

**TEACHER WORKING CONDITIONS IN ALBERTA
DURING THE KLEIN REGIME**

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Abstract

The thrust of this research project was to examine how educational reform in Alberta, under the Klein regime, has affected teacher workloads and morale. The first section of this project establishes a political context and examines how the Klein government's neo-conservative ideology has permeated educational discourse, policy and reform. The second section is the interview portion of the study and is designed to help the reader gain a better understanding of current teacher working conditions in the province of Alberta. The inquiry adopted a qualitative approach and the data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The research will show that educational reform in Alberta is more about balancing budgets and eliminating deficits, in view of competing in the global marketplace, rather than improving the quality of education for students. The research will also attempt to show that the alleged crisis in public education was artificially created to orchestrate a massive and unprecedented restructuring of public education in Alberta.

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Political Context

Educational reform, performance indicators, performance standards, information and communication technology outcomes, accountability, standardized testing, personal professional growth plans, school-based management, charter schools, parent advisory councils... these are the latest catch words resonating in the halls and classrooms of Alberta schools. Under the Klein regime, education in Alberta has undergone unprecedented and drastic change. Educational reform in Alberta can be likened to a school's antiquated lighting system being completely retrofitted to meet more rigid environmental standards. Much like the inefficient and wasteful fluorescent lights of old, the political discourse of the early 1990s indicated that the education system was in need of a major overhaul. Since 1993, the Klein government has steered Alberta on a new circuit his government coined as the *Alberta Advantage*. This paper is an attempt to show how the Alberta Advantage has evolved into the 'Alberta Disadvantage' for teachers.

One does not need to study an array of statistics to know that teacher frustration is at an all time high. A headline in the November 30th issue of the Edmonton Journal (2001) hailed: "*Teachers vote to strike: Strike likely in January, other boards expected to follow.*" It is my hypothesis that the current unrest is related to chronic underfunding and a top-down approach to educational reform that has left teachers feeling bewildered, dissatisfied and angry.

Teaching Under Duress

Fatigue appears to be plaguing the contemporary classroom. I believe this fatigue stems from a public and governmental perception that educators are not accountable and are not to be trusted. On the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) website

(<http://www.teachers.ab.ca>), in the *Question and Answer* section, parents and community members are informed as to why teachers are voicing their concerns about deteriorating classroom conditions in Alberta. Underfunding has led to large class sizes, multiple-grade or multiple-course classrooms, the elimination of important support positions (such as school counsellors, teacher-librarians, special needs experts and family liaison workers) in some schools and the threats of school closures. The ATA warns their on-line readers (<http://www.teachers.ab.ca>), that under funding “may compromise the quality of the learning experience...” (p. 2) for students in Alberta.

The elimination of essential support services such as school counsellors and other specialists, have tremendously increased the workload of teachers. It is not uncommon to see teachers’ vehicles parked in the school parking lot on weekends and late the evening. Many beginning as well as seasoned teachers joke about how they often race out of the school at 11:58 p.m. in an effort to beat the alarm system that arms itself at the stroke of midnight. This trend of overwork is alarming.

Family and personal relationships as well as teacher wellness are suffering from the Alberta Advantage. The Canadian Teachers’ Federation reports that, “only 75% of teacher graduates take jobs as teachers and that there are indications Canada could be losing 25 to 30 percent of beginning teachers in their first five years of employment (<http://www.teachers.ab.ca>). A university professor who was an instructor in a graduate level course that I completed several years ago, also confirmed this trend. She asserted that most teachers enter the profession full of high ideals and are anxious to experience the fulfillment of ‘making a difference’ in the classroom. Unfortunately, she reported,

many will have quit teaching before they complete five years of teaching and will have left the profession burned out and/or demoralized.

In his commentary on education in the global economy, Harrison (1999) offers insights into the meanings behind the Alberta Advantage and its implications for teachers. In a staples-driven economy (such as in Alberta), volatility in the economy exists because our resource extraction is closely tied-in to global markets. For example, in 1998, an economic downturn in Asia led to a decrease in revenue in Alberta during the same period. In a political climate that embraces low taxes for the corporate sector, these boom and bust cycles have significant consequences for the education sector. Harrison (1999) argues the following: “Given that social welfare, health, and education incur the largest expenditures of any departments, anywhere, they are the most targeted for cuts when the inevitable downturn occurs” (p. 36). In other words, if the government chooses not to widen the tax base during an economic downturn, there is an insufficient amount of revenue in the provincial treasury to adequately fund high expenditure departments such as education and health. Thus, this reliance on strong oil and gas prices to collect revenue can then be used to rationalize increases or cuts to educational funding. It is critical to note that fluctuating oil and gas revenues are not responsible for cutbacks to education, but rather, ideological choices akin to taxation made by the Klein government.

Harrison (1999) goes on to explain that following the Growth Summit in 1997, the Alberta Advantage was expanded to include “people development” (p. 39). I remember this emergent term being defined in an educational context by the Klein government and I assumed that the government had admitted the error in setting its educational policies and would finally restore funding to adequate levels. To my

disappointment, I soon discovered that my definition of ‘people development’ did not correspond to Ralph Klein’s interpretation of the term. Harrison (1999) exemplifies the government’s definition of ‘people development’ with the following statement: “The reinvention of education in Alberta is designed to link education and training more than ever to the needs of Alberta’s major resource industries” (p. 39). In a resource-based economy, the trades offer specialized skills that are seen as valuable and contributory to the province’s economy. According to Harrison (1999), this may explain, “...the Tories’ skepticism towards higher education” (p. 40), especially in fields associated to the arts and the social sciences. The government finds it difficult to understand where “...political scientists, playwrights, ecologists, and all those nurses, social workers, and teachers fit in” (Harrison, 1999, p. 40) to their ideological arrangement. Teachers express feelings of being undervalued by the Klein government because the skills of teachers do not directly contribute to a resource-based economy. Harrison (1999) concludes his chapter by stating that, “Albertans must also free themselves of the belief that education is only a means to an end, a tool in the service of the economy” (p. 42) and that the government needs to re-examine the way in which it allocates funds to education.

Educational Reform and Political Agenda

Between 1993 and 1995, a restructuring of education occurred in Alberta like in no other educational jurisdiction in Canada (Barlow & Robertson, 1994, pp. 217-219). The educational reforms of the era, implemented by the conservative government, included:

1. A 5% wage rollback,
1. Funding cutbacks of 12.4% (\$239 million) to school boards,
1. A centralized collection and allocation of funds to school boards,

1. Amalgamations of school boards (from 141 boards to 60);
 1. An expanded use of standardized testing in order to hold schools accountable to the public,
 1. More of a focus on meeting the needs of business and industry in the new business plan,
 1. The introduction of outcomes-based education,
 1. The introduction of charter schools and increased parental choice,
 1. The implementation of measures to ensure accountability of public dollars invested in education, and
10. One hundred and seventy staffing cuts at Alberta Education.

Most of these reforms appear to be economic and political reforms disguised as educational reforms. Taylor (2001) suggested that business leaders had much to gain from political and fiscal reform in Alberta. Decreasing the deficit and working toward the elimination of the provincial debt would result in a stronger economic and business climate in Alberta. In corporate language, taking fiscal responsibility translates into less spending on social programs thus leading to taxation cuts and greater opportunity for increased profit. However, according to Barlow & Robertson (1994),

The basis for reforms was, neither pedagogical nor fiscal, but ideological and political, consistent with ultraconservative beliefs about the role of government (as small as possible), the role of the private sector (as large as possible) and a deregulated marketplace. (p. 219)

Under this ideological framework, the onerous task of maintaining a welfare state is minimized.

Politicians aligned with this ideology argue that the social safety net discourages initiative and encourages citizens to rely on government handouts for subsistence.

Reliance on high taxation to maintain these government programs discourages investment and 'Big Business' looks elsewhere to establish their factories and company headquarters. In a climate of decreased taxation and 'laissez-faire' economics, trade barriers are dismantled and the stage is set for multinational companies to enter Alberta with their capital and need for qualified workers. Proponents of this ideology believe that the private sector can regulate itself in a healthy competitive marketplace thus leading to greater prosperity for all sectors. If the same economic principles were applied to education and healthcare, would that not lead to greater efficiency, choice and quality of services for Albertans?

The challenge for the Klein government was to convince the Alberta populace to buy into their ideology. I contend that the Klein government used the media as a means to disseminate their propaganda and fabricated a supposed crisis in education. "Like a good advertisement," writes Taft (1997), "Ralph Klein can create an image of authority without providing authoritative information. He can sound credible without telling the whole truth... Klein can create good feelings without much concern for the underlying substance" (p. 73). Taft (1997) refers to an agency called the "Public Affairs Bureau" and explains that this agency houses the government's public relations experts, or as Taft likes to call them, "spin doctors" (p. 73). Created in the 1970s, this agency was responsible for the dissemination and coordination of government brochures and other publications. In the past, the position of 'Director of Communications' for this agency was normally assigned to a cabinet minister. Ironically, indicates Taft, when Ralph Klein became premier, "...he put himself in charge" (p. 75) of this department. It is my contention that Ralph Klein, with the help of his 'spin doctors,' has led Albertans to

believe that there was a compelling need to make our education system more streamlined and competitive in the global marketplace.

In 1995 Ontario's Education Minister John Snobelen borrowed Mr. Klein's political strategy and created a situation similar to the one in Alberta. Snobelen was videotaped telling his senior managers at a meeting with the Department of Education, that in order to persuade the Ontario public that education reform was needed, "...a sense of crisis needed to be created in the system". (Canada and the World Backgrounder, Dec. 1998, p. 25). This was an explosive and revealing statement. The public at large needed to realize that changes to education have had little to do with improving student learning and more to do with drastically reducing costs. The agenda of right-wing governments appears to be motivated by saving money, centralization of power and validating ideology rather than pedagogical improvements to the education system. Fortunately for Mr. Klein, most Albertans bought into the slogan that the quality of education was low in Alberta. Consequently, deep cuts to the education budget could be more easily justified.

The former argument raises an interesting question: If the quality of education in Alberta were poor, wouldn't cuts make it worse? Johnson (1994) informs the reader that citizens have a responsibility to educate the youth of their society and to become involved in their education. Young people need to develop critical thinking skills and should be able to solve challenging problems when they arise. He later refers to the business community as having a supportive role to play in this new vision for Alberta. He argues that it is the responsibility of the business community to ensure that young graduating Albertans are prepared to make the transition from high school into the workplace. This seems to suggest that the education system is not adequately preparing young graduates

for this transition to the workplace. A popular critique of the times, as surmised by Taylor (2001), was that schools had become out of touch with the knowledge skills needed for the workplace. It was time for the government to take charge of curricula if students in Alberta were to remain internationally competitive. Alberta voters believed this to be the case and in the 1993 elections, education reforms were met with little resistance.

The Business of Education

Mr. Klein's cutting-edge economic model for Alberta was not an original one. Rather, his ideas were based on existing reforms that have occurred in England, New Zealand, Australia and the United States (Taylor, 2001). In these countries centralization of power over educational reform has been followed by budget cuts and much discourse in the area of reducing deficits. Attacks on public education in the media became commonplace and were accompanied by reports filled with statistics claiming that education was in crisis and that students were being left behind in the global economy. There was also an increased emphasis on school-based decision making and on parental choice. The integration of free-market principles to the education system became the norm (Barlow & Robertson, 1994). However, what was original about Premier Klein's 'Alberta Advantage' was the public's reaction to it. As discussed by Taylor (2001), fearing predictions of economic doom and gloom, Albertans became convinced that the government's preoccupation with fiscal restraint was well founded. Many Albertans adopted this ideology and were persuaded by the Klein government to believe that educational reform was justified. Mr. Klein's strategy to convince the electorate that a fiscal crisis needed to be averted at all costs is what ensured that swift educational reform would take place in Alberta.

