Shields and Evans, Jenson and Phillips, Veltmeyer and Sacouman, Wotherspoon, Miller, Gross Stein, and Armstrong, et al.

In light of its erroneous assumptions that public education had been a source of overspending, and that activities outside and inside the classroom were distinct and unrelated, it made sweeping budget cuts and unrealistic demands on school boards to "find" more *savings*. It further established a contingency relationship between administrative spending and classroom spending. Specifically, if a district school board did not have adequate funding for inside the classroom, it was because the board was continuing to spend too much money outside the classroom. Thus, by reducing its *purely* "administrative" (or *wasteful*)

spending, district school boards would be *empowered* to increase their funding inside the classroom. Yet, with the small exception of being able to escape the sticky issue of needing to raise property taxes, the Harris reforms have served to increase school boards' workload and responsibility greatly, and therefore their stress. This increased stress has been presumably poignant where school boards must grapple with conflicting mandates from the government – to improve operations by spending less public money; and the public – to realize public education as a public good. Considering that both mandates are unrealistic, however, school boards have seemingly had to operate according to a more singular goal – survival. In other words, by starving an already malnourished institution, the government's objectives for more affordability (in terms of cost-efficiency) and greater accountability (through increased reporting) have led to a lesser, as opposed to an improved, quality of *public* education. Combined with making education practices and students *more* “calculable” and hollowing-out local governance, the government has redesigned public education in light of changed perceptions of the best way to produce the “right” conditions suitable for economic growth.

Although no education system or government will ever be perfect, the quality of the *public* education system under the Conservative leadership of the Harris government has been diminished. This lower quality is likely considering the 1960s, early 1970s provincial commitment to broaden *public* education by expanding its provisions in attempts address a wider scope of public needs and how, under the Harris government, these provisions have been unevenly reduced. Specifically, junior kindergarten can no longer be offered by *all* boards, user fees have been implemented by others and/or, in the wake of insufficient

volunteerism to cover the gaps left by inadequate funding, some boards have (also) opted for corporate intrusion to avoid cutting programs and/or implementing user fees.

The government has increased regressive taxation to finance public education where it has reduced both the amount of public secondary schooling Ontario students receive as well as the educational provisions. This has meant that increasing costs have been downloaded onto private individuals/families. This has created the real potential for secondary school graduation to be increasingly determined along socio-economic lines where programs formerly offered by the public system now require private expenditure and therefore, have the likelihood of excluding certain brackets of the student population from getting the help, attention and advice they might need. These conditions subsequently combine to challenge the notion of education as a public good.

Higher quality education for the Harris government was about “improving” student achievement and keeping pace with education reform among the other provinces. Where we were informed that Ontario had not “kept pace,” the government claimed its reforms to improve the quality of education in a comprehensive manner would ensure that students received “the skills and knowledge they [would] need to lead fulfilling lives, and to compete and win in a competitive global economy.”⁵⁶ Yet it is significant that the government’s assessment of the quality of education offered in Ontario public secondary schools was deemed to be lacking or ‘behind the times’ in connection with quantitative comparisons of details that were completely extrinsic to the content of schooling. Where this quality assessment also formed the basis for government’s rationale to restructure Ontario’s public education system to be more focused upon standardized testing, single figures and “performance indicators,” questions about the purposes behind public education re-emerge.

Considering that “the determination of educational quality is a highly contested process that involves several levels of human judgement,”⁵⁷ the suggestion that quality education or student achievement could be contained by a single figure from a single standardized provincial, national or international test, for example, contradicts the emphasis on educating in a comprehensive manner.

By embracing a regime of standardized testing in order to quantify and compare elements extrinsic to the content of education, the government has restructured public education according to a narrow conception of student achievement. Where its concerns and methods for ‘improving’ the quality education revolved around its notion of “student achievement,” these too were correspondingly narrow and therefore, simplistic and even contradictory. This narrow and overly simplistic approach to improving the quality of education is perhaps most obvious with its contradictory actions to simply change the secondary school graduation requirements, on the one hand, while decreasing the education supports, on the other. Specifically, students can no longer graduate with a secondary school diploma unless they have passed a standardized literacy test and have learned more in a shorter timeframe. In its equation of increasing the level difficulty (academically, as well as socially and economically speaking) with *improvement*, the government’s approach seems to fit with Shields and Evans’ claims surrounding the cultural shift away from welfare citizenship and towards a more economic citizenship that deems everyone responsible for their lot in life.

The socio-economic hardships have presumably been increased as a result of the Harris government’s mandate to reduce public spending on education whose recent history records a legacy of provincial funding reductions. Where the Harris government has

exacerbated these underfunding conditions by further limiting district school boards' capacity to supplement inadequate provincial funding given the varied access to revenue sources and volunteers, for example. Although the implications would be correspondingly varied across the province, students' needs for particular education provisions, resources and programming have likely remained at a constant, if they have not increased. However, the percentage of students whose education needs cannot be met has surely expanded with the increased need for private expenditure in public education. Specifically, where the Harris government's use of privatization initiatives to restructure public education has decreased education provisions, the private market has been able to fill in gaps for *some* of those students whose needs could not be adequately addressed through the public system. Yet, where market-filled education provisions would require private expenditure, those students who cannot afford the costs, would be forced to continue their secondary schooling with their needs unaddressed. This situation is further complicated by the more demanding graduation requirements, for example. These circumstances raise the question as to how the government intended to curtail the rate of secondary school dropouts considering that many of those students unable to meet the increased demands, would also be without the help they need in order simply to improve. Not surprisingly, tensions have emerged from the government's reforms for and in connection with competing visions of, "quality" education.

