



Equity in Public Education

Written by: Arnold Reimer

*What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?*

Langston Hughes¹

Last year the Government of Manitoba passed legislation promising an appropriate education for all students (Bill 13). Provincial consultations on how to achieve that promise are in progress. In October of 2004 Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth unveiled an action plan for Aboriginal Education which sets as a goal increased graduation rates by Aboriginal young people. A recent reassessment of property in Winnipeg occasioned headlines about a feared property tax “cash grab”² by school boards, resurfacing old questions about finding an equitable way to share the education tax burden among school divisions and among taxpayers. To the south, 2004 marked the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v Board of Education*, the landmark case in which the U.S. Supreme Court decided that segregated education was unconstitutional because it was “inherently unequal”. Legislative action in pursuit of equity in public education has continued, persistently and pervasively. But are we any closer to the goal? Is it a dream deferred?

Equity is a Commitment of the Public System

This enquiry is about equity in *public* education. Our public K-S4 education system has both a moral and legal obligation to educate all children equitably. If inequities arise, the public system offers avenues for redress. Equity is a primary commitment of the public system. Private/independent/exclusive schools on the other hand (although they receive public funds and do serve the public good) cannot, in the same way that public schools can, claim to be champions of equity. Shielded by select admissions requirements and by self-defined educational or parochial missions, private schools look first to their own constituencies, and have, by definition, ceded ground when it comes to equity. Open access for all is simply not at the top of their mission statements. It is the public schools that aspire to - indeed are obligated to - extend an equitable welcome to all students in our society.

Debate continues about the fairness of providing public financial support to private schools. Some see an inequity when persons already paying public school taxes are required to pay additional fees to send their children to private schools. Others hold that funding of private schools perpetuates inequity because, while all children are compelled by law to attend public school (usually an assigned local school), only some families have access to the private school.

More problematic when it comes to equity is how to view the charter/voucher/magnet genre of schools. These schools, operating within the public system itself, are also defined by a variety of educational “missions”. Their proponents hold that such schools offer choice, and that, by example and by competition, they lead the entire system towards educational improvement. The Edmonton public school system a few years ago was featured in a major educational journal³ as an exemplar of a public system which, by offering a full plate of school choice *within* the public system, had stopped the hemorrhage to private schools. Every school jurisdiction across Canada has its coveted “prestige” and “lighthouse” schools. Do such schools serve the principle of equity? Jonathon Kozol, in *Savage Inequalities*, offers this insight:

Continued inside ►

*The magnet system is, not surprisingly, highly attractive to the more sophisticated parents...who have the ingenuity and, now and then, political connections to obtain admission for their children. It is also viewed by some of its defenders as an ideal way to hold white people in the public schools by offering them 'choices' that resemble what they'd find in private education. Those the system chooses to save...are the brightest youngsters, selected by race, income and achievement for magnet schools where teachers are hand-picked and which operate much like private institutions.*⁴

The Canadian context is different than Kozol's America, but one senses it is true here also that the sophisticated wealthier classes have disproportionate access to the best schools - public or private. However, questions about the relative equity of "private/independent/exclusive" schools, or "charter/voucher/magnet" schools, divert us from our main task, an enquiry about equity in public education.

The Motivation for Equity

Why do we seek equity? On a fundamental level our quest for equity, in education as in all public service, arises out of our innate sense of fair play, a sense of a 'natural law' that tells us all members of a society are of equal value before the law, and should have equal access to the benefits of that society. Stephen Lawton, in his primer on education finance, *The Price of Quality*, sees human compassion in our concern for equity:

*Equity, efficiency, autonomy, and adequacy are the four values that tend to underlie debate about education finance....Equity remains as the paramount issue that attracts public notice and support. The underdog, it seems, has a special position in our hearts, and it seems unfair for one child, because of chance, to have access to a better public education than another.*⁵

A recent Manitoba Education document puts it this way: "Equity is a concept that flows from our concern for equality and social justice in a democratic society" [emphasis mine].⁶ The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, since 1981, has enshrined these 'natural' principles of equity in law, and today Canadians' protection against inequitable treatment in education rests in a legal right as well as in our personal/social/political commitment to fairness.

Definitions of Equity

What do we mean by equity? If our concern for equity arises from our sense of fair play and compassion, a definition is still required. Webster's "freedom from bias or favoritism"⁷ works well enough, but current notions of equity are much

more complex. One way of defining equity is to identify the inequities we hope to eradicate. Two sources of inequity are evident: those arising from the education system's structure and practices, and those arising from the student's ethno-cultural and socio-economic context. Another way of defining equity is to consider the broad sequential elements comprising education - a common trilogy emerges:

1. Equity of *resources* (supports, finances, taxes);
2. Equity in *process* (the school experience, program, content, access);
3. Equity of *outcomes* (learning achieved, impacts on later life).

Such general conceptions of equity are very broad in scope. The literature reveals dozens, if not hundreds, of more specific equity challenges in education. The brief list below, in no particular order, will illustrate the scope of the equity challenge.