One point that should not be contested in this era of educational reform, is the government's insistence on providing the best possible education for our children (Flower, 1995). It is on this theme that the teaching profession and government agree. Reform is necessary in any system. Institutions are like the strands of a muscle -- they need to be toned, flexed, reshaped and rebuilt to gain mass and strength. At times a muscle just needs to be toned to stay in shape, at other times it needs to be pushed beyond its limits to increase in strength. Perhaps cutting the education system loose to a free market global economy is a risk worth taking. Historically, competition in the marketplace has had immense benefits for the consumer. Prices fall, innovation is stimulated and goods and services are generally more affordable when competition thrives. Nonetheless, the danger of too much intervention by business in education is apparent in the influence that advertising has on our youth. For example, is it ethical to splash company logos on our school web page or to display corporate paraphernalia at the school's entrance? What about playing snappy commercial jingles at 9:00 a.m. before principals make their morning announcements? As corporations begin to invest sizable amounts of dollars in the education system, they will be asking the capitalist question of 'what's in it for me?' Schools are now expected to sport gimmicky advertisements on school uniforms and sprawl banners across their cafeterias and school buses in support of multinational companies and their sponsorship. Is this type of advertising in the education system ethical?

In a satirical editorial in the wake of Premier Klein's reforms and cutbacks in Alberta, Titley (1994) informed readers that business involvement had already permeated the education sector. He cites one instance of Pepsi-Cola signing a deal with the Toronto

Board of Education giving their brand of cola exclusive marketing rights in exchange for funding. “The educational aim of this initiative was to create a new generation of Pepsi drinkers” (A19). Unfortunately, relying on the business community for funding has become a new reality for many Alberta and Ontario School Boards.

To further illustrate these thoughts, let me cite an instance in which advertising had created some controversy. A former principal of mine was once challenged at a staff meeting about endorsing vending machines in a large urban school. The staff were upset that the machines were creating new sets of problems in the school -- strewn garbage in the hallways, junk food being consumed during class time and the promotion of unhealthy eating habits in the school. The principal recognized the problems created by having the machines in the school, but felt that the vending machines could not be removed because the school had signed a long-term contract with the vendor. Breaking the contract would mean a potential loss of thousands of dollars in revenue for the school, money designated to purchase computer equipment and instructional materials for the school. The vending machine debate ended.

The above-mentioned argument is further developed in the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) 2001/02 Action Plan (<http://www.teachers.ab.ca>). In this plan, parents are advised that schools should provide a diversity of learning experiences without having to rely on the community’s ability to raise funds. They are against sending children door to door selling chocolate almonds, or parents and teachers working in casinos in order to stock the library with books or the lab with computers. If the provincial government were to restore funding to pre-1993 levels and allocate funds back to school boards, this type of fundraising would not be necessary. Not all fundraising is

inappropriate however. Raising funds for sports uniforms and trips abroad are luxury endeavors that should be funded from outside school budgets. It is not the parents' role to fund raise for essential instructional materials in the classroom as they are paying school taxes for this purpose. These issues are addressed in the following quote from the December 1998 issue of Canada and world background:

Fun fairs, auctions, selling chocolate bars and magazines -- schools everywhere are stepping up their fund raising efforts. They are trying to fill the gap left by provincial government budget cuts. But, however hard the volunteers try, it takes years to equip a computer lab through bake sales (p. 31).

It is not a student's responsibility to raise money to purchase audio-visual equipment or to buy current books for the school library. Are we teaching our youth the value of entrepreneurship or are we robbing them of homework and study time? Parents and students do not need to be burdened with these time-consuming fund raising commitments.

Standardized Testing

In reference to the use of standardized testing, Couture and Liying (2000) state that we are living in an era of "high-stakes testing" (p. 65). Increasingly, teachers are feeling the pressure of performing in this "culture of testing" (p. 65).

As characterised by Couture and Liying (Spring 2000, as cited by Neave, 1989) teachers are now living in a "new Evaluative State" (p. 65). The state places little emphasis on the rights of students in the political arena of standardised testing. Their opinions, beliefs and feelings on the matter have been ignored. How do students feel about writing these tests? Has a large body of government research focused on the psychobiological effects of these standardised tests on students? Following are several personal anecdotes to illustrate this body of research.

In June of 1990, as a grade 12 student, I toiled through a rigorous itinerary of diploma exams. To view a breakdown of a typical June roster for a grade 3, 6, 9 or 12 student in Alberta, please refer to the Appendix at the end of this document. In the short span of my career as a teacher, I have prepared students for and administered standardised testing in grade 3, 6 and 9 classrooms. All grade ten students, except those exempted for special needs reasons, will have been subjected to sixteen achievement tests by age fifteen; French Immersion students will have written a total of 20. Parents express concern about the ramifications of potential failure of these exams. Parents feared that their children would be labelled as “slow” if it was shown that they were lagging behind their peers in their exam results. Parents have commented about how preparation for these exams has created much anxiety for their children that manifested in lack of sleep, loss of appetite, panic attacks, refusal to go to school, nightmares and fear of failure. It is interesting to note that I as a classroom teacher, have experienced those very same changes in behaviour. Does a child of eight learn better and/or more as a result of this level of stress in his or her life? Does a child of eight benefit by this level of peer competition? The system is endorsing competition amongst peers even at the primary level. Is this the meaning of accountability? It is unnecessary and perhaps harmful to encourage and reinforce a pecking order of intelligence in a class of eight-year-olds. These tests are not an accurate reflection of good teaching practice or of student achievement but rather a reflection of a neo-conservative political agenda. Jones (1990) describes neo-conservatism as a combination of sociological and political ideas drawn from conservative and liberal ideology of the 19th century. Jones (1990) also purports that these ideological views are permeating textbooks and government policy documents.

Martin (2000) quotes Rettig, the President of the Canadian Teachers Federation, as saying: “In Manitoba, bowing to parental pressure, the province has eliminated grade 3 tests and has made grades 6 and 9 tests optional” (p. 26). Perhaps parents in Alberta will follow Manitoba’s lead and exert this same kind of pressure on the Klein government to eliminate the use of wide-scale student assessment.

In the years before formal student testing by the state, Earl (1999) explains that standardised tests were mainly used for diagnostic reasons to give teachers more information about individual students. They were used as tools in a teacher’s arsenal to help assess individual students and to give parents a clearer picture of their child’s progress. Earl (1999) goes on to explain that in the past these external exams were seen as “...a fair way to identify the best candidates for scarce resources, and they have been the vehicle for directing students into various programs or into the world of work” (p. 4). In other words, these tests were used to weed out students who were not qualified to move on to post-secondary institutions. Under the Klein regime however, this type of assessment has been used less for diagnostic purposes and more for holding teachers and administrators accountable.

In this study, *accountability* is defined as an obligation to report, the need to justify something, to be responsible, to be answerable. A pre-service teacher from the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta being interviewed on Global News (Thursday, Dec. 6 broadcast, 2001), spoke about the impending teacher strike in Edmonton Public Schools. She reported that her professors speak about teacher burn-out that occurs in the classroom at about year five. If going on strike meant that working conditions would improve in order to alleviate this burn-out, she could see herself

remaining in the profession for a long time. A strike would also mean to this student that she may not be able to complete her final practicum in order to graduate. When questioned about the possibility of making more money as a teacher as a result of a strike, the student answered that she was not entering the teaching profession for the money. Although other professions have the potential to make more money, she chose to become a teacher in order to make a difference in the lives of children and their education. Most teachers are as dedicated and caring about children. Teachers as a whole are accountable to students, parents, administrators, their profession and society. They are passionate about what they do. However, educational reforms are eroding this passion and teachers are feeling a loss of professional independence in the classroom. In one study, Wideen et al. (1997, as cited in Couture and Liying, Spring 2000), reported that, "...grade 12 teachers believed that they lost much of their discretion in curriculum decision-making and much of their professional autonomy" (p. 68). Earl (1999) sums it up best in the title of his research: *Assessment and Accountability in Education: Improvement or Surveillance?* (p. 4).

Implementation of School Councils

One cannot analyse educational reform in Alberta without mentioning *School Councils* (also known as *Parent Advisory Committees* or *Parent Partnership Associations*). In Johnson's (1994) position paper, School Councils are defined as "a formally constituted group made up of parents of students attending the school, the principal, teachers, students and community members. This group makes decisions about and advises on educational matters at the school level" (p. 1). In this new era of parental power, a partnership is created to assist in the governance of schools (shared

responsibility between the school board, the principal, the teachers and the parents is explicitly mentioned throughout the document). Some of the roles and responsibilities of a School Council include:

- Deciding what programs to offer (curricular as well as extracurricular),
- Determining the school's overall mission, discipline policies and philosophy,
- Selecting staff and the principal of the school,
- Planning the school budget, and
- Establishing guidelines for reporting student achievement to the school community.

Johnson (1994) informs the parent of the various procedures, protocol, implications and membership rights of a School Council. His paper is based on the assumption that parents will want to become meaningfully involved in the governance of their child's school. A School Council Handbook (1999) is available for any parent wishing to be elected to their local parent council. In this handbook "...meaningful involvement in their children's education" (p. 1) is detailed for the parent member, complete with margins for note-taking and 1-800 numbers listed to call for more information on understanding their roles and responsibilities. Is parental power in Alberta a reality or the creation of a perception of power?

During the Klein government's Roundtable Discussions in 1994, public hearings were held in various cities by Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) implementation teams in an effort to democratize the educational reforms implemented by the Conservatives. In the published report entitled, A Synthesis of Public Input, some of the barriers and fears identified by participants in regard to School Councils included the following:

- Many parents do not want a stake in educational decision-making. They lack the necessary expertise and are content leaving these decisions to trained personnel.
- Domination of School Councils by specific interest groups,
- Lack of representation in lower socio-economic groups,
- Time requirements of serving on a council,
- Apathy of parents in the school community;
- A manipulative principal, and
- Most parents are interested in to volunteering at the school but do not want the responsibility of decision-making or policy setting.

Regardless of the barriers and problems outlined by participants in the roundtable discussions, the government went forward with the conception of School Councils. What has been the impact of increased parental involvement in the everyday workings of the school setting?

The domination of a School Council by a specific interest group did emerge in one large urban school shortly after the inauguration of the School Council. One parent in particular yielded much influence in the school community. When told that the parent's concerns "would be taken under advisement," it became clear that hallway politics would increase. Parents aligned with other parents in the corridors at the end the school day and on occasion, complaints were made about the administration and/or perceived incompetence of staff members. Members of the School Council can be vocal and can often attempt to set the agenda of council meetings only to give focus to a specific issue, forgetting that their role as parents on the council is an advisory one. A select group of

parents were making educational decisions that were not pedagogically sound for teachers thus creating an increased level of stress in the school.

On the other hand, parents on School Councils also encounter their own levels of frustration with senior administrators, school board members, principals and teachers who refuse to share power and authority with them. For example, school boards can be unwilling to listen or to discuss the wishes of parents to be involved in fund raising through casinos. Senior administrators and school board members are sometimes reluctant, on moral grounds, to involve the district's schools in this type of fund raising. Board members have walked out of meetings in protest against the demands of parents who were angry at the reluctance of the school board to revise, at parents' request, policy regarding this type of fund raising. Parent members of School Councils have resigned their positions feeling that the school board was ignoring them and refusing to even discuss certain issues important to parents. Principals can spend years repairing such damage to councils and trying to attract parents back into key positions on council.

Of all the educational reforms that have taken place in the province, School Councils do have some merit. For many years parents have lobbied to become more meaningfully involved in the education of their children. A large percentage of parents do support the hard work of classroom teachers and school personnel should not be afraid to give up some of their power and authority to parents in an advisory capacity. Parents have a right to be involved in their child's education and this democratic right should be alive and well in the school system. Parents are already exercising this right by being elected to school boards; however expanding the number of participants by the implementation of effective School Councils can make a positive contribution. Like the

bones of a developing adolescent, School Councils are bound to encounter some growing pains during their developmental stages.

Albertans for Quality Education (AQE) stress the importance of exercising parental authority in the school system. The AQE takes the position that “parents must reclaim their ownership of schools; choice will restore consumer power to its rightful place” (Barlow & Robertson, 1994, p. 224). In this new partnership of shared decision-making, the AQE assumes that the quality of education will improve in Alberta. As paralleled in the School Councils Handbook (1999), the AQE asserts that members of the business community and society have a shared responsibility to work together and contribute to the education of our young Albertans. On this point I agree with the AQE and the government’s positions. Parents are a child’s first teachers. Parents are the ones first obliged to teach children how to behave according to social norms. Although they are responsible for teaching the child appropriate social skills and acceptable manners, often in our consumer-driven and workaholic culture, many of these initial childhood lessons are not being adequately addressed in the home. Parents often rely on childcare providers and teachers to provide a moral upbringing for their children. Is it exclusively the school’s responsibility to make up for society’s moral shortfalls and economic realities? The question of increased parental roles and responsibilities in education will be further discussed in the Interviews section of this study.

A Cautionary Note

I would like to highlight the need for the Klein government to avoid committing the same “faux-pas” as the Harris government of Ontario. Relations between Ontario teachers and the Ontario government have been antagonistic. As reported in *Canada and*

the World Backgrounder (Dec., 1998), "...by 1997, Ontario's education system was filled with poison" (p. 25). Bill 160, instituted by the Harris government in January of 1997, took a major punch at teachers' unions. Preparation time for teachers was drastically cut and the right to negotiate pupil/teacher ratios was removed from collective bargaining. Modelling his reforms on those of Premier Klein, Premier Harris' platform for Bill 160 was to right the wrongs of a failing education system and to bring accountability to the system. As reported in the aforementioned journal, his rhetoric simply "...reinforced the belief among all teachers, most school board officials, and many parents that Bill 160 was not about improving public education; it was about chopping another \$1 billion from the system and, eventually, turning it over to private enterprise. Accusations, the government flatly denied" (p. 25). A province-wide teacher strike ensued.

It is in this atmosphere of strife and strike action, between government and teachers that I bring the reader into the action research component of this study.

Introduction to the Research

Since accepting my first teaching contract, I have experienced many frustrations in my professional life. As a graduate entering the job market in September 1994, educational reform was in full development. Mixed with my initial insecurity as a developing professional, was a sense that change was occurring in the halls of Alberta Education. I remember wondering...What was this 5% salary rollback all about? Why were school boards across the province being asked to amalgamate into these gigantic regional divisions? Why were there so many parents involved in decision-making at our school? My colleagues seemed just as confused as I was about the state of education in Alberta. In retrospect 1994 was for me, a blur of change and confusion.

The purpose of the next part of this project will be to bring this blurring into meaningful focus. Personally, I do not see myself staying in the profession unless deteriorating classroom conditions are rectified. My sentiments are echoed by Larry Booi, president of the ATA, in his January 2002 letter to his colleagues across the province:

...we are facing the biggest crisis in education in Alberta in decades.... Alberta's 32,000 teachers have done all they can to avoid this conflict. We have not had a teachers' strike in Alberta for ten years, despite the fact that during that period salaries have eroded and classroom conditions have deteriorated. As a result of these factors, we have seen too many of our younger colleagues walking away from the profession and too many of our older colleagues leaving as soon as they can.

Method of Inquiry and Data Analysis

My tool of inquiry was an action research model, a collaborative research method used in many Alberta school jurisdictions (Townsend, July 2000). My inquiry was qualitative in nature and the data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Interviewees were granted open-ended opportunities to disclose relevant thoughts and feelings on the topic. Any impressions that resulted from the interviews were noted and analysed using thematic analysis. Anomalies and patterns in the interview responses were identified and any points that I considered significant to my research were incorporated into my reflection.

The purpose of the interviews was to gain a clearer picture of the topic being studied along with the relevant literature. My intention was to understand the professional lives of satisfied and dissatisfied teachers. I wanted to explore their current views on working conditions and the morale of teachers in Alberta.

I interviewed three teachers, one curriculum co-ordinator, two administrators and two parents. It was not a random sampling because I was not seeking to make vast generalizations on this topic. The people that I chose as potential interviewees were selected for reasons related to their background, experience and availability for an interview.

This is a local study and the research is applicable to current circumstances in Alberta. I drew my impressions from my own experience, the available literature on this topic and from the emergent themes presented during the interview process.

Interviews

Reason for Becoming a Teacher

The first question posed to the subjects was: Why did you decide to become a teacher? The following responses were provided:

- Subject A had a grandfather and aunt whom were teachers and a father who valued education above all else.
- Subject B always liked working with teenagers, coached sports for many years and likes to be involved in decision making.
- Subject C always wanted to become a teacher and had a mother whom had a strong influence on Subject C's choice of career. Subject C would rather impart wisdom to students than sit behind a desk all day.
- Subject E also had a mother whom was a teacher, used to love playing school as a child and was a swimming instructor as a young adult. Several years later, Subject E became curious about administration and wanted and had a desire to move in that direction.
- Subject F always liked working with children, especially the "at risk" ones.
- Subject G used to play school as a young child and left administration several years ago mainly because "interacting with students and staff no longer felt positive."

Emerging Themes. It appears that the subjects became teachers for altruistic reasons.

They wanted a chance to serve their community and to work with children. Three of the teacher respondents had a parent that played an influential role in shaping their careers.

All of the respondents implicitly or explicitly stated during the interviews that they enjoy working with children.

Commentary. Teachers chose this career path because they have an affinity for children.

Subject C's need to, "impart wisdom to students" and Subject B's affirmation of teenagers indicate to me that they are content with their choice of profession. The holidays and the pay were apparently not deciding factors in their choice of vocation (not one of the educators made a mention of this in their interview responses).

Professional/Personal Satisfaction

Question #2 asked participants to describe their level of professional/personal satisfaction in their current position. The responses given were:

- Subject A likes to teach but feels that teachers are over-supervised. Subject A says that in the past teachers were perhaps under-supervised and would like to see a balancing effect occur in the future.
- Subject B would rather teach than be an administrator because satisfaction is higher in a classroom setting. Subject B feels overburdened with the administrative demands of the job.
- Subject C enjoys teaching and feels that we do make a difference in the lives of the children we teach.
- Subject E is satisfied in this current position and has always felt good about teaching.
- Subject F has a high level of satisfaction but feels that the position is very political.

- Subject G enjoys teaching at the current grade level but is feeling “stressed” about achievement exams.

Emerging Themes. All of the respondents are satisfied in their current positions. Five out of the six respondents explicitly confirmed that they enjoy dealing with students on a day to day basis.

Commentary. Many teachers get their joy from being in front of the students. Subject C sincerely believes the adage of “making a difference in the lives of children.” As a teacher, I sense that I am making a difference when a student grasps a difficult concept or when higher level thinking occurs during an engaging discussion. Subject G summed it up well at the end of the interview when stating the following: “We work in a worthwhile profession and it could be much better if we just got rid of all those extras that take us away from the kids!” Subject G later defined the “extras” in responses to the questions #4 and #14 as meaning: An overabundance of meetings and paper-work and “enormous curriculum demands.”

Current Issues and the Labour Dispute

Question #3 asked participants to share their thoughts on the current issues surrounding the teacher labour disputes in Alberta. The participants answered as follows:

- Subject A mentioned that the cost of living in Alberta is on the rise (i.e., gas prices) and our wages are not. Subject A believes that the government has stripped school boards of their authority and then turned around and told them that they cannot interfere with bargaining. Subject A firmly believes that oil revenues should not be tied into education funding and disagrees with the current funding formula and affirms that it has caused many inequalities for urban boards. Subject A vociferously

stated that, "It is time for school boards to spend their surpluses and to pay teachers what they deserve!" Finally, Subject A was insulted by Premier Klein's remarks that were lobbed at Alberta teachers while on his trade mission to Japan in February 2002.

- Subject B is not supportive of striking just for the sake of salary increases and respected what Larry Booi had to say at the Teachers' Convention. Subject B realised, while listening to Booi, that learning conditions need to be improved across Alberta. Subject B declared that we should strike to get better class sizes and improved classroom conditions rather than a substantial increase in pay. Subject B definitely feels that 30 students in a class are too many particularly with a multitude of special needs students included in a classroom of that size.
- It is interesting to note that Subject C was on strike when the interview was conducted. Subject C concurs that there is too much talk about salary increases in the media and would rather see the class size issue resolved first. "If classes become too big," Subject C remarked, "we become lecturers and not teachers." Subject C maintains that Mr. Klein's biggest mistake was offering huge increases to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA's), to health care workers and not to teachers. Subject C says that since we are public servants, we should also get fairly compensated in return.
- Subject D enthusiastically proclaimed that Mr. Klein is on the right track when it comes to reducing spending and not incurring deficits. Subject D is aware of the 11%-12% being awarded to teachers in several Alberta school jurisdictions. Subject D is a Klein supporter and has a problem with unions. Subject D works as hard as teachers and other unionized employees and says, "there are ups and downs in other

jobs too.” Subject D declared that, “not everyone will receive a pension” and strongly maintains that unionized employees are getting “greedy” in Alberta. Subject D is impressed with Mr. Klein and believes he is doing a good job of balancing the budget.

- Subject E enjoyed Larry Booi’s address at the Teachers’ Convention in February 2001, and contends that there are “areas of struggle” that the government needs to address. Subject E was happy to hear that a judge had overturned the government’s back-to-work order in March 2002.
- Subject F does not like how ‘teacher unrest’ is being reported in the media, feels demoralized and cannot stand “everybody being an expert just because they went through the school system.” Subject F figures that classroom conditions are being overlooked and thinks that a big wage increase will make us look bad in the end. Subject F also talked about the MLA’s giant pay raise in December 2001 and claims that most teachers do not think conditions will improve.
- Subject G feels that Klein is disrespectful of teachers, is ignoring our wishes and says most teachers would probably give up their wage demands for better working conditions. Subject G is worried about future university students not wanting to go into education programs because of current working conditions.
- Subject H says much has happened in recent weeks and is glad that there is no visible unrest in this jurisdiction; however Subject H is sure that there are many “behind the scenes discussions” occurring in our staff rooms. Subject H doesn’t think, “teachers are going to win this battle” and proclaimed that the students will come out as the

biggest losers. Subject H figures the government will have to give teachers more than they want to in the end (in salary increases).

Emerging Themes. Four of the eight respondents verbalised that there is too much focus on wage increases and not enough on classroom conditions. The real issues affecting working conditions for teachers and learning conditions for students are being ignored because of salary increase demands.

Three of the respondents explicitly identified class sizes as being a contentious issue. Two respondents implicitly referred to class sizes as being areas of struggle.

Two subjects strongly support Larry Booi as a leader of the ATA. They left their Teachers' Conventions with a clearer picture of insufferable classroom realities faced by teachers across Alberta.

It was interesting to note that the parent subjects contrasted each other when queried on this point. One parent supports the Klein government's initiatives and purports that unions have become too strong. The other parent supports teachers and their call for better classroom conditions.

Commentary. I agreed with Subject C and the assertion that the government's determination of who gets a raise and who does not is unfair. Are these decisions based on current economic conditions or are they related to pre-election strategies and unfair political practices? I maintain that the government, in 2001, averted a nurse's strike because it would be too messy to deal with just before the provincial election. Which poses an interesting question: Do teachers just have bad timing? Perhaps we should learn from the nurses and pick our fights on the eve of a provincial election.

Subject A brought up an enlightening point that was discussed in the first part of this research (see p. 3–4). Subject A maintains that dropping oil revenues are being used as an excuse by the Klein government to justify spending cuts to essential social programs. Education and health care funding, according to this respondent, should be tied into taxation revenues and not natural resource revenues. Subject A believes Mr. Klein should use natural resource revenues to pay down the debt and not divert essential dollars earmarked for social spending to pay down this province’s debt.

Subject G also echoed the comments of the pre-service teacher’s quote in the first part of this research project (see p. 14). Subject G’s daughter is considering a career in education, but is worried about “having to put in the same hours that Subject G puts in at school.” Subject G convinced the daughter that she should choose a career in education by reassuring her that, “it’s more about the kids than the hours.” Subject G informed me that, “for now, the daughter is enrolled in education, but still has doubts.”

Accountability and the Educator

In question #4, interviewees were asked to define the term *accountability* in their own words. They were also invited to comment on whether or not they perceive themselves as accountable educators. Their comments were as follows:

- For Subject A, education is not an “accountable subject.” All students should come out as winners. Under the current system, says Subject A, “we are creating winners and losers. Not everything can be measured with performance outcomes. For example, how can we measure a smile on a child’s face?” Subject A does not think you can use business terminology when dealing with children.

- Subject B feels accountable to the students, the parents and the school board. Subject B talked about how frustrating it is “to get rid of a teacher who has lost their passion for teaching” and believes “it is right to get rid of unaccountable teachers.” However, Subject B believes teachers are better trained and are better at what they do than in the past. Subject B cannot see a teacher lasting 30 years in the profession without enjoying the job. “Most leave when they realise they are not natural teachers,” Subject B remarked.
- Subject C is responsible for the school’s limited budget and has to spend it very wisely. Subject C has had to cut back hours to liberate some extra money in the budget to better meet instructional needs. Subject C holds that they are accountable “for every cent” they spend in the school.
- Subject E purports that the introduction of accountability to the system was a business move and believes there was, at one time, too much professional freedom. In the past, they were not held accountable at all; nevertheless, Subject E retorts that “the push has gone too far!”
- Subject F dislikes the word ‘accountability’ and senses it is “a non-trusting term” that has negative connotations such as always being “checked-up on.” Subject F would rather see the term “professional responsibility” replace the term *accountability* and feels that teachers are responsible people and should be treated respectfully. However, it was mentioned by Subject F that, “there are some bad apples in the basket.”
- Subject G feels we need to be accountable to parents. However, at times it is difficult to do so, like with certain marks, because a professional judgement is required. In the

past, Subject G does not remember parents questioning teachers like they do today.

“Today’s parents are demanding more accountability from us than ever,” Subject G reports and is wondering if there is more “distrust of teachers, now.” Subject G finished by admitting, “there is more paperwork now than ever before!”

Emerging Themes. Two of the interview subjects strongly dislike the use of the word *accountability* used in an educational context. One subject likes the term and believes teachers need to be held accountable. The other subjects were more lukewarm in their responses and did not get flustered when I spoke the term during the interview. Two subjects recognise *accountability* as a business term that has only recently been integrated into pedagogical lingo. Two of the more seasoned teachers are reporting that in the past teachers were perhaps “under-supervised” or “were not held accountable at all.” They referred to the past and present situations as being “extremes” during their interviews. Two subjects see *accountability* as being equal to “distrust of teachers.” Two subjects believe that “unaccountable teachers” or “bad apples in the basket” should not remain in the profession.

Commentary. This question generated some intense affective responses in two of the interview subjects. I was happy to hear that I am not the only teacher that is vexed by the etymological abuse of the word *accountability* in education. Subject F was particularly insightful when it was suggested the word should be replaced by more etymologically correct terminology such as: “professional responsibility.”

Two of the respondents have dealt with ineffective teachers in the past and reported to me that some accountability is needed in the system. I agree with Subject B’s assertion that it is difficult “to get rid of a teacher who has lost their passion for

teaching.” However, I feel teachers, in general, are distrusted by the Klein government. This generalization can be supported by Subject E’s quote that, “the push has gone too far!” and by Subject F’s allegation that the word *accountability* has become “a non-trusting term.” Subject A’s claim that this term cannot be used in an educational context may also be a contributing factor to the distrust of teachers by the government.

Views on Standardized Testing

In question #5, respondents were asked to share their views in regard to standardized testing. I also asked if they felt that the results were reported in a just or unjust manner, by the media, the government and their school jurisdictions. Their responses were as follows:

- Subject A suggests that numbers can be manipulated to “say all kinds of things.” An achievement test only shows how well a student did on one particular day in time. “What if the kid had a bad day? What if the kid got dumped that day?” challenged Subject A. “And, to say that you should use numbers to say that Johnny can’t read.... The numbers are indicators that can help us out at times. What you need to do is talk to the human being to see where he is at [sic]. He may not fit the numbers.”
- Subject B does not think children are ready, in grade three, to write achievement tests because of the pressure these tests exert on them. However, Subject B does agree with grade 12 diploma exams and thinks they are well-designed exams in comparison to other provinces. Subject B supposes that grade six and nine achievement exams are acceptable but that they should contain new questions every year, even though this may prove expensive for Alberta Learning. Subject B does not like it that some teachers are teaching to the exam and warns that they should be more attentive to the

teaching of the course itself. Subject B is of the opinion that students in higher socio-economic schools do better than students in a more transient community. Neither does Subject B believe that the reporting of results is always fair and does not like the way schools are ranked in an “order” by the results. Subject B also thinks that, “many teachers feel more pressure” because of the achievement tests. “If you teach grade eight,” affirmed Subject B, “you seem to have no pressure because it’s your own exams. But if you teach grade three, six or nine, there are results coming back at you. So you can be a zero or a hero!” Subject B went on to question the validity of those provincial results and further commented that, “If you have good results then you’re a good teacher. If you have bad results does that mean you’re a bad teacher? If you have good results, what does it mean? Does it mean you’re a good teacher or does it mean you just taught to the exam?”

- Subject C thinks that 50% is too much weighting on the grade 12 exams and believes the exams are too long and put much pressure on the student to achieve. Subject C likes the achievement tests because it prevents teachers from wandering away from the curriculum. However, Subject C does not like the way teachers are rated by these tests and they should not be a reflection of a teacher’s teaching ability. Subject C says that the group of kids you are teaching determines more how well they will do on the test (depending on which community they are from).
- Subject E understands “they have their place” and can help a school grow. They identify areas of strength and weakness and meeting the provincial standard shows growth over the years. Subject E does not like the grade three achievement test, though (no reason given).

- Subject F thinks they are a good piece of data. Analysis of results does show if a school is following a new curriculum or not and said: “It’s a benchmark. Unfortunately, most people don’t know what the numbers mean.” Subject F admitted, however, that the results have more to do with the group of students you are teaching. It is a good reflective tool for teachers and helps them improve their teaching methodologies. Subject F observes too much hype in the media when comparisons are done and firmly believes results should be used to help improve our teaching and not be used as an accountability measure. “We shouldn’t use the results to scare people!” was the final comment.
- Subject G does not disagree with them because it keeps all the schools at a provincial standard but does not necessarily agree with the type and length of the tests. Subject G perceives that grade three is too young for this type of testing and that they have a hard time sitting for that long without changing activities. Subject G would rather see the government test in grade four, seven and ten. Subject G also feels that it is “ridiculous to test French Immersion students in grade three because most of them aren’t at grade level in English yet because of their late start.” Subject G also believes that special provisions should be scrapped because these can be played with and that, “you should write the test or not write the test, forget the provisions!”

Emerging Themes. Three of the six respondents do not like the idea of forcing grade three students to write the achievement test. For the most part, they feel the students are just too young. It was interesting to note that five of the six respondents were in favour of standardized testing in their responses. Four of the six respondents mentioned that they

are not pleased with the manner in which achievement result statistics are reported in the media. The idea of rating schools according to levels of achievement is not applauded. Three of the six respondents reported that results are more influenced by socio-economic factors than by performance standards.

Commentary. I wholeheartedly agree with the claim that grade three achievement tests should be canned. Do we need to put that kind of unnecessary pressure on eight and nine year-old children? As paralleled by the parental comments regarding high levels of anxiety and stress observed before achievement testing (see pp. 12-13), three subjects wonder if we need to subject young children to this type of testing (especially grade 3) at such an impressionable age. I also agree with Subject F and the assumption that tests can be a good diagnostic tool for teachers. Subject F reminded me that the analysis of achievement test results could be used in the following school year to enhance the learning experience of students.

Nonetheless, as was echoed by Subject B, we must guard against teaching to the test just to look good in the eyes of the public. Quality instruction needs to precede the need to statistically shine when achievement results are published. As reported by Subject B, C and F, a class' scores may have more to do with the composition of the group (intelligence quotients, economic situation, special needs considerations and geographical placement) than with teaching ability or a teacher's strict adherence to curriculum.

Views on Klein's Cutbacks to Education

Question #6 probed the respondents' opinions in regard to the cuts to education, imposed by the Klein government in 1994/95. The respondents shared the following information:

- Subject A does not understand why the government needed to cut education when they have had surpluses in the billions of dollars for many years. Subject A also talked about the “un-funded liability pension portion of the government” and how our pension contributions have climbed considerably over the years to cover this liability (to replenish the fund for retired teachers or teachers entering retirement).
- Subject B says that it felt more like a 10% cut in 1994 because for many years prior to the rollback, teachers were getting 5% increases every time a settlement was reached. Subject B was happy to see districts amalgamated, senior administrator positions scaled back and special needs kids integrated in regular classrooms. Subject B cautions that we, in essence, still have special needs children pulled out of the regular stream and placed in Integrated Occupation Programs (IOP). Subject B does not remember anyone complaining loudly about the 5% cut in salary “because everybody was taking it.” Subject B ascertains that, “the problem today is that he (Mr. Klein) is giving 20% to some and not to others. It looks like were not as important as the others!”
- Subject C talked about how cutbacks are still occurring and how the administrative allowance for their school has recently been cut. Subject C has the same work to do, but has less money in which to run the school. They only see an administrator once a week in their school. This is very frustrating for Subject C because of the nature of the program they run.
- Subject D has not personally felt the effects of cutbacks other than having to put a child in a split-grade class. “With revenues down, the government should take control and manage its funds as it sees fit,” according to Subject D.

- Subject E says they were probably necessary for the government to keep their fiscal house in order, but has particularly felt the loss of intervention workers in the school. Subject E says this year is good and there is much money for resources in the school.
- Subject F immediately responded: “No, we’ve been forever trying to catch up since then.... We have yet to make up for the 5% we lost. And even today we’re still talking about 30 kids in classes and the special education problems.” According to Subject F, principals have become “number crunchers” and as a result, are not able to teach and mentor like in the past. Subject F wishes that principals, like chartered accountants, could be allowed to bill their time. Subject F also notices that, “secretaries are being asked to do too much” and are not being compensated appropriately for their services.
- Subject G has felt the effects of the cutbacks and said: “We have to share resources with other teachers and other schools more than before. Fund raisers to stock library shelves were never needed before. No bingo’s to work then either. Class sizes were not an issue before the cuts either.”
- Subject H affirms that, “in the long run, it’s the kids that are hurt by cutbacks” and recalls a time when readers were photocopied for a teacher because there was not enough money in the school’s budget to purchase them:

I recall books - home readers that the Parent Council was asked time and time again to raise funds for. As a parent, being very active in the school, I recall photocopying books, Paul & Susan books, and colouring them so that the students had books to read. And that was at the grade two level. It was very distressing....

Emerging Themes. Four respondents identified the 5% wage rollback as a topic of discussion during this query. Only one respondent perceived the rollback as fair because everyone was taking it at the time but does not like the way some groups (i.e., nurses,

doctors, MLA's and prosecutors) are being favoured over other provincial employees in their settlements. Both parent respondents provided me with concrete examples of where they perceived cutbacks to have occurred in education. For the most part, the responses to this question were varied and unique.

Commentary. What surprised me during one of the parent interviews is that one parent has not personally felt the full impact of the government's massive spending cuts to education. Subject D mentioned that class sizes have remained generally small in the district and that no significant differences in classroom conditions were noted over the years. I wonder, is this a public perception or simply a localized comment? In a sidebar question to Subject F, I shared the aforementioned reflection and the following impressions were articulated: "You know what I think a lot of it is, I think we end up carrying the ball and doing more. We're doing the job we want to get done, working for less money and less resources, so nobody notices. Except our teachers who are getting tired and worn out." I believe Subject F's assertion strengthens my claim that I am working harder than ever, because of cutbacks to education, to deliver a quality education to my students (see p. 2).

The more experienced interviewees have a previous era to compare to and, moreover, possess a unique perspective that adds legitimacy to my argument that cutbacks have been deep and brutal to the education sector. These interviewees taught in an era when funds were more plentiful and fund raising was done to mainly raise cash for luxuries such as scoreboards for gyms and trips abroad. They have no recollection of massive fund raising efforts launched to purchase textbooks and other school related necessities. However, Subject E's story about the little girl with severe language

expression difficulties that nobody remedied (see question #11) somewhat refutes my argument that the quality of education is proportionate to the level of funding received in the school. Increased funding does not necessarily equal quality instruction. Subject E remembers that funding was adequate during this era, but no programs were in place to help a particular student. Subject E believes that, today, we are better serving the needs of struggling students. This belief may suggest that reforms have taken place in education over the last several decades and that teachers are better trained at identifying and remedying special needs.

Subject C also shared a similar viewpoint. When asked about reforming education (see question #13), Subject C said: "...I don't think that just throwing ten million dollars or a hundred million dollars into the education system is going to change it either." At this point, I would like to challenge the Klein government to imagine what a combination of increased funding and improved teaching practices could procure for Albertan students. If the Klein government truly believes in the development of people, increased funding joined with professionally responsible teachers (as described by Subject F on page 29) would most certainly create a true "Alberta Advantage" for our students.

Private Enterprise and Education

The purpose of question #7 was to gauge respondents' opinions in regard to private enterprises (such as Coke, Pepsi, Nike, Hostess, etc.) being permitted to advertise and sell their products in our schools. The participants answered as follows:

- Subject A does not agree that they should be allowed to advertise in our schools. Subject A says it is fine to fund raise for scoreboards but Coke should not help us raise money for essentials and claims that, "education is the wave of the future."

Subject A continued by saying that, “It should be tax money that funds education, not oil royalties. And if you want to diversify, the best way to do this is with a more educated population.”

- Subject B reported that Coke provided their school with a scoreboard and “we see Coke in the school.” Subject B is not bothered by their advertisements and said: “They’ve been doing that for years.” Other than Coke, they do not get a whole lot of advertising in the school. Subject B revealed that bingos generate the most money for them.
- Subject C does not like companies getting exclusive deals for marketing in schools and says that this is not “free enterprise.” Subject C does not like students eating junk food in the school and declared that, “we should not be using those funds to buy essentials for the school.”
- Subject E resoundingly stated “No!” to this query and hates the idea of having to go and solicit businesses for funds.
- Subject F answered that, yes, companies should be allowed to advertise and sell their products in schools because “advertising is everywhere and it’s a fact of life. We need the money even though the advertising may be influencing the kids. We don’t have \$30,000 to put up a scoreboard in the gym!”
- Subject G believes that increased advertising is due to poor funding. The school should not be run like a business and advertising should be limited.

Emerging Themes. Two subjects do not have a problem with advertising in schools. Four respondents feel that it has no place in our schools. Three of the six respondents accept that scoreboards are very expensive to purchase and believe that advertising is the only

way to defray such a financial burden. Two out of six interviewees unequivocally stated that fund raising should not be done to purchase essential resources for schools.

Commentary. If the funds do not come from the government, what other choice do we have than to solicit the assistance of the business community? Subject G attributes this increase in advertising and selling of products to one underlying reason: Poor funding. It is high time for the Klein government to restore funding to education and to keep hungry capitalists away from susceptible adolescents. Subject C ascertains that pop machines are huge money-makers, but doesn't think "we should be funding schools with money made from pop machines." Subject F says that advertising "is a fact of life, we're going to find advertising no matter where we go." However, Subject F is not sure we should be influencing students with advertising in our schools. Subject E used the word "atrocious" when I posed this interview question. What I find "atrocious," is that adolescents live in a society that continuously assaults them with cultural notions that rampant materialism and consumerism are somehow necessary to good living. In my opinion, schools should be a bastion of neutrality and should encourage children to aspire to higher living through intellectual rigor and strong moral development. Free enterprise has a limited place in my vision for education. As proclaimed by Subject E, I also disagree with the whole idea of having to "solicit businesses" for the funding of essential materials in the school.

Estimates of an Average Teacher/Administrator Workweek

The purpose of question #8 was to ask participants what constituted an average workweek for them (in terms of how many hours they spend on the job). The following estimates and comments were provided:

- Subject A works anywhere from 50 to 60 hours per week and Subject A puts in more time now than teaching in the pre-Klein years and, on some evenings, will not get home until 8:00 p.m. because of meetings. Subject A would like to see the work week reduced to 40 – 45 hours and attributes increased workloads to business plans and computers. Subject A contends that there are more “special needs” than ever before in our classrooms and asks: “Are they growing in the population?” Subject A attributes this trend to more alcohol and drug consumption in the population and blames unacceptable school behaviours on parents who give their kids free-reign at home. Subject A proclaimed: “Too many parents are throwing money at kids rather than disciplining them. People need to learn how to say no!” We also discussed how people are going away from traditional church values and how this may be a factor leading to moral decay in society. Subject A also claims that parents are exhausted when they get home because of “overwork” and how this can lead to a lack of discipline in the household.
- Subject B works from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and plans lessons in the evenings for about one hour. Subject B does much planning for his new courses during holidays (about 50 to 60 hours of preparation). “New courses are a lot of work,” announced Subject B, “but once they are planned the teaching is easier.” Subject B has some evening meetings, works about 14 bingo’s a year and works closely with the student’s union in the school.
- Subject C works at a 0.8 full time equivalent and finds that much easier. The school Subject C operates is open from 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. and Subject C gets no breaks during the day. Toward the end of a semester, Subject C has three or more hours of

marking per evening and in an average week, works a total of ten hours at home in the evening and on the weekend.

- Subject E averages about 55 hours per week and works on the weekend to get caught up.
- Subject F works on average up to 50 hours per week without counting meetings and conferences that Subject F attends and will clock between five to six hours of work on the weekend (to catch up).
- Subject G is “afraid to figure it out!” Subject G figures three to four hours are spent each evening preparing lessons for the next day and does much marking on weekends. Subject G admits, “better time management is needed” though has noticed that some other colleagues are spending even more of their evening hours at the school. Subject G believes this is because of the method in which they are evaluated by the principal and that they set very high standards for themselves. Subject G mentioned that on a recent parent/teacher interview night, “the room was starting to spin” and Subject G developed a headache and felt drained of all energy. Subject G does not ever remember this happening in the past. I suggested that stress and extreme fatigue likely brought on this condition.

Emerging Themes. Five of the six respondents reported that they are putting in upward of 50 hours of work per week (please note that these figures were estimates only).

Administrators are recording the longest hours at work. One subject is being paid as a part-time teacher but is actually working a full time workweek. Four of the six respondents reported that they work on weekends to clear the backlog. Over the course of

the school year, I have observed the remaining two subjects at work, on the weekend, in their respective schools.

Commentary. All of the six testimonials are indicative that cutbacks to education have seriously distended their workloads. Obviously, the educators I questioned do not take their whole weekend to rest, rejuvenate and to fully pursue leisure activities. These six educators are working excruciatingly long hours to keep up with demanding workloads and unrealistic expectations. Unfortunately, I have no quantitative data to back-up any claims that teachers are working harder than before the cutbacks. Three of the six educator-respondents (who each have several years of teaching experience and have all taught in the pre-Klein era) provided evidence to support my claim that teachers are working harder now than before the Klein government's cutbacks. On four separate occasions, Subject A spoke to this fact: (1) When asked to talk about an average workweek, Subject A answered: "I think I'm putting in more time now than ever before." (2) When I asked to elaborate on the previous statement, Subject A replied: "It changed when they brought out this business plan." (3) When speaking about the demands placed on Subject A (see question #9), I probed the subject with the following question: Who do you perceive is giving and placing these demands on you? Subject A replied: "I think government has a lot to do with it. By downsizing the health programs, the speech pathologists aren't available. The professionals that could help us aren't there." (4) I probed Subject A even further and asked if the previous statement had anything to do with cutbacks. Subject A answered: "I also believe that they have slimmed the teacher budget to a minimal." In a conversation about 'Business Plans,' I asked Subject E if they existed before Mr. Klein came to power. Subject E replied: "I'm not too sure when they

came into existence, but I do know it's pretty new." At one point in the interview, I asked Subject E why teachers are not feeling respected and the answer was: "I think it's because the government is not treating them very well and they are not putting money into education like they should be." When conversing about accountability in education (see question #4), Subject G had this to say: "There is more paperwork now than ever before. More reports need to be filled out than ever before." When asked about the effects of the cutbacks in education since Klein came to power, Subject G reported: "Class sizes were not an issue before the cuts." In short, this qualitative data may be used to argue that teacher workloads (at least in the respondents' respective local areas) have indeed increased since the cutbacks.

Excessive, Adequate or Minimal Demands

In question #9, respondents were asked to rate the demands placed on them as a teacher or administrator as minimal, adequate or excessive. The responses to this query were as follows:

- Subject A responded "excessive" to this query and feels the "pressure" comes from the government and from society. Fewer professionals are sent to help us and Subject A does not like the fact that principals are responsible for doing lice patrols and considers this a health matter. Subject A states that the counselling of students has expanded because there is no one available in the school to work in this position. Subject A feels that instructional budgets have been slimmed too much and that kids should get more physical education and music instruction during the week.

- Subject B recapped on the fact that getting a new course creates a lot of stress and does not like getting more than one new course at a time. Subject B declared that, “If you look strong in your subject, teaching in front of the students becomes easier.”
- Subject C stated that demands have increased since money allocated for administrative time was cut from the school’s budget.
- Subject E responded: “Somewhere between adequate and excessive” and continued with the following remarks: “I think there’s a lot of reports that have to be written up. And it goes from Provincial Achievement Test studies, to Education Plans, to School Update Plans, to Professional Evaluations, and to maintenance reports. It takes a big chunk of my time!” Paperwork for Subject E has increased tremendously over the years and is gobbling up a great deal of time.
- Subject F answered “excessive” and talked about the business world and how professionals get to bill for their time. Subject F feels that teachers are demanding of themselves and thinks that, “the demands on classroom teachers are high: curriculum to cover, marking, the extra hours, the coaching.... It’s excessive! Although, the public perception would be: Well, you get the summer off!”
- Subject G said: “On a scale of one to ten, I would say between eight and nine” and situated it between adequate and excessive. When asked where Subject G would like to be on the rating scale, a ‘five’ was the response given. A ‘five’ would create a good balance between work and home life because Subject G “would feel less guilty all the time.”

Emerging Themes. Two of the six respondents immediately answered ‘excessive’ to the query, two answered between ‘adequate and excessive’ and two did not directly answer

the question. During their interviews, Subject B and F regarded 'demands' rather, as "challenges." Both subjects believe that they demand much more from themselves than others do of them.

Commentary. What I found strange about the reactions to this query were those four subjects who admitted that demands have increased, but did not openly commiserate about it (on tape or off tape). According to these interviewees, demands on teachers are excessive or becoming so. Subject A feels too much time is spent counselling difficult students and objects to there not being a counsellor in the school. Subject B does not like being given more than one new course per year to teach and sees this extra planning as excessive. Subject C feels it is excessive to expect the administrative duties of the school to be fulfilled while no longer being remunerated for the work. Subject E believes that "excessive paperwork" is the root of the problem. Subject F labels the "curriculum to cover, marking, the extra hours, the coaching..." as excesses. Personally, Subject G would like to see a healthier balance between work life and home life.

Individually, all of the educators have identified excess demands placed on them by external sources. However, they appear to accept that these excesses are realities they must learn to live with.

School Councils and Parental Involvement

The purpose of question #10 was to explore whether or not educators, since the creation of School Councils, see parents as having a bigger part to play in decision-making at their school. When queried, the interview subjects had this to say:

- Subject A has served on a parent council in the past. On this council, they sent surveys and Subject A remembers school uniforms being a hot topic. It was an

advisory committee and Subject A remembers the principal as being co-operative and willing to listen to issues. According to Subject A, “parents are given a forum to have a say. Parents need to be asked their opinion before big decisions are made.” Subject A had an opportunity to effect change and professed that, “the School Councils are one of the good things to come out of the department of education in a long time!” Subject A did hear of a school where a certain parent council took over the school because the principal was not using them as an advisory group, but rather as a “running group.” Subject A cautions that special interest groups need to be controlled at these meetings.

- Subject B has a hard time finding parents to be on the council because many are burned out from serving on them through the years. The small group they do have at their school is dedicated. Their role is an advisory one. They also give the teachers much recognition. Subject B finds them very supportive and says that, “If you have positive people, the council can be a great for to the school!” In the past, they have had some parents who only wanted to talk about their children, but for the most part, all children are considered in their discussions.
- Subject C says they do have one, but it is not very active. It is difficult for parents to meet; therefore, does not think they are very effective.
- Subject E said that parent councils were initially given a larger mandate. They were supposed to have a stronger voice in the beginning. That changed to an advisory capacity. Subject E asserts that, “parents should not be involved in the governance of the school or in the final decisions, which they know very little about.” Subject E remembers parents sitting in on a staff interview but they left once it was finished.

Subject E claims that it is difficult to deal with an angry parent because they can commandeer a lot of other parents. Usually, though, other supportive parents help diffuse tense situations.

- Subject F thinks they have more of a voice than they did in the past. However, Subject F maintains that the principal has the last word and said: “I think it’s wonderful to have this structure and this communication and to find out what is happening in the school. Their influence (the parents) and their opinions are important. “But, when an important educational decision is to be made,” Subject F does not believe “parents should have a lot of say.”
- Subject G informed me that they used to be called “Parent-Advisory Committees” but are now called “School Councils.” Subject G does not believe they should have “a say in matters they don’t understand like teacher hiring and programming. They are not aware of all aspects of the job and should not be involved in such decision-making.”

Emerging Themes. Overall, teachers do not appear to be threatened by the School Council’s presence in their schools. Only one subject views School Councils as ineffective. Five of the six respondents are of the opinion that the role of a parent on a School Council should only be advisory one and that some decisions do not concern them because they don’t have the “proper training.”

Two of the five respondents informed me that that ‘School Councils’ have undergone a name change over the years and that their role has been adjusted to reflect their “advisory capacity.”

Commentary. I share in the opinion of the five subjects who perceive that educators should make educational decisions and that parents should not get involved in complex pedagogical decisions or in the intricacies of long-term and unit planning. Teachers have four years or more of specialized university training in this area. As Subject F stated in question #3, just because parents themselves went through the school system, it doesn't make them experts and does not mean, "they know all there is to know about education."

It would seem that the strength of the parent voice has been reduced since the inception of parent councils. Subject E and G both confirmed that Premier Klein's innovative vision for greater parental choice and power has been adjusted to realistically reflect the important decision-making capacity of administrators, school boards and teachers. Albeit, like a good sea captain, administrators need to listen to the opinions of their officers before any significant course changes are made. At the very least, parents need to be listened to so that a messy situation like the one described on page 17 may be avoided.

Working Conditions and The Morale of Teachers in Alberta

Question #11 asked respondents to rate teachers' working conditions and morale in their own jurisdiction and at the provincial level. The following reactions were noted:

- Subject A thinks they need improvement. "I think a lot of teachers are working too hard. I think they're too stressed out." Subject A feels that older teachers are more stressed out because of the all the changes that have taken place over the years and realises that change is a good, but does not like change for the sake of change. Subject A elaborated further and said: "I believe change should be gradual rather than rapid. And I believe many districts seem to like rapid change. And attaching your wagon to

every stir [sic] that goes by becomes very difficult at times for people.” Subject A has seen the proverbial educational pendulum swing back and forth many times. When I asked for an example of a pendulum shift, phonics, whole language, and the eradication of workbooks were given as examples. Subject A says that “xeroxing” has taken on whole new dimensions in education. When asked about the current morale of teachers in Alberta, this was shared:

I think, overall, the morale is strong. I think teachers are pulling together, but I also know that they’re disappointed in the salary negotiations and all that. Like the strike situation. I haven’t talked to one teacher that wants to go on strike. Teachers are into creating things. Teachers are into building things up. They’re not a group that likes to tear things down. And a strike does tear things down. They don’t like tearing relationships. They work very hard on relationships with others, with students, with parents and with board members.... But, I also know that, like talking to some, morale is at times low [sic]. Especially when you’re dealing with high stress students, morale gets very low. I know of teachers and teacher aides that have said: ‘I’ve had enough. I’ll put in the end of the year and then that’s it - I’m not coming back!’

- Subject B feels sorry for some teachers and the situation they are in, but mentioned that there are always three or four teachers on a staff that “are not pulling their share” and this affects everyone else’s workload. Subject B says that teachers who are not team players end up creating more work for others and says that feeling overworked depends more on the kind of class you have and your situation. Subject B maintains that “you can get over-stressed because you know your classroom will change from year to year. Every teacher says, ‘They say I’m going to have a good year.’ Why? Because of the class you’re getting. That’s the main thing. It’s not the working conditions, it’s the class that you’re getting.” Subject B does not feel that all teachers across the province are overworked and is one of the fortunate ones since there are no students with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or severe special needs in Subject B’s

classes. Subject B may have to work on weekends to catch up, but says it is still a choice of when to work on the weekend. Subject B has family members who work shifts and don't have this choice on the weekends and is, consequently, thankful for Christmas and summer holidays. When asked about the morale of teachers in Alberta it was mentioned that at Teachers' Convention, Subject B realised that, "there are many bad situations here in Alberta and we heard lots of horror stories about some classes." What Subject B realised, though, is that many teachers support the cause and want to see changes in classroom conditions, will fight for the cause and will go on strike if they have to.

- Subject C feels that class sizes are, in general, too big and said: "...that study after study shows that 17 is an appropriate number for a class size in lower elementary." Why is the government not "getting with the program?" asks Subject C. "The kids in a class of 17 are getting a better deal than the ones in a class of 32" and does not feel that split-classes are needed either. When asked about the morale of teachers in Alberta, Subject C answered: "At one point I felt very proud to be a teacher, I love my job and I love what I do. But there's becoming to be almost like this stigma that we're all bad. We don't work. We all work five hour days according to Klein." When I asked why Subject C feels that teachers are not feeling valued, Subject C had this to say: "You hate to say you're a teacher because somebody's going to jump down your throat!" Subject C says it is frustrating to hear over and over again that, "it must be nice to be a teacher because of the long holidays."

- Subject E thought back to the first years of teaching and had this to say:

My very first year of teaching, it wasn't all that rosy. I had 10 different subjects to prepare for everyday. Some of those classes, one class I recall had 36 boys, grades

seven, eight and nine doing remedial Language Arts, all slumped into one.... I can remember working without curriculum or without resources. So how does it compare today? I can also think back to my first years. Probably this will be a horror picture for me, but there was a young girl there who wasn't able to read or write. She was in grade six and we didn't do anything special for her. We never took care of her. So that's pretty sad. And I think today teachers have a lot of things that they have to do and their parents are really demanding. Their principals are very demanding. And I think that they have a lot of work that is set out for them. But I also believe that if you are a teacher and you want to teach, then you do the job.

When asked how Subject E would rate the overall morale of teachers in Alberta it was stated that "teachers are frustrated and angry. They are not respected maybe like they would like to be."

- The immediate response from Subject F was: "Taxed, stressed and pressured!"
- Subject G feels that we are further behind now than before the strike action in February 2002. Subject G does not feel valued and said: "The public doesn't see the whole picture." According to Subject G, "the public just sees all our holiday time and think we have it so easy! They don't see all of the extra hours that we put in." Subject G noted that more and more of our August break is being used for professional development and preparation and that this "cuts our holiday by a few weeks."

Emerging Themes. According to several respondents, "some situations are worse than others." All subjects mentioned increased class sizes as a working condition issue. The two administrator respondents are concerned about teachers "not pulling their weight." The teacher respondents did not bring up this phenomenon. Four of the six respondents discussed holiday time and how these breaks very much affect public perception of our profession. Attending Teachers' Convention helped several respondents see the bigger

picture of working conditions across Alberta. Two respondents proclaimed that they “do not feel valued” or respected by the general public.

Commentary. What I found especially alarming with the responses to this interview question was Subject A’s comment in regard to teachers and teacher assistants abandoning the profession because “they have had enough!” This statement echoes Larry Booi’s thoughts as well as my own on the subject of teachers leaving the profession because of deteriorating classroom conditions that are not being rectified by the Klein government.

I noted contradictory responses when the subjects were asked about the morale of teachers across Alberta. Respondents’ answers varied from *strong* to *low* and from *good* to *bad*. This may suggest that the mental condition of individual teachers is healthier, varies between subjects or that the noun *morale* was misunderstood in the question.

One issue that will always stand out in the public perception of working conditions for teachers is our holiday time (see responses from Subjects B, C and G on this point). Many individuals in the public (including members of my own extended family) feel very little sympathy for teachers because on average we are on holiday for three months out of the year. Subject C sums up this public perception well with the fear that, “somebody’s going to jump down your throat” if you reveal that you are a teacher. Judging from Subject C’s comment that, “at one point I felt very proud to be a teacher....” indicates to me that Subject C’s reference to a “stigma” may be justified; Subject C could certainly view insults hurled at Alberta teachers from Japan by Ralph Klein, as a reproach of teachers.

In most occupations, holiday time varies between one week to eight weeks per year. Subject B is thankful for teachers' holiday time because members of Subject B's family work shifts and they do not benefit from extended holiday time. In my opinion, there is a deeply entrenched public perception that most teachers become teachers for the great holidays. This comment can be validated with Subject G's belief that "the public just sees all our holiday time and think we have it so easy! They don't see all of the extra hours that we put in." Anytime I am confronted with this value statement, my typical answer is that my holidays are "time in lieu" for all of the evenings and weekends that I give up during the school year to deliver quality instruction and evaluation to every single one of the students in my care. None of the respondents offered any clear suggestions on how to alter the public's perception of our holiday time. I assume that this issue will most likely continue to hinder teachers in their struggle for improved working conditions.

Daily Frustrations of Administrators and Teachers

Question #12 examined some common frustrations that administrators and teachers encounter on any given day at school. The following contributions were brought forth:

- Subject A mentioned "computers that don't work and impolite students."
- Subject B sees administrators as having a harder time controlling kids because they have less power than in the past and attributes this to parents not being as supportive as in the past. "They believe their kids before they believe us." Subject B says many teachers do not deal with difficult situations in the beginning because they "think nothing is going to happen anyway so why spend the time" and feels that education is becoming too business oriented. "It seems like the money aspect is starting to be too important, more than the kids in some aspects." Subject B thinks the government

wants education to run more like a business and does not like the way funding is tied into credits. Subject B feels that students are pushed to do more than they can handle and that this is “a big game” that leads to widespread cheating. Subject B is also frustrated by the high turnover of teachers and finds it difficult to deal with teachers who are incapable of relating with students.

- Subject C tires of having to justify the job (especially the holidays) to people in the family and the general public.
- Subject E is frustrated by excessive parent demands and the lack of good parenting. A second frustration is the ATA’s lack of “self-introspection” and feels that the ATA protects inadequate teachers to the point of it “being absurd.” Only “top-notch professionals should stay in the profession. Someone who can’t perform in the job should not be able to continue in the profession!”
- Subject F is frustrated by financial constraints and says more collaboration is created when there is more money for common planning time and meetings. Subject F is also frustrated by the public perception that, “we only work 9 to 3 jobs and that we don’t deserve a raise because our jobs are too easy.” Subject F does not like the political structure of school districts and finds that competition between teachers takes away from collaborative efforts. Subject F finished by proclaiming that, “the biggest frustration on a daily basis could be that you could work 24/7 in your classroom or in your office and you still wouldn’t get everything done. I wish I had 48 hours in the day!”
- Subject G says that trying to meet all the needs of your learners with less assistance is a huge frustration and would like to have more assistance in the classroom. Subject G

also finds it difficult to find the time to plan for the different levels in the group.

Mostly, Subject G feels “spread too thin.” Some students are very dependent and won’t continue with the work unless the teacher checks their progress constantly.

Subject G sees these children as being the special needs students in a group.

Emerging Themes. Two respondents see improper parenting as their biggest frustration.

“Parents who believe their children before believing us” was verbalised by two separate respondents during their respective interviews as creating difficulties and frustration.

Two respondents view financial constraints as creating the most frustration. Subject G attributes the lack of assistance in the classroom (for children with special needs) as a financial constraint. Subject F attributes the lack of collaborative planning time as a financial constraint. Both administrators are frustrated with the difficulty in firing incompetent teachers. Subject E feels that the ATA should get more involved in the policing of its members. Both administrator respondents see high parental demands and expectations as stressors that lead to frustration.

Commentary. The lack of adequate parenting is certainly not something we can blame on the government or on a lack of funding to education. During the course of the interviews, several of the teacher/administrator respondents alluded to “bad parenting” as a constant source of frustration. This social phenomenon is interwoven in the fabric of working conditions and, I assume, is a contributing factor in the deterioration of classroom conditions across North America.

Some of the frustrations outlined above can perhaps be used to argue that a lack of adequate funding to education, on the part of the Klein government, has negatively impacted the working conditions of these three respondents. This ‘impact’ could include:

- (1) Subject B's insistence that, "the government wants education to run more like a business;"
- (2) Subject F's mention of financial constraints as the root cause of many personal frustrations;
- (3) And Subject G's difficulty in "trying to meet all the needs of your learners with less assistance" in the classroom.

Reforming Education

Question #12 was worded as follows: Where and how do you think reform should take place in education? The participants had the following to say about making changes in education:

Reform needs to come from the "grassroots up," says Subject A. "Most reform has come from the top down." Subject A also dislikes how curriculum has been "downloaded" from grade eight learner expectations to grade four and said:

We are asking them to absorb too much information and trying to fit all of the technology revolutions into education at once is too much. I think what we need to do is return to what do they need to know. They need to know how to find information. And they need to know how to read and write.

- Subject B responded as follows: "We need to work on reducing class sizes and making sure all kids have a place to stay and enough food to eat before they can learn." Subject B thinks the ATA is on the right track with our demands.
- Subject C asserts that, "parents need to take the time to read to their kids" and says that education does not end "when they walk out of the school doors." Subject C does not think that throwing money at the problem is the right solution either. Subject C feels school boards and central offices are too "top-heavy" and finished with this

question: “Are they doing what’s best for them (the students) or are they doing what’s best to keep a job?”

- Subject E likes the “New Vision for K-3” that has come out of Alberta Learning and says there is an increased focus on numeracy and literacy in this vision.
- Subject F would love for education to be “a federally funded entity” and thinks that “students should have equal opportunities across the country and we should be having similar curriculum delivery. Of course, we could have regional focuses on certain things.” When asked what obstacles are standing in the way of this federally funded vision, the response was: “It would be a political nightmare. Forming the Western Canadian Protocol has been challenging enough! People are just too territorial for this to ever happen.”
- Subject G would increase funding so we would not have to worry about getting extra assistance and then went on to describe how it would be “nice to have someone employed in the district that helps you design a program for the special needs kids.” Subject G imagines that this person could do the research for the teacher and help put a program together for the child in need. All the classroom teacher would need to do is adapt their teaching style to fit the child’s program.

Emerging Themes. Only two respondents mentioned that funding should be increased to reduce class sizes and hire more assistants for the classroom. Variations in responses were noted and expected because of the nature of the interview question.

Commentary. Subject A believes that reform needs to come from the “grassroots up” or from within the system to be longer lasting. Unfortunately, this kind of reform may take decades or even generations. As suggested in the first part of this research, Mr. Klein’s

reforms were quick and drastic and were motivated by spending cuts and not improvements to the way Albertan students are educated.

As revealed by Subject B, class sizes need to be reduced in order for reform to occur. The following quote from Subject C's interview strengthens Subject B's assertion:

I think class sizes are too big... There are studies upon studies that have said for lower elementary, 17 is the perfect number. Your kids are the most important things and they're our future and that makes a difference. I've taught classes of 17-18 kids and I've taught classes of 32. You know who's getting the better deal! And I think that's the biggest issue."

Reasons for Becoming School Council Member

There were a series of ten questions posed to parents only. These questions and the responses follow. The first request of parents only was to divulge the reason why they decided to become active members of their School Council. The parents had this to say:

One parent does not like to "hear from other people what's going on" and likes to find out the news firsthand. When parents complain to Subject D, they are told to "get involved!" Subject H wanted "to have a voice and to have that voice heard."

Commentary. Both parent respondents became involved to have a greater voice and to know the happenings in the school. Subjects D and H do not like to receive second hand information and Subject H feels its "important to me to have my voice heard especially when my kids best interest is at heart."

Parental Role on the School Council

The second question asked to parents only was to highlight their role on the School Council. The following responses were shared:

Subject D was “a class rep [sic].” Subject H was also a “class rep [sic].” I then asked Subject H what were the responsibilities of a ‘class rep’ and the following was said:

Initially, just to make the other parents in the class aware of the happenings at the meetings and how they pertained to the parents. Special events in the school that they might want to attend. Asking for volunteers, lice checks, for bake sales, making them aware of certain committees being formed (i.e., playground committees) and seeing if they wanted to participate in that.

Commentary. Both parents shared the same title and both mentioned that everybody had a participatory role in the council. Both parents mentioned that part of their responsibility as a class representative is to keep the other parents in their respective classes well informed. Subject H went so far as adding an insert, once a month, in the teacher’s newsletter to keep all of the parents of the group in touch with current happenings.

Role of the Principal at a Meeting

The third interview question for parents requested that the parents recount the role of the principal during the meetings.

Subject D stated that, “the principal is there to oversee discussion, to guide us and to let us know what the boundaries are. The principal always has a report to share with us and an agenda is always prepared before a meeting.”

Subject H said: “The principal acted as a mediator and kept us up to date on the happenings of the school.” There was often a teacher representative present, too, at these meetings.

Commentary. Both parents rolled their eyes before responding, but did not answer the question in a sardonic manner. From what I was told by the respondents, the principal obviously leads the meetings and ensures that parents do not over-step any boundaries.

Both parent subjects made it quite clear that the principal is in charge of the meetings. Later in the interview, I asked Subject H why some parents do not want to get involved on the School Council. Subject H had this to say: “A lot of parents have experienced this too where you can only make so many decisions in front of the brick wall. When nothing is being done or changed, than its discouraging.” This was the reason Subject H gave, as well, for leaving the School Council. Could the “brick wall” Subject H is referring to mean the administration? I did not probe Subject H any further on this point. What is obvious, though, is that Subject H quit the School Council because nothing was being done when parent opinions were shared at the meetings.

Quality of their Children’s Educational Experience

The fourth question for parents examined their views in regard to the quality of education they believe their children are receiving. The following opinions were contributed:

Subject D responded “as a whole, yes,” but did not like the split class scenario. Consequently, Subject D says that, “parents will sometimes pull their kids out and then the numbers get even lower and you get more split classes.”

Subject H initially responded: “Globally, yes, nationally, no.” Subject H does not like it that there is a high number of instances when substitute teachers are needed in the children’s classes.

Commentary. From the tone of the interviews, both parents seem satisfied with the quality of education received by their children. I did not seize the opportunity to further probe Subject H on why it is perceived that our students are receiving a good education on a global level but not a national one.

Creation of School Councils and the Parent Voice

The fifth query invited parents to comment on the following prompt: The Klein government advocated the creation of School Councils to ensure that parents have a greater voice in the education of their children. Do you feel you have been granted a greater voice? Their reactions to the prompt were as follows:

Subject D answered:

I don't know that we have a better say but we have a better view of things. I mean if you attend the meetings then you know better what's going on. But I don't know that we have a lot to say or choices. Like the split class situation... it sounded like we had a choice and that we were going to be able to do something, but we were pretty much told what to do. So, I guess not.

Subject H elaborated as follows:

I agree that the motive is there and that's the idea. But we have to make sure the voice is going to open ears. Parents can get together and they can make decisions and there can be an administrator present and there can be teachers present. But, if the concerns, comments and the decisions are being given to people who are not paying attention with their heart and with their mind, than that philosophy of the greater voice means nothing. We need to have school trustees or school board representatives other than the principal at those meetings.... That's the group of people who could give the parents the answers they want to hear. The principals sometimes have their hands tied because they might not have the answers from the school board. If that's what their job is at the meetings (to act as a representative of the school board) than that needs to be clarified. I think it's good to have a greater voice, the right parents should and I think the voice needs to be given and sent to open ears.

Commentary. Both parents elaborated at great length on this question. Despite agreeing that they have been granted a 'voice,' the parents seem to want more of one. Subjects E, F and G, however, seem to believe the 'voice' is loud enough. Do they have any real power when it comes to decision-making? I doubt it. Important educational decisions remain exclusive to teachers and administrators as far as the two parent interviewees were concerned. For example, when speaking about a child being placed in a split-grade

classroom, Subject D said: “We were pretty much told what to do.” Subject H likes the motive behind the creation of School Councils but says, “we have to make sure the voice is going to open ears.” Subject H believes the “philosophy of the greater voice” means nothing if “the concerns, comments and the decisions are being given to people who are not paying attention with their heart and with their mind....”

Parent Views Concerning Fund Raising

The sixth question of the parent interview invited parents to share their thoughts on the subject of fund raising by parents in the school. The following was spoken:

Subject D said: “It depends for what it’s for” and feels that it is always the same people doing all of the work. Subject D does feel that there is too much of it going on and objects to any fund-raisers that take away business from local commerce. At this point, Subject D said in an angry tone: “A lot of times what they are trying to sell is conflicting with business owners and conflicting with merchants up town!” When I queried as to whether or not it ever happened that funds raised were used to buy books or AV equipment for the school, Subject D could remember one instance where “some books and games were bought for the kids and spotlights for the Christmas Concert.”

Subject H responded:

I think that it’s overdone, especially in the early years. A couple of years ago the kids were doing a fund raiser and the message that came home was that the money was going to be spent on equipment for the gym – balls, skipping ropes, etc. I’m not sure that is something we should be raising money for. Neither should we be raising money for books. I understand that this does happen... otherwise they don’t get the books. If it’s a necessity we all have to pitch in to ensure that the kids get a quality education. It’s not our job, but sometimes we have to do that.

Commentary. Both parents identified that funds raised were used to buy books or other necessities in the school. Subject H is adamant that this type of fund-raising is not necessary, but does not subsequently finger the government for lack of funding.

Fund-raising is evidently a huge responsibility of any parent serving on a School Council. Subject H is resigned to the fact that sacrifices need to be made for children to get a quality education even though fund-raising may be “over-done.” Subject D believes that the school should not participate in fund-raising that interferes with the commercial interests of local businesses. The collected data from this question may fit into the argument that I raise on page 18. If the provincial government were to restore funding to pre-1993 levels and allocate vital funds back to school boards, fundraising to purchase equipment for our gym (as identified by Subject H) and books for our classrooms (as identified by both subjects) would not be necessary.

Type of Decision-Making on the School Council

The seventh question asked parents to give details on what types of decisions they found themselves involved in making. The respondents had this to say:

Subject D stated that mainly fund-raising decisions were made. Subject H stated that fund-raising is mainly talked about at meetings and mentioned that, “they are not allowed to carry over a balance from year to year” (they must show a zero balance in their bookkeeping). As a council, they had to decide how money would be allocated to different groups in the school.

Commentary. Fund-raising appears to be the main preoccupation of their meetings. A more appropriate name for their council should be ‘Parent Fund Raising Committee.’ Subject H informed me that parents who leave the council often do so because they are

burned out and tired of being criticised for the fund-raising decisions they were involved in making. Subject D announced that much of the volunteering done by parents in the school is for fund-raising reasons.

Decisions Based on the Best Interest of all or Select Groups

The eighth question invited the parents to report on whether decisions were made with the best interest of all students in mind or if decisions were sometimes made with a select group in mind. The participants verbalized the following:

Subject D says they try to think of all students when making decisions and spoke of “a going-away class picture” being given to all students moving on to the next school rather than sold to only a select few who could afford it.

Subject H professed that an effort was always made to keep the best interests of all stakeholders in mind. They sometimes “tip-toed” around sensitive issues involving French Immersion parents and the English stream parents, though.

Commentary. The best interest of all is kept in the forefront of discussion and decision-making on this particular council. Neither parent described a situation where a specific interest group dominated discussion during one of their meetings.

Controlling an Angry Parent at a Meeting

The ninth question asked parents to recount how members of the School Council controlled an angry parent at a meeting. Their responses were as follows:

Subject D has only seen one instance of this. A parent was told an issue did not belong on council. The offending parent was told to speak to parties involved and then to pursue it with the principal if the issue was not resolved. “During discussion,” says Subject D, “it can get heated, but parents are asked to raise their hand before speaking.”

Subject H does not remember any specific incidents but said: “As part of any good discussion or debate, there tends to be anger or differences understanding things.” Personally, if parents were having trouble understanding a point of view, Subject H would come to the next meeting armed with better information.

Commentary. Discussion can become animated and certain parents speak with “a tone” but, for the most part, Subject D and H concur that discussion did not get out of hand at their meetings. Subject E’s assertion that it is sometimes difficult to deal with an angry parent at a meeting, until a supportive parent intervenes to diffuse the tense situation (see p. 47), qualifies what was said by Subjects D and H in respect to decorum at School Council meetings.

Contribution to the School Council

The tenth question posed to parents was as follows: Do you feel that your contribution to the School Council was valued? Their reactions were as follows:

Subject D answered affirmatively. Subject H answered: “Yes, but more so in the beginning” and would return to the council if it ever became “underrepresented” by parents.

Commentary. Both interviewees answered ‘yes’ to the query, but had reservations throughout their interviews about “their voices being heard” by the right people.

Other Information

The following is a list of other information that was revealed by parents and relevant to the study:

- Fifteen to twenty parents show up at any given meeting.

- When asked why some parents are apathetic about getting involved on the School Council, Subject H answered:

A lot of parents are exhausted because they have other obligations. A lot of parents have experienced this too where you can only make so many decisions in front of the brick wall. When nothing is being done or changed, than its discouraging. You find other ways to channel your energy. You find ways to spend your time in ways that sees results for you, your heart, your kids and your family.”

- A typical meeting lasts between one and two hours.

Final Contributions

The final question invited all interviewees (teachers, administrators and parents) to share any final comments. Their final contributions were as follows:

- Subject A does not like the word ‘business’ permeating educational discourse. “That word really does not reflect an educational standpoint. A business is dollars and cents.” Subject A believes that students cannot be categorized in “columns of wins and losses” and says, “you can’t have losses in education. You need to have wins and what you do in education is look at what things the child is doing right, not what he’s doing wrong.”
- Subject B made no comment.
- Subject C proudly responded: “I love my job and I love the kids, even though they give me grief at times. But, I like what I do and I think I do something good. I think that what we do is important!”
- Subject D finished the interview with: “Just hang in there!”
- Subject E finished with this statement: “I think that schools have improved a lot in what they’re presenting to kids and I think that we are in an interesting age where we provide a lot of development for many kids.”

- Subject F summarised the interview with this statement:

Even with all the negativity about the budgets and stuff, you still find most educators are dedicated people and that brings me hope. We're in education not to climb the hierarchy. You don't go into education to make money.... If anybody goes into education because they think they're going to get rich, they are ill informed. I think most educators go into it because they love kids and that gives me hope. I wish the profession were more highly rated by the public.

- Subject G said that we work in a “worthwhile profession” and that it could be much better “if we just got rid of all those extras that take us away from the kids.” Subject G says, “we don't have enough time to just have fun with the kids because of enormous curriculum demands,” finds that being with the kids is enjoyable and wishes the students had more opportunities to get to know their teacher on a personal level.

- Subject H supports teacher endeavours and finished with:

I think that in our district, passion is felt by most teachers to provide kids with a quality education. That means by delivering the information they know across to the kids with their heart. I truly hope that when I send my kids to school everyday that the teachers are doing their best to make sure it comes from their heart.

Synthesis

Much of the reflection shared in Part A was strengthened by the interview responses that were gathered in Part B of the study. As was stated by Subject F in the interview, teachers as well as administrators are feeling the pinch of cutbacks and are putting on a brave face for their students and the parents that they serve. During the duration of their interviews, I sensed that all of the six educators appeared hopeful for the future.

Nevertheless, I got the sense that they simply regard these tough times as another proverbial pendulum shift in education. However, it is my perception that this is not a pendulum swing but rather an ideological shift that is being witnessed in many other countries (see p. 8). In this age of rapid globalization and free trade between nations, education has, in my mind, become another commodity. In this global marketplace, acquiring knowledge is equated with acquiring goods. If knowledge cannot be bought, sold, traded, exchanged or borrowed in a commercial transaction it is not valued. In this fast-paced technological age, knowledge is regarded as a possession. Teachers, in my opinion, are not in the business of buying and selling knowledge or in forming mindless worker bees for the marketplace. I am much more inclined to view knowledge as a precious resource that should not be exploited exclusively for economic reasons. I transmit knowledge and challenge my students to achieve higher levels of enlightenment on a metacognitive level. I am not convinced nor am I prepared to debase the sanctity of learning, in my classroom, by embracing Mr. Klein's array of free market ideals. After compiling all of the interview responses, I arrived at the following conclusion: Despite all of Mr. Klein's reforms in the education sector, these will not amount to much, in the long

run, if educators do not buy into his ideology. Teachers will very likely continue to protest and undermine his reforms and will wage a silent revolution of their own. It is in this silent revolution that future students will truly benefit from educational reform.

In this era of downsizing in the education sector, several of the respondents in this study reported that they are feeling the effects of bare bones funding, centralized curricula and increased parental choice. Political, ideological and economic shifts are occurring at phenomenal speeds and the testimonials suggest that these changes have spilled over into their classrooms. Much of my research implies that very little consultation with the teachers, administrators and parents, whom I questioned, has occurred in the process of reforming education in Alberta. Reforms have trickled down from the top and have subsequently drenched teachers on the ground. Teacher and administrator workloads, as illustrated in this local study, have become or are becoming insufferable. I also share in Subject A's assessment that in outcome-based curricula, the criteria for performance seem to take precedence over educating the whole child (see response #4). In the eyes of a liberal minded educator, looking from the ground up, these reforms look more like the dehumanisation of education.

We are living in dangerous educational times. As vocalised by Subject A (see response #11), Mr. Klein's radical reforms are driving teachers away or out of the profession. As described by Subject G in the interview (see response #3), the current trends in education are turning-off potential teachers from making 'teaching' their profession of choice. Teachers are unhappy with their working conditions and have waged strikes to make their point. It is time to ask teachers for solutions. To effect real educational change, reforms need to swell from the ground up. It is in an atmosphere of

mutual trust, between government and educators, that authentic educational reform will occur in Alberta.

Epilogue

As I conducted my research, the relationship between the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and the Klein government continued to play out in the media. I will bring the reader through a brief account of the current events surrounding the context in which this study was undertaken.

In January, several bargaining units of the ATA were in contract negotiations with their local boards. As momentum was building in the ATA, negotiations with local school boards were stalling out all over the province. By mid February, over 20 bargaining units commenced strike action. The strike action dragged on for three weeks and there were no solutions in sight for Alberta teachers. During the strike, the Klein government opened their lines of communication and began amassing evidence from frustrated parents and students to build a case for a back-to-work order. By February 21st, 22 bargaining units were on strike. On February 22nd, the government ordered the teachers back to work and the ATA implored all bargaining units to comply with the order. The ATA immediately filed a court challenge and won their challenge several days later. Nevertheless, fearing a backlash of public opinion, Larry Booi urged local bargaining units to not pursue further strike action. On March 11, 2002, the government of Alberta introduced Bill 12 or the *Education Services Settlement Act* and established an education commission to examine the issue of class sizes. ATA President Larry Booi was quoted in the ATA News (March 15, 2002) as saying: "This is a black day for public education and for democracy in Alberta."

The following explanation of Bill 12 was largely borrowed from a memorandum sent to local ATA presidents from the Provincial Executive Council. According to the

ATA, “this legislation imposes a highly restricted form of binding arbitration on teachers and strips working conditions clauses from collective agreements”. Bill 12 removes the right to strike or lockout until September 31, 2003. It also requires that teachers “resume the duties of their employment without slowdown or diminution. Bill 12 imposes harsh fines for non-compliance (\$1000 for individual teachers who incite a strike and \$10,000 for an officer of the ATA or of a school board for inciting a strike). In section 1(1-f) of Bill 12, a strike is defined as: (i) a cessation of work; (ii) a refusal to work or to continue to work by 2 or more employees acting in combination or in concert or in accordance with a common understanding; (iii) a concerted activity by 2 or more employees to refuse to comply with responsibilities assigned by their principal or their employer. Under the law, the Labour Relations Board is empowered under Section 29 of Bill 12 to decertify the Association and preclude it from representing teachers. The arbitrator is not permitted to impose a settlement that may cause a board to incur a deficit or add to an existing one. As well, it is strictly forbidden for the arbitrator to include any clauses in agreements dealing with class sizes or other working conditions. The ATA is obviously outraged by this legislative hammer, but is recommending that teachers comply with the law. ATA President Larry Booi advised teachers to make individual choices about the withdrawal of voluntary services in their schools and to the Department of Learning.

From my viewpoint, Bill 12 is a legislative muzzle designed to intimidate teachers and to silence the Association. Bill 12 does not remove our right to protest, but does revoke our right to strike. This law jeopardises democracy and restricts basic freedoms with its use of legal semantics. By removing the right of teachers to strike, Bill 12 restricts the right to assemble and to organise a concerted protest of current working

conditions. Bill 12 was designed, in my opinion, to destroy teacher solidarity and to lay in the groundwork to dismantle the ATA. In the end, much like its counterpart in Ontario (Bill 160), Bill 12 will only inflame an already volatile situation and its caustic effects will be felt for years to come.

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Appendix

Government Exams

- Grade 3

1. Math: Part A (computational speed tests, end of May); Part B (concepts & skills, end of June)
2. English Language Arts: Part A (writing, end of May); Part B (reading comprehension, end of June)

Total Exams: 4

- Grade 6

1. Math: part A (computational speed tests, end of May); part B (concepts & skills, end of June)
2. English Language Arts: Part A (writing, end of May); Part B (reading comprehension, end of June)
3. French Language Arts (French Immersion students only): Part A (writing, end of May); Part B (reading comprehension, end of June)
4. Science
5. Social Studies

Total Exams (English): 6

Total Exams (French Immersion): 8

- Grade 9: same format as grade 6

- Grade 12: All core subjects that the student has enrolled in involve a culminating diploma exam at the end of the term. These results account for 50% of the student's final grade for a particular course. These achievement test results can make or break a student's application for entrance at most post-secondary institutions.