Adequacy and Equity

The Harris government claimed *differences in per-pupil spending* among school boards that resulted in inequities in education opportunities across the province stemmed from a combination of school boards' ability to fundraise through property taxes and differences in local wealth or the size of revenue pools. Distinguishing between 'high' and

'low-spending' boards, the government claimed to resolve this issue by taking education off the residential or local property tax base (the effects of which were previously discussed above in connection with local autonomy) and by replacing the former "complicated" funding structure with a "simpler," "fairer" funding model. This funding model or formula was especially notable, according to government sources, for the way in which it would fund all school boards with the *same* per-pupil amounts in connection with their enrollment figures, regardless of their local wealth. In other words, the Harris government linked sameness to equality.

Yet, not only was the government's assumption that sameness indicated equal opportunity misguided, its assessment of the problem and of what needed to be *fixed* were misinformed. Specifically, differences in per-pupil spending among boards did not differ *because* boards were able to fundraise through residential property taxes. Rather, these differences emerged in response to inadequate and declining provincial funding in the face of sharp increases in education costs (see chapter two). Moreover, given this misdiagnosis and coupled with the fact the Harris government has reduced funding in an already under-funded system, providing the *same* funding has likely led or would lead to more, not fewer, inequities among students and boards. This contradiction is tenable with respect to the way in which school boards have been forced to deal with inadequate provincial funding and the loss of their power to fundraise through property taxation. Ironically, while the government claimed this reform measure would help to bring about equality among boards, not much seems to have changed. If anything, it seems likely that inequities among boards have increased by virtue of the different approaches to operating prior to the Harris government's reforms (that is, some had already implemented cost-saving initiatives). Inequities among

individual schools would also be more likely now, where schools have been *encouraged* to solicit and rely on volunteers, which would typically rely on the socio-economic background of the student population in order to recruit the “right” type of volunteers and to secure people with the time, energy and interests in volunteering at a secondary school. Where other options span implementing user fees to opting for corporate intrusion to cutting education programs, the implications would be similarly uneven where they would overburden the poor and/or smaller or lower income schools and localities.

Differences among boards would also follow from the combination of “provisions” in the government’s *Education Amendment Act* and its budget cuts. Although the *Education Amendment Act* made junior kindergarten a ‘choice,’ where it used to be entirely funded by the provincial government but is now 50% funded by the government, school boards who decide to offer junior kindergarten inevitably have to make cuts elsewhere given their reduced budgets. Thus, district school boards have been forced to prioritize programming as opposed to offering what their student population needs and/or to facilitate any improvements. Where the government claimed to address differences in school board spending by centralizing control over public funding to education and granting identical per pupil amounts, it ignored the fact that sameness does not necessarily mean adequate funding, especially given the differences among boards and the respective needs of their staff and students. Hugh MacKenzie points out some of these critical differences among school boards and their localities where he explains some of the problems with standardizing funding to school boards. Specifically he highlights that standardizing the “amount for salary and benefits across the province ignores the fact that pay and benefits for these categories of board employees are not the same across the province.”⁵⁸ He further explains that

... by basing that standard amount on 1997 salaries and benefit costs, the grant fails to account for inflation, salary increases as teachers move up the pay scale or the costs of providing benefits. [And in] evidence before the courts, the Government's chief witness testified that the numbers selected for teachers and assistants were those for the lowest board in the province, to ensure that no board would receive a "windfall". Only the board with the lowest salaries and benefits in the province will receive enough to pay their teachers at current salary and benefit levels. The more experienced and qualified a board's teachers, the greater the extent of the gap between funding and current salary and benefit levels. While the government claims that the "teacher compensation" grant takes care of this problem, it does nothing to reflect differences in costs for teaching assistants in different parts of the province. Furthermore...it also does not actually account for differences in compensation of teachers for many school boards.⁵⁹

MacKenzie also explains how and why sameness should not be equated with adequacy in connection with the \$43 per student allotment that comes out of the Foundation Grant for computers in the classroom.⁶⁰ According to the *Education Quality Improvement Act* constitutional trial cross examination, a government official admitted that \$43 was "just a number, among other numbers, picked by the Government to achieve its bottom line objectives."⁶¹ In other words, the standardized amount for computers had nothing to do with actual school board needs; rather, the amount was determined by an economic imperative that seemed to consider corporate interests (by restoring profitability via tax cuts and facilitating increased consumption) over any legitimate concerns for equality (which would require that we support more, not fewer, public education provisions).

Again, with reference to MacKenzie, the problems in the education system did not emerge because too much was being spent in some areas or on some students and not enough in or on others. Rather, inequities emerged "because the total level of funding for education in Ontario was insufficient to ensure an adequate level of resources for all..."⁶²

In its dismissal of the connections between adequacy and equity, the Harris government's reform measures for equality, that were based upon the incorrect assumption that sameness

would mitigate difference, have in all likelihood served to exacerbate socio-economic differences among individual students where a regressive tax (property) has been replaced by an even more regressive tax (user fees/private expenditure). This situation subsequently raises the question as to how the government's new funding formula could address and improve the quality of public education when it ignores specific school and/or school board needs.

Reforms to Public Education: Having Students Spend More *and* Less Time in Secondary School

In addition to altering how we fund education, a fact-finding report from the government's Education Improvement Commission made the connection between better student achievement and having students spend both more time with teachers and in school. Where these elements were quantified, calculated and averaged, the government was able to compare Ontario with other countries. The government subsequently decreed that the results from these comparisons indicated deficiencies in the quality of public education being delivered. Accordingly, the *Education Quality Improvement Act*, which empowered the government to determine both the number of hours of instruction that teachers should work and the amount of time students should spend in school, led to an increase in both by $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour and ten days respectively. These arguments and changes are perplexing, however, given the government's recent reform to *reduce* the amount of secondary schooling students receive from five to four years. Although the government claimed there was "no added value" to a fifth year of secondary schooling, clearly it had offered students' increased time in secondary school while providing them with more time with teachers.

Yet despite the government's conflicting claims and reform measures, the effectiveness or quality enhancement to increasing secondary schooling by ten days per year

and by .75 hours per day are questionable for at least two reasons. First, with reference to Terry Wotherspoon, where “the school day consists of both formal curricular expectations and social and other dimensions of the ‘hidden curriculum,’ there is no necessary correlation between the number of school days and the amount or quality of education in a given school jurisdiction.”⁶³ In other words, just because Ontario students might spend more days per year in secondary school compared to Manitoba students, for example, these numbers do not speak to the content or the “quality” of schooling during those ten extra days. Second, the way in which the government found those extra ten days was much like the its education reinvestment plans. In other words, increasing the number of days without actually elongating the school year has meant reductions elsewhere in the system. These reductions included the amount of time students have to write exams (10 days instead of 15) and reducing the number of teacher professional development days by half. This decision by the government was curious considering the effects of reducing the institutional supports for teachers, which were in place to help teachers improve their skills and abilities as educators in the name of students, and its claims to improve the quality of education by having students spend more time with teachers regardless of their skills or lack thereof.

Moreover, the government’s reduction in professional development days parallels the downloading of increased responsibility for addressing needs or educational gaps onto individual students, where teachers will also be increasingly responsible for improving their abilities as teachers on their own time and money. In addition to ignoring economic differences among the teaching staff, this change further ignores different lifestyles (e.g. family commitments) and/or places of residence (e.g. teachers living in small towns without

a college or university). Therefore, some teachers will be more limited than others in their ability to get the professional development they seek and/or need.

Having students spend $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour more with teachers per day for school year that has been extended by ten days seem trivial and contradictory in light of the reduced supports to help teachers improve (thus, students will be spending more time with teachers who are potentially improperly equipped), the elimination of an entire year of secondary school, and the mandate to *encourage* students to move through the system more quickly. These contradictory situations subsequently raise questions about the government's notion of "quality." However, these reforms are not the sole measures deemed to produce "quality" in education. In terms of the content of schooling, the government also claimed to improve the quality of education by establishing a standardized testing regime and greater accountability using "performance indicators." Accordingly, the government initiated the *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act*.

Improving Student Achievement Through Increased Demands, Decreased Supports

Through a four-step plan under the *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act*, the government promised the quality of education would be improved by providing clear measurable performance indicators through a new and improved curriculum (that would be more rigorous), a provincial testing program and by publishing students' test results. The government also established the Education Quality & Accountability Office (EQAO), to be the arms-length agency that would be responsible for creating and implementing the government designed testing regime. While neither space nor time exists to adequately investigate the Education Quality and Accountability Office in this project, it warrants further investigation in future studies. Yet, it is relevant to note here that inasmuch as the

EQAO was mandated to create and implement the new curriculum, tests and report on results, it was the government which demanded that the bar be raised on education expectations and standards as a way of improving the quality of education. In other words, the “arms-length” agency would act according to predetermined government policy, guidelines and a set budget. In part, the bar has been raised with respect to the new graduation requirements. However, all curriculum has been redesigned to expect that students learn more at a younger age.

In exploring the government’s arguments for a more rigorous curriculum and high stakes testing program, several contradictions come to light. In particular, I reveal flaws in the government’s arguments where they are based upon at least three interrelated erroneous assumptions: that Ontario students have not been challenged enough in the past (under the former NDP and Liberal governments); that by simply making education requirements more demanding, students will comply; and that results from standardized test are *the* indicators of student achievement. Seemingly, this core emphasis on quantifying and calculating education activities, practices and student performance into single figures in the Harris government reforms (as well as relatively recent trends in education reform more generally) is related to a regime or cultural shift.

The Harris government argued that graduation requirements should be more rigorous based on the mediocre to below-average test results, and the lack of incentive under the former system in which students were not challenged *enough*. Accordingly, the government implemented what it called higher standards for secondary school graduation by reorganizing curriculum standards and by requiring students to achieve a passing test score on the province-wide standardized literacy test. Secondary school curriculum has been redesigned,

in part, by drafting course expectations around a shorter timeframe for learning with a view to having students learn more in less time. Although partially related to a change in the expected high school completion time, students have also been *encouraged* to spend less time in secondary school in connection with the reform that would see marks for all courses taken disclosed on student transcripts. There are at least two problems with the government's reforms that aim to have students move through the system more quickly.

To reiterate from chapter two, education is inherently inefficient in light of how and when students learn due to differences in abilities as well as for socio-economic reasons. Thus, the government's reforms, which made learning in less time a standard of achievement, were not in the interests of students or the public good. Rather, *encouraging* students to spend less time in school by disclosing marks for all courses taken, for example, seems to follow from the political focus to restoring corporate profitability where the less time students are schooled, the less public expenditure is required, which creates more room for tax cuts. Disclosing all marks for courses taken not only ignores the particular circumstances affecting some students abilities to learn, it also calls the purposes behind public education into question where the system essentially punishes students who decide to try again if at first they do not succeed.

Similar contradictions emerge in the government's arguments to improve student achievement or the quality of education through high-stakes standardized testing. Although secondary students have the option to retake these tests, they cannot obtain their high school diplomas without a passing grade and all test scores are attached to student transcripts. While there is nothing wrong with testing literacy and using the results as a diagnostic tool, the Harris government legislation will likely prevent many students from graduating. This

raises the question again as to why a student would elect to stay in school if he or she did not pass the test, even if s/he decided to make a second or even third attempt.

The Harris government has seemingly narrowed the purposes of education by increasing students' focus upon numerical results and standardized testing. And where speeding students through the system may produce some initial "savings," the government's apparent concerns to improve the "quality" of education are confusing to say the least where student needs appear to be absent from its considerations. The fact that students should strive to finish their studies more quickly, on the one hand, while the government points out that spending more time with teachers and in school fosters higher student achievement only enhances this confusion. Yet inasmuch as these conditions tend to support the counter claim suggesting that the government operates under the guise of fiscal restraint, this explanation does not adequately address the government's measures for "quality" education that focus on quantifying students and education practices and deeming the resulting single figures "performance indicators."

At the same time as it promised to improve student achievement on account of implementing a standardized testing regime with high stakes, the government also explained that the resulting visibility of student performance was indicative of high standards. The government argued that students, parents, teachers, and taxpayers would all benefit from a standardized testing regime that published test results as a form of accountability that clearly measured student and individual school performance. Where these test results would be published in connection with students' schools, this represented the government's form of accountability for "quality" education. As concrete achievement indicators, the government assumed the results would help parents and teachers to be more effective in addressing

students' needs. At the same time, where these results would be published in connection with specific schools, they were said to reflect a school's effectiveness, especially with respect to teachers. The published test scores were further explained to benefit school boards, taxpayers, parents, and students where they would provide concrete analyses of a given school's weak areas, for example. These weak areas would subsequently allow boards to be more "effective" and "accurate" in their spending practices. In other words, the test results would help boards to spend tax dollars "wisely."

However, and with reference to Peter Miller's work, translating or quantifying education practices and activities (such as literacy) into single figures with a view to visibly accounting for the "quality" of education offered at a particular school represents a type of "managerial" or "cost-accountancy." Understanding the Harris government's reform measures for greater accountability and higher quality education as a form of managerial and/or cost accountancy further speaks to the government's agenda for education restructuring more generally. Specifically, they point to how the government's education policy changes go beyond fiscal restraint to affect the realms of governance and citizenship.

According to Miller, managerial or cost accountancy includes "a multitude of techniques for calculating costs, identifying deviations from standards, producing budgets and comparing these with the results actually attained, computing rates of return projected for the future,...and much else besides."⁶⁴ More importantly, however, are Miller's links between this type of "accounting" and power. As a twentieth century phenomenon and an increasingly "routine component of programs and strategies of governments in western nations,"⁶⁵ managerial/cost-accounting allows for a form of 'governance by numbers' while providing "a way of "harnessing the interests" of individuals, of utilizing their autonomy

rather than seeking to suppress it.”⁶⁶ Moreover, where the Harris government’s grade 10 literacy test harnesses the interests of students, teachers and school boards, it further represents an act of hegemonic politics in terms of the consent and coercion that it inculcates among those implicated (students, teachers, schools and school boards).

Despite the fact that the “more indeterminate human and social dimensions of education are ignored in the quest to generate standardized achievement test scores and quantitative measures of educational accountability,”⁶⁷ students and schools are forced to adopt and compete within the new standardized testing regime. This coercion and consent arise from the high stakes the government has attached to the test results, coupled with the fact that all test results will be published in association with students’ respective schools. The high stakes for schools/school boards come from the government’s reduced funding that is directly tied to district school boards’ pupil enrollment figures. Thus, where parents have recently been granted the “freedom of choice” in selecting a school for their son or daughter, schools will likely use their student test scores as a way to advertise to parents in order to maintain and/or increase student enrollment. Likewise, where students not only have their test scores attached to their transcripts but are required to pass the literacy test in order to graduate from secondary school, most students will not only aim to pass but strive to achieve high scores in the context of highly competitive post-secondary applications, for example.

In summary, the government’s decision to legislate mandatory standardized student testing (which was agreed upon by all three parties), has had both “autonomizing and centralizing effects.”⁶⁸ By evaluating education practices and student learning in connection with narrow “visible” indicators that are completely extrinsic to the content of schooling, the Harris government’s standardized testing regime has brought “the actions of “free”

individuals [(such as students and local school boards)] into accordance with specific objectives by enclosing them within a calculative regime.”⁶⁹ One such objective behind this and other reform measures seems to suggest that changes in public education are about educating a different type of citizen for a different type of regime or culture.

Framed as the reform to solve all problems in education, the Harris government narrowly subsumed student achievement under the guise of a single test score, in the name of apparent clarity and measurability. This numerical definition represents a narrow analysis of student achievement where it completely ignores the complexity and diversity of the content of secondary education. While test results may be useful in highlighting some problem areas, they should not be allowed to essentialize and single handedly determine a student’s literacy considering all the variables that go along with taking tests. In one instance, the government appeared to recognize some of these variables with respect to the grade 9 students’ test results from 1994-95 in the areas of reading and writing, for example. Snobelen stated:

The English boards reported that reading skills were 96% acceptable, which is an increase of 6% over the previous year’s testing, and the writing skills were at 93% acceptable, a decrease of 1% over the previous year...[But] I think it’s important to remember that there are some statistical anomalies in all of these reports. For instance, the boards that tend to be at the extremely good or extremely poor spectrum in the test results tend to be boards with a very small number of students, and I think that accounts for some of that range. I’d like to tell the member [from Mississauga West] that I’m very concerned that in fact over a third of the students in our English boards are performing at the very bare minimum of performance....⁷⁰

Although the minister was correct to point out some of the problems that come with quantifying student performance as a single figure, where certain details get hidden (i.e. school board particularities in terms of student performance), the government is selectively critical. This selectivity was most glaring given its comments above in contrast to its absolute faith in the ability of the results from *its* mandated standardized tests (the above results came from a standardized test issued by the former NDP government) to *clearly* judge

and measure student performance and the quality of education. This faith is evident in connection with the high stakes attached the test scores.

What was perhaps most perplexing and contradictory about the government's claims to improve the quality of education by raising the standards and its reforms, which enhanced the inadequate funding, resource and staffing conditions *and* increased the demands on school boards, schools and students. Specifically, where reduced funding has presumably led to narrowed education provisions and support, the government has seemingly restructured the system to place a greater onus on the individual for his/her success in the name of fiscal responsibility and reducing the burden on taxpayers. This "responsibilization" of individuals in terms of their academic "achievements" has the imbedded assumption that all students are the same and should be held responsible for their test results, for example. Yet, where the government's high stakes standardized testing ignores differences among students, it conceivably discriminates against those who do not come from an English (or French), stable, middle class, well educated family background.

While none of this is to argue in favour of a system without standards or for lax curriculum, nor is it to say that we cannot set out curriculum guidelines and strive to attain specific curriculum goals. It is paramount, however, that the education system aim to address students' needs by allowing guidelines and goals to be modified for students with special needs and/or special circumstances, for example. Thus, where students are being forced to adapt to a system that appears to be more focused on "finding savings," quantifying and calculating education activities and practices, and educating for a more "economic" and less democratic citizenship, questions emerge over the government's restructuring agenda. Although it argued that students needed to become more competitive in the wake of our

changed, globalized economy, even this claim is questionable considering the difficulty many students would have in becoming *more* competitive where they are unable to graduate from secondary school. Where the existence of contradiction and conflict among the government's arguments, claims and actions challenge the legitimacy of its leadership, looking beneath the surface of the observed reality of the Harris reforms was telling of both its agenda and Ontario's historical context. For although it clearly restructured public education in light of fiscal concerns, the Harris government's education reforms further support the arguments that suggest we are undergoing – through concerted political efforts - a cultural shift away from welfare rights and democratic citizenship towards a more individualistic society that is willing to accept inequality as 'normal.'

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Conclusions

Increased Inequities with Less Public Expenditure

I have argued that the Harris government's mandate to improve the quality of public education by spending less public money is untenable considering that its arguments for restructuring Ontario's public education system were based upon misguided assessments and assumptions of historical contexts, people and circumstances. Coupled with its primary method of restructuring through privatization initiatives, the government has likely diminished the quality of education in Ontario where its discordant education policies have increased the demands on students and school boards in particular, while decreasing the supports to facilitate their improvement and/or to enable them to meet the new, more rigorous provincial standards. Where these policy changes point to a shift in the concepts of "quality" education and citizenship, as well as a change in the political priorities, I suggest, with reference to Shields and Evans, Gross Stein, Veltmeyer and Sacouman, Jenson and Phillips, Miller, Wotherspoon, Jessop, and Armstrong et al, that we are in the midst of a societal or all-encompassing cultural shift. Specifically, this cultural change has involved steering the public good away from social, economic and political entitlements for equality towards a "good" that believes in trickle-down-economics and which enshrines a form of individual freedom willing to accept poverty and inequality as inevitable.

In terms of educating students, important differences exist among their learning abilities and methods as well as their education needs. During the postwar period, the Davis Conservative government made a provincial commitment to broaden the education mandate in an attempt to address and prevent these differences from becoming socio-economic inequities. Although the Davis Conservatives, the Peterson Liberal and the Rae NDP governments maintained contradictory policies by encouraging education program expansion

on the one hand and exercising fiscal retrenchment on the other, the Harris government has justified reducing public expenditure on public education out of a greater concern for taxpayers and “the future” over students and public needs. However, the government claimed that everything it did was in the interests of students and higher quality education, despite the fact that the changes it made would not affect all students (or schools and school boards) in the same way. In particular, the changes to secondary school graduation requirements would make it more difficult for some students to graduate. Couple these changes in curriculum with the government’s privatization initiatives, and some students will find it impossible to complete four years of secondary school, graduation aside.

Where the Harris policies generally decreased the public system’s supports and resources due to a combination of over twenty years of underfunding, the Harris government’s recent privatization initiatives, its increased centralized control and the decentralization of an increased workload have translated differences among students, schools and/or school boards into socio-economic inequities. This ‘translation’ is clarified considering the similarities in its approach to restructuring local governance to the one it applied to the content of schooling.

While the government increased the workload for school boards through amalgamation, by increasing the required number of Ministry reports to fill out, and by enforcing boards to “find additional savings” in a context of decreased funding, staff and resources, it made changes to the funding formulas (including reduced amounts and standardized methods of funding determination) that would not affect all school boards in the same way. Specifically, where differences among school boards existed and exist in connection with their particular local context (e.g. urban and rural; cultural and socio-

economic backgrounds of student populations), the government has reformed education policy and governance to ignore specific needs by requiring a central focus upon a narrow economic concern – to reduce education costs in order to reduce tax rates restore corporate profitability. This approach to funding has subsequently countered the Harris government's mandate to "improve" the quality of education where school boards – the former primary locus of local improvement initiatives - have been forced to focus on penny pinching for taxpayers and survival.

I developed these conclusions in connection with three main interrelated arguments, which highlight some of the most glaring contradictions in the government's claims surrounding its assertion to restructure for an improved public education system by spending less public money. These arguments were based upon a combination of historical empirical studies of the wider contexts surrounding education reform and an exploration of the Harris government's discussions and debates in the Legislative Assembly, its public web documents and its actual bills of legislation. First, I argued, in connection with Bob Gidney's and Paul Axelrod's work, that the Harris government's mandate to reduce public expenditure must be placed along the continuity of provincial fiscal retrenchment in education since 1975. Second, upon exploring the government's restructuring policies in concert with one another, there seems to be a dual process of decentralizing or downloading the provincial mandate onto students, schools, and school boards at the same time as the government has centralized control over more of the education system's components, namely policy, financing and governance. And third, the government has restructured public education to educate for a different type of citizenship as well as to function in relation to changed perceptions of the best way to foster economic growth and prosperity – by restoring corporate profitability. As

the so-called “engine” of the market economy, the political efforts aimed at restoring private sector profitability have shifted in connection with neoliberal ideas that espouse tax cuts over social programs, competition over support, cost-efficiency as an education objective. In other words, the Harris government has initiated the marketization of public education with its privatization initiatives and more centralized governance. Where my arguments specifically counter the government’s objectives to make the system “more affordable,” to provide “greater accountability,” and to offer “higher quality” education to students, I challenge its mandate as well as its leadership.

The Continuum of De-Funding Public Education in Ontario

Where the Harris government’s election was largely based on its claims to restructure public education in a distinct and “revolutionary” way - by reducing public expenditure on education - I have challenged the quality of its leadership by virtue of the continuity among all three parties in reducing provincial public expenditure on education, beginning in 1975. The government’s leadership is further called into question given its misguided assessment and faulty claims that problems in public education existed as a result of overspending. The combination of increased public demands on the system and a shift in the nature of the political economy led to a dramatic rise in education costs, which threw a wrench into the province’s concomitant promises to realize a broader education mandate and to pay for 60% of rising education costs. In the end, both commitments were dropped by the province and downloaded onto local school boards.

Where the province would fund 60% of what *it* calculated the costs of education *should* be (ignoring all the variables that had contributed to rising education costs), the governments under Davis, Peterson and Rae ended up reducing provincial public expenditure

between 15 to 20% of the total education costs. This led to school boards raising property tax rates in order to compensate for the inadequate provincial funding and meant that localities would be forced to pay for an increased percentage of education costs and/or make cutbacks. Yet given the differences in the size of school boards' property tax revenue pools, per-pupil funding inequities emerged among boards that was directly related to a particular board's location. The cause of these inequities, however, was a decrease in provincial funding and not, as the government claimed, because school boards had the power to set rates for and collect property taxes.

The Harris government's approach to solving these funding inequities among boards was to take education off the property tax base and make education financing a uniquely provincial jurisdiction in order to standardize education funding for all boards regardless of their locations. If funding levels had at least remained stable, making education financing an entirely provincial responsibility could have helped to resolve some of the funding differences among school boards. However, inasmuch as property taxation was regressive in terms of overburdening the poor with disproportionate percentages of their income going towards these taxes, requiring increased private expenditure to cover day to day education costs has essentially replaced a moderately regressive tax with a very regressive tax. And where its arguments to standardize public funding to boards equated sameness with equality, the government ignored the particularities among school boards in terms of differences in education costs (in terms of wages; size and age of facilities; previously implemented cost-saving measures, etc.) and therefore, ignored local funding needs. Yet, while the Harris government expanded its control over education financing and governance, it decentralized

or downloaded the work and responsibility involved in making the system operate with less public expenditure.

Centralized Power, Decentralized Work and Responsibility: “Quality” Education

I have challenged the Harris government’s arguments to provide higher quality education for Ontario students and to increase school boards’ local autonomy by revealing the ways in which the government’s reform measures have both centralized its control over education and decentralized the increased workload and responsibility for making a financially starved system function. One of the effects of this dual process has been a hollowing-out of school boards’ form and functions where their central focus has been necessarily occupied by concerns for “cost-efficiency” in order to simply make ends meet. Given the fact that boards have more work to do with fewer staff and resources – what the Harris government deemed as a more “efficient” system - coupled with their reduced funding and power, it is conceivable that school boards actually have less time and energy to devote to students and education matters.

Generally, the Harris government has centralized increased control over education financing, local governance and policy. It has concurrently increased the demands on school boards, however, by decreasing their funding (and therefore, their resources and power to facilitate improvement), reducing their staff, increasing their geographic areas of administration (which in turn, has increased the number of schools boards need to administer) through amalgamation, and increasing their reporting and accounting practices through measures for “greater accountability.” All of these reforms were designed in concert with the faulty assumption that school boards - like the provincial government - had been

spending in wasteful and ineffective ways, and that all education administration staff were self-serving “educrats.”

Where the implications to these measures for greater efficiency have likely exacerbated the inadequate funding conditions, the government’s measures for increasing school board autonomy, despite being essentialized under the rubric of choice, have had significant impacts on local school governance. As an example of one of the ways in which the government claimed it had improved the “quality” of public education and where this form of “quality” education deviates from its Conservative predecessor Davis’ notion, quality education must be considered in connection with its historical context.

Thus, despite the absence of any type of formal retraction of the 1960s commitment to a broader education mandate with a view to realizing education as a more inclusive *public* good, the government has nonetheless shifted public education away from its postwar purposes with a view to educating for a different type of citizen for a different type of regime or culture, to reiterate from chapter three, that:

allows every individual to determine her or his own behaviour and destiny, not freedom to enjoy positive outcomes...[where inequality] is accepted as an inevitable and necessary conditions of a free market where there is no predictability, and of a society where progress is achieved by providing rewards for initiative.¹

Related to this shift away from welfare policies, which the government links with fostering dependency, a lack of standards, and overspending, the government’s notion of “quality” education further connects with Peter Miller’s work in terms of the importance of increasing the “responsibilization” of students and their schools. Specifically, students need to take a greater responsibility for their education and academic achievements, which the government

¹ Shields and Evans, 80.

has aimed to foster through its standardized testing regime. The fact that fewer education supports exist in a context of increased demands as a direct result of the government's privatization initiatives for greater cost-efficiency and its absolute faith in testing as a way to visibly indicate student performance, has meant that the individual student and her/his family have been made more central to meeting these "higher standards." The fact that some students may not be able to afford to "improve" their achievement is also apparently irrelevant.