- Equity in teacher expectations and behaviours
- Equity in access to good teachers
- Equity in career expectations and career or academic counseling
- Equity with respect to gender
- Equity with respect to sexual orientation
- Equity with respect to school disciplinary processes
- Equity in access to culturally appropriate learning resources
- Equity in access to appropriate language supports
- Equity in access to programs and resources appropriate to individual abilities, disabilities, interests, talents, gifts, special needs
- Equity in access to technology
- Equity in access to athletic facilities and athletic programs
- Equity in access to and participation in education governance, policy-making, school boards, advisory bodies
- Equity in bearing the tax burden supporting education
- Equity with respect to school system or provincial purchase policies
- Equity in ... *the list could be much expanded.*

Equity of Resources

Having briefly explored definitions of equity, a look at some more specific challenges is in order. Consider first equity in relation to various forms of taxation, funding formulas, and financial support allocation models - the *resources* for public education. In Manitoba much recent debate has centered on the question whether property tax is an appropriate (and/or equitable) revenue source for education. The problem: property tax rates vary greatly - inequitably - among school divisions. (As an aside, "education tax" is the only major tax in Manitoba that is labeled as to its purpose. We do not

have a medical tax, a social services tax, a law enforcement tax. Other taxes are usually named for their sources - income tax, sales tax, gasoline tax. One wonders what effect singling out "education tax" in this way has on taxpayers.)

Reducing property tax inequities is difficult. Many recommend full provincial funding of education to level the playing field between rich and poor divisions, although there are serious concerns about loss of local control in that approach. Others opposed to full provincial funding are concerned that Manitoba cannot fiscally afford to vacate property tax as a revenue source, and that shifting education costs to sales or income tax would bring other inequities. In several provinces where there is full provincial funding, however, property taxes still support education, but it is the province that levies the tax, at a uniform - and equitable - rate across the province. In contrast, the Manitoba government's strategy of eliminating its provincial Education Support Levy (ESL) - the only part of the property tax which is applied at a uniform rate across the province - is a retreat from equity, not an advance towards equity.

When it comes to resource allocation, we have long since left behind the notion that we should spend the same number of dollars on each child. Our sense of fairness and compassion has led to compensatory funding - a more generous (but therefore equitable) allocation of resources for the disadvantaged. Despite the perennial shortage of funds for education (an adequacy issue rather than an equity issue, *per se*), compensatory resource allocation is well established. This is not to excuse the fact that in tight times it is sometimes the compensatory programs, along with other "peripherals" and "non-essentials," that first experience the sharp edge of budget cuts. School divisions should guard against such budget-driven re-introduction of inequity.

Equity in Process

Compensatory funding is a means to pursue equity in the resources for education. Pursuing equity in the process of education is more complex. In seeking to serve all students, public education has become increasingly adaptive in order to meet the varying needs of all students. We do not say that all students will receive "the same" education. Instead, we see multiple curricula, modified curricula, adapted curricula, differentiated education, differentiated programs, individual education plans (IEP's), and a host of similar accommodations to meet individual student needs. Educators are agreed that equity in educational programming does not mean all students should receive the *same* educational programming.

Some - perhaps those who seek to define a minimum "basic" education for all - decry this trend towards adaptation. President Bush, for example, echoing the more rigid advocates of the "all-children-can-learn" and "no-child-left-behind" schools of thought, spoke a few months ago of "the

soft bigotry of low expectations,"⁸ re-emphasizing an insistence on results (at least those results measurable by standardized tests) which has so permeated educational discourse in recent times.

Equity of Outcomes

This brings us to the third, most difficult aspect of the trilogy - equity of *outcomes*. The Manitoba Education document cited above accepts this challenge head on: "Educational equity refers most broadly to a concept of fairness with respect to educational opportunities, access, and *outcomes* [emphasis mine] for all people."⁹ Since we have already observed above that school programs are being adapted to meet individual student needs, it is not logical to seek the *same* outcomes for all. But what does *equity* in outcomes mean? What does 'no child left behind' mean? Left behind in what? In attaining a certain 'basket' of academic skills? Social skills? Job and career skills? Left behind when? At a certain age? At a certain grade? At graduation? Fifteen years after graduation? Left behind whom? The norm? Those of similar ability? Those in another province? These questions are so complex that one wonders whether equity of outcomes can be a realistic, achievable goal.

Even if we could reach agreement about the one best mix of essential, universal outcomes that we want all students (equitably) to attain, how we measure the attainment of outcomes is critical. And what we do with the results of our measurements can bring on unintended results. Highly-publicized competitive comparisons of performance (often administered by agencies external to the school) can bring resentment and destroy motivation. We must guard against The Fraser Institute's Darwinian, competitive stance which would have us publish school outcomes and rank schools in descending order, so that the privileged classes can vote with their feet and move their children to higher-ranked schools. When Peter Holle of the Frontier Centre for Public Policy praises the "opening of the school market in Alberta," and contends that choice and charter schools in Alberta exhibit superior academic performance,¹⁰ we need to ask whether such schools do well because of superior pedagogy, or because such schools attract the children of the privileged. Further, we might ask what such stratification of schools does to society as a whole.