The government has further *encouraged* schools to take more responsibility in student achievement where it has tied funding to student enrolment, has allowed a school's "performance" to be visibly calculated and therefore "judged" in connection with student test results from the province-wide testing, and has provided parents with the "freedom" to choose their daughter or son's schools. Thus, contrary to the government's claims, centralizing control over both education financing and policy has helped to centralize local governance and has not increased school boards' local autonomy. By commanding control over how school boards receive their public funding as well as how much public funding they are to receive, the Harris government has simultaneously reduced the amount of public education secondary school student can receive and privatized education program expansion. Moreover, considering that school boards' differ in relation to their particular localities, the effects of less funding, less control, more work, and more responsibility have likely exacerbated inequities among boards, schools and students across the province.

Although centralizing control over education financing clearly has implications for education policy; the government has specifically centralized increased control over education policy through its measures for "higher quality education." Implementing

province-wide standards through standardized curriculum and testing has reduced local input and drawn more distinct lines among students in terms of who should and should not graduate in light of the changed graduation requirements. The onus to find a way to help students meet these new requirements in a context of inadequate funding and therefore, supports, has been decentralized or downloaded on to individual school boards through publishing students' test scores in association with their particular school. Coupled with the required reports on school boards' financing practices and cooperative agreements, the Harris government has essentially decentralized its entire mandate - to improve student achievement with less public expenditure - onto local school boards. Where boards have been forced to operate with less public expenditure (by virtue of the budget cuts and financial reporting), I come to my third core argument – that public education has been restructured in connection with changed perceptions of how to *encourage* economic growth and prosperity.

Economic Citizenship, Restoring Private Sector Profitability, and a Cultural Shift

Keeping in mind that no shift is absolute, I have argued that the political imagination surrounding the links between notions of “quality” education and economic growth and prosperity have shifted in at least two interrelated ways. Although public education continues to educate future citizens and discipline labour, the Harris government has diluted these foci in connection with changed ideas on how to produce the “right” conditions for the regional market economy. In a historical context straddling post-Fordism, post-industrialism and neoliberalism, a central concern in the government's public sector restructuring plans was to reduce operating costs, and therefore, public spending. This was done with a view to “restoring private sector profitability” and by using privatization (or, cost-efficiency)

initiatives in order to offer tax cuts that would serve to increase taxpayer purchasing power and attract corporate investment and expansion in Ontario.

I have also argued that educating students and forcing the education system to operate under the guise of *cost-efficiency* has specifically endorsed a shift in the type of citizenship and therefore, regime or culture, that is “needed” for the government’s narrow conception of the economy. Where this cost-efficiency has removed the amount of public education and/or has *encouraged* students to spend less time in school, the responsibility for an individual’s education has been increasingly downloaded onto her or him. However, the implications to these cost-cutting measures make the government’s agenda more complex than simply operating under fiscal restraint. Specifically, where every dollar removed from public coffers takes the most away from the most disadvantaged, the Harris government appears to be promoting a cultural shift – in terms of the role of the state and citizenship - that endorses and reproduces socio-economic inequality in the name of restoring corporate profitability.

Contributions & Future Studies

By and large, my contributions to the political economy of education and education reform have focused upon educating citizenship and the relationships between government and society, especially with respect to the notion of hegemonic politics. I have also contributed to the base of knowledge surrounding Ontario’s recent history of education reform as it relates to party politics and leadership. And lastly, I have added to the base of knowledge surrounding the particular provincial leadership under the Conservative Harris government.

Yet inasmuch as I have made contributions to these bodies of literature, I would like to propose additional areas of study in connection with and/or stemming from my particular

focus. Where I have investigated the government's claims and some of the counter claims surrounding its restructuring plans that have been in effect for over five years now, it would be fruitful to return to these reforms in connection with their empirical implications. It would also be useful to continue the explorations of the changes made to the education system beyond the timeframe I addressed in view of detecting whether or not there has been any shift in policy direction, especially in light of the new premier, Ernie Eves. Lastly, where the Harris government continually exposed Ontario's qualitative and operating inadequacies in connection with the other provinces, it would be worthwhile to conduct a more lateral study in connection with the other provinces.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Pupil Accommodation Grant

- The provincial government will be responsible for providing adequate financial resources to school boards; for providing school boards with flexible powers to deal with these issues; and for monitoring the actions of the boards to keep them accountable to taxpayers.
- School boards will be responsible for providing schools and facilities for their students, and for operating and maintaining their facilities as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Starting in September 1998, the government intends to calculate funding levels for “pupil accommodation” based on [three] main elements:

1. SCHOOL OPERATION AND RENEWAL

Funding will recognize realistic costs for these activities, and reflect the different requirements of elementary and secondary facilities:

- For operating costs (e.g., heating, lighting, cleaning): based on one amount per elementary student and one amount per secondary student
- For facilities renewal (repairs and rehabilitation in existing buildings): based on one amount per elementary student and one amount per secondary student

Boards will be required to report annually on their operation and renewal spending, and feedback will be sought from school councils about the conditions in the schools.

2. NEW CLASSROOMS AND SCHOOL FACILITIES

The government wants to encourage school boards to find the most effective ways to provide classrooms and other facilities that students need. As a first step, school boards will be required to demonstrate that they have used all existing school buildings effectively, and that their enrolment cannot be accommodated without new space.

If new space is required, in some cases this may mean building a new school. In other cases, it may make more sense to create a public/private partnership. Perhaps the school board could provide the land and lease back the building from a developer to meet a temporary peak in enrolment. A range of options will be available to school boards.

The government will provide school boards with a block grant on a per-pupil basis to deal with the costs of constructing, furnishing, and equipping new schools, and paying for this over time.

3. LAND FOR SCHOOLS

There has been an ongoing problem in getting land for new schools – in the right place, at the right time for enrolment growth, and for the right price. Our new approach will simplify this process.

The province will no longer provide grants for new school sites. Instead, boards will be encouraged to enter into cooperative agreements with developers and municipalities for joint-use sites and facilities.

They will be able to continue using sites within their existing land holdings or purchase new sites using savings from board operating grants or through continued use of an Education Development Charge (EDC), to be paid by developers and builders of new residential or business projects.¹

¹ Ministry of Education and Training, (1997) *Excellence in Education: Student-Focused Funding for Ontario* [online] available at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/> [2001, January 30].

Appendix B

Taken from the Ministry of Education and Training's *Excellence in Education: Student-Focused Funding for Ontario*

Foundation Grant

We will clearly establish the base cost of educating a student and will cover this cost through the foundation grant. The components of the grant (shown below) represent those things which parents and other members of the education community have told us must be included in funding elementary/secondary education.

- Classroom Teacher
- Teacher Assistant
- Learning Materials
- Classroom Computers
- Preparation Time
- Library Services
- Guidance
- Other Professional and Para-Professional Supports
- School-Based Administration
- Teacher Support and Supervision²

² Ministry of Education, (1997) *Excellence in Education: Student-Focused Funding for Ontario* [online] available at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/> [January 30, 2001].

Appendix C

Special Purpose Grants

Student-focused funding will provide grants to school boards for special programs to meet students' needs and boards that face unique local circumstances which are beyond their control. While the foundation grant supports the components of a classroom education that are *common* to all students, the special purpose grants recognize *differences* in student and board needs, in language proficiency, in geography, in transportation needs, and in many other aspects of education.

To improve accountability, school boards will be required to report how they spend the money which is intended for these special purposes. We are proposing that grants be simplified and streamlined to include:

1. Special Education Grant
2. Geographic Grant and School Authorities Grant
3. Learning Opportunities Grant
4. Language Grant
5. Adult and Continuing Education Grant
6. Transportation Grant
7. School Board Administration and Governance Grant

These special purpose grants are described in more detail below.

1. SPECIAL EDUCATION GRANT

School boards are required by law to provide special education programs and services for students identified as exceptional. The government is proposing to make boards more accountable by moving special education funding from the foundation grant to a new two-part special education grant.

The proposed components of this grant are

- A per-pupil grant to provide the costs of assessment and assistance needed by most exceptional students – for example, many students who have a moderate learning disability benefit from regular assistance both inside and outside their normal classroom in learning areas such as reading and mathematics – and for gifted children to obtain their special programming;
- A specific grant, designed by the identified needs of particular exceptional students, to provide high-cost assistance to a relatively small number of students – for example, deaf and blind students require specially qualified teaching staff, educational assistants, and specialized instructional materials.

2. GEOGRAPHIC GRANT AND SCHOOL AUTHORITIES GRANT

These grants pay for the additional costs faced by school boards in purchasing goods and services in areas that are remote from major urban centres; the higher costs of small schools in isolated areas; and the costs of very small school boards ("School Authorities", currently known as "Isolate and Hospital Boards").

3. LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES GRANT

Some students are at greater risk of academic failure because of their social and economic situations. They may find it difficult to arrive at school ready to learn, and may need extra help to achieve the standards set in the new curriculum. A new learning opportunities grant will assist these students.

The learning opportunities grant will be given to school boards to provide a wide range of programs determined locally, which will improve these students' educational achievement.

School boards currently meet the needs of these students with the strategies such as: reading recovery programs (intensive remedial work); additional educational assistants in particular classrooms; and reduced size in schools with high-risk factors.

1. LANGUAGE GRANT

This comprehensive new grant will include funding for the additional teaching, learning materials, and administrative costs associated with a variety of existing language programs. Current areas of funding that will be included in the new grant are: French as a first language; French as a second language; Native as a second language; English as a second language; specialized French-language support; and international languages.

2. ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION GRANT

This grant will pay for summer school and credit education for adult students aged 21 years or older who are enrolled in day or night continuing education programs.

It will also cover non-credit adult English/French as a second language programs provided by school boards. We will be considering how best to reform existing second-language programs for adults.

3. TRANSPORTATION GRANT

School boards currently receive a "block grant" (lump sum) to pay for transporting students to and from school. Many boards are now developing cooperative arrangements with other boards to share transportation routes and costs. Sharing information about these best practices will help other school boards to find more cost-effective ways of dealing with students' transportation needs. We are proposing to continue this grant, and will work with school boards and the school bus sector to improve efficiency while maintaining the highest safety standards for students.

4. SCHOOL BOARD ADMINISTRATION AND GOVERNANCE GRANT

A new grant is proposed to recognize the following costs:

Trustees: based on the number of trustees in the new school boards; intended to cover trustee salaries and expenses, and secretarial and other costs related to trustee meetings.

Directors and Supervisory Officers: required by the school board; funding to be calculated on the basis of enrolment.

Central administration Costs: intended to fund the business functions of the board (for example, the school board acting as an employer), and the costs of operating and maintaining board offices and facilities. The government would set up the funding based on students enrolment, and would make adjustments for the higher costs faced by very small boards and by boards covering very large geographic areas.³

³ Ministry of Education, (1997) *Excellence in Education: Student-Focused Funding for Ontario* [online] available at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/> [January 30, 2001].