Don Kussmaul, current President of the American Association of School Administrators, spoke recently to a convention of the Canadian Association of School Administrators. His remarks on "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) outlined a litany of ills which are troubling this originally well-intentioned effort at achieving equity

of outcomes. Publication of school performance data (so often reflecting socio-economic factors) is demoralizing staff and driving parents, aided by vouchers, to desert their local schools. Literally a return to a free-market model, NCLB has become a 'survival of the fittest' scenario, in effect more punitive than compensatory, and having little to do with equity.

Thus far, in exploring equity and outcomes, our focus has been on outcomes students achieve *at the time of graduation*. Dare we go beyond that? Can we hope for equity in post-school *life outcomes*? Can we realistically expect that somehow our public schools will bring social justice and economic equity to our society?

In 1966 Coleman found that "the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront life at the end of school."¹¹ Jencks confirmed Coleman's findings, noting that student achievement is primarily a factor of the student's background, and that schools do little to lessen the achievement gap (and the subsequent life style and life income gap?) between rich and poor, able and less able students.¹² Recently Richard Rothstein, commenting on the relationship between schooling and life-time incomes, noted that "even if our schools were able to graduate each child with a PhD, society would still have to sort out which PhD's would do the nuclear science, and which PhD's would sweep our streets."¹³ Rothstein's point is that while educators may aspire to equitable achievement of *school outcomes*, a myriad of economic and social realities far beyond school walls will create inequities in life-time income. Educators should avoid rhetoric suggesting that schools alone are the key to economic equity in our society.

Conclusion

Our conclusion about equity in public education is positive - educators, by and large, do value fairness, and do believe in compensatory measures to raise the disadvantaged. Bart McGettrick of Glasgow University recently challenged Manitoba educators to "raise each child to distinction."¹⁴ Educators do not shirk from that task. But so often the "devil is in the details. Almost any action in education (be it undertaken by teachers, administrators, school boards, or provincial governments) has the potential to create an inequity.

Our challenge is to ask the right equity questions about the work we do. Will all students benefit equitably from this action? Do all students have equitable access to this service? Is the tax burden in support of this program equitably shared? Have we made progress, since last we took up the challenge, in providing this resource more equitably to all students? Has someone been lost in the cracks? Can

we refurbish this older school so that there is reasonable equity in the school facilities our students experience?

Recently the federal Minister of Justice, Irwin Cotler, challenged a national gathering of lawyers to address a variety of inequities in Canada's justice system. His words apply well to public education:

*We must aspire to a society in which no one is left behind, in which equality is not only an ideal but a constitutional norm, in which we extend a hand to those disadvantaged and discriminated against. The test of a just society, a society organized around the principles of equality and human dignity, is how it treats the most vulnerable of its members — children, women, ...minorities, aboriginals. Every one of these groups must find a place in the justice agenda.*¹⁵

¹ As quoted in Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (1991), p. 2.

² *Winnipeg Free Press*, October 14, 2004

³ "Edmonton's Enterprise," in *The School Administrator* (AASA publication, May 2001)

⁴ Kozol, *op cit*, p. 59-60. (He is quoting here from the Chicago Tribune.)

⁵ Lawton, *The Price of Quality: The Public Finance of Elementary and Secondary Education in Canada* (1987) p. 109-110.

⁶ Manitoba Education, *Diversity and Equity in Education: An Action Plan for Ethnocultural Equity* (2003) p. 4.

⁷ Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary* – the first definition under "equity".

⁸ President George W. Bush, in a speech at Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, January 9, 2004.

⁹ Manitoba Education, *op cit*, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Winnipeg Free Press*, August 16, 2004

¹¹ Coleman, *Equality in Educational Opportunity* (1966) p. 325.

¹² Jencks, *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effects of Family and Schooling in America* (1972)

¹³ Richard Rothstein is a research associate of the Economic Policy Institute and a visiting lecturer at Teachers College, Columbia University. The cited comment was made at an AASA National Conference on Education several years ago.

¹⁴ Bart McGettrick, University of Glasgow, in a speech at the Summer Institute of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, 2003.

¹⁵ *Winnipeg Free Press*, August 17, 2004, p. A3.

Additional Resources:

Berne, Robert and Picus, Lawrence O., Eds.; *Outcome Equity in Education* (Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, California, 1994.)

Burtless, Gary, Ed.; *Does Money Matter? The Effect of School Resources on Student Achievement and Adult Success* (Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 1996)

About the Author

Arnold Reimer, now retired, was Assistant Superintendent of Administration in St. James-Assiniboia School Division, followed by several years as the Executive Director of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents.