

Beyond Resistance to Privatization: Rebuilding and Reclaiming Public Education

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Introduction

Privatization is felt in classrooms every day. Parent Advisory Councils lead fundraising drives and teachers seek donations of resources to support the curriculum. Faced with budget shortfalls from decreased international student tuition (Rozworski, 2020), school boards propose to cut student electives and activities. Teachers turn to “free” online services to supplement overstretched resources. These are all examples of how “public institutions increasingly use market-like mechanisms to deliver services and are being run according to market-oriented principles such as competition, cost-reflexive pricing, financialized performance indicators, and competitive outsourcing” (Bownlee, Hurl and Walby, 2018).

As discussed in a previous British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF)¹ research report (Kuehn, 2019), some of these forms of privatization are explicit and obvious. Examples include contracting out services, reliance on international student tuition for school district revenue, and public funding for independent (private) schools. Other forms of privatization are more subtle. For example, Google Classroom has become ubiquitous in most parts of British Columbia (BC) (Levine, 2020). This “free” platform is based on a business model that makes its money from user data that they have collected in a variety of ways. As articulated by Shoshana Zuboff (2019), this is “surveillance capitalism” whereby companies take users' personal information as the “free raw material for translation into behavioral data.” Behavioral data is then sold back to companies to predict and influence consumer behavior. These pressures and trends have been amplified under COVID-19. For instance, while online learning has been at times a necessary response to health conditions, it has the potential to become the new “normal” and further extend private interests in public education (Gacoin, 2021).

To better understand the issue of privatization from the perspective of teachers, the BCTF held a one-day Think Tank in May 2021. The aims of this research event were to (1) explore growing pressures and trends towards privatization of education within the province and globally, particularly within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and (2) identify strategies for resisting privatization and defending public education as a public good.

Methodology: Activist research

The *BCTF Think Tank on Resisting Privatization in Education in BC* was conceptualized as an interactive research space to enable dialogue and connection between teachers, academic, and community stakeholders and the union. The Think Tank is a methodology used by the BCTF as a form of progressive activist research. Following Jones (2018), activist research is a “framework for conducting collaborative research that makes explicit challenges to power through transformative action” (p. 27). As such the day was structured to first identify key facets of privatisation in BC's public education system and then facilitate the development of strategies for action and resistance. The day's conversations were interpreted in a visual mural, created by Sam Bradd of Drawing Change.² The images, discussed with participants during the course of the day as they were created, were both a recording of the event as well as an opportunity for iterative data analysis with participants during the event itself.

Setting the context: Privatization in education

¹ The BCTF is the provincial union for teachers in British Columbia, Canada, representing 49,000 members. See www.bctf.ca.

² Drawing Change is a network of graphic recorders who listen, synthesize and draw dialogue in real time. See <https://drawingchange.com/>.

The Think Tank's theoretical framing was provided by Dr. Sam E. Abrams (2018), Director of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education at Teacher's College, Columbia University. Abrams argues that a "commercial mindset" underpins the privatization of education and allows private interests to drive the direction of public education. For Abrams, this mindset has four key dimensions. Firstly, the libertarian critique is premised on the need for small government and doing the "minimum" within public services. Secondly, the drive towards commercial profit allows business models to be introduced into the provision of public education services. Thirdly, a sense of crisis creates the need for solutions to "fix" public education. Finally, public services are mired in a bureaucratic pathology which opens the way for external "solutions" by private "experts" (see Figure 1).

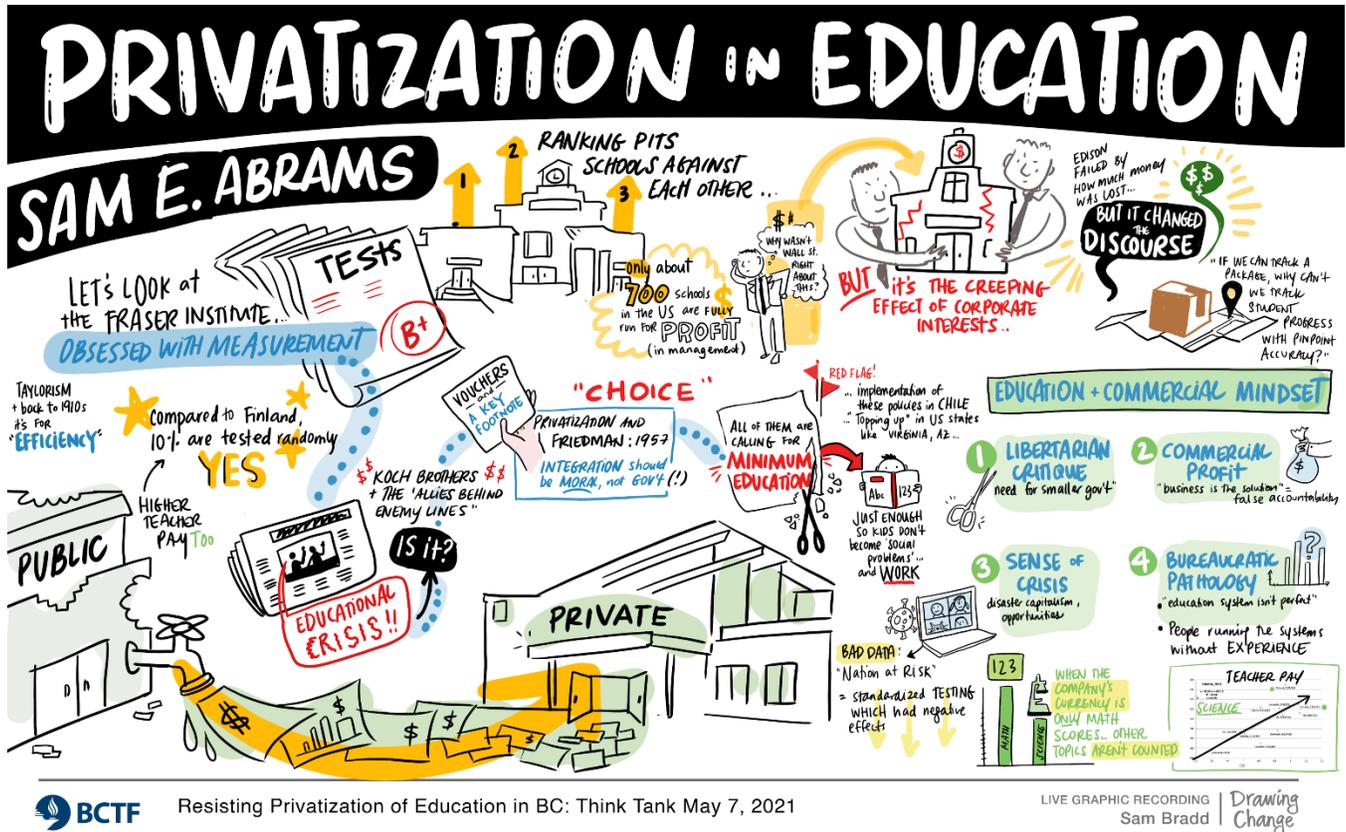
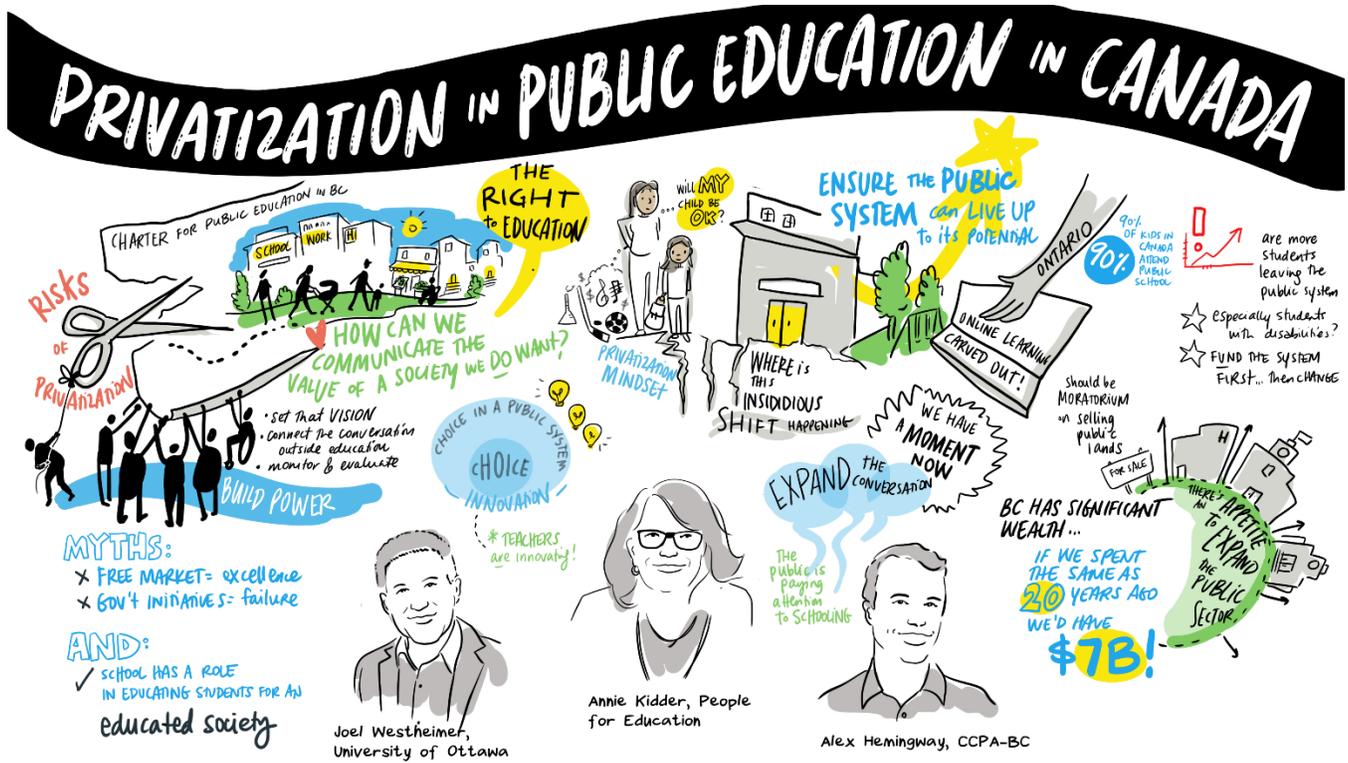


Figure 1

In the Think Tank, Abrams arguments were extended through a panel discussion with Dr. Joel Westheimer (University of Ottawa)³, Annie Kidder (People for Education)⁴ and Alex Hemingway (CCPA-BA)⁵. In addressing the question "How do you see the commercial mindset with public education in Canada?," these panelists provided a deeper contextual understanding of the multiple facets of privatization within public education, and more broadly within public services in Canada (see Figure 2).

³ See Dr. Westheimer's work at <http://www.joelwestheimer.org/articles>.
⁴ Annie Kidder is the Executive Director of People for Education, an organisation that conducts research in support of public education. See <https://peopleforeducation.ca/our-work/>
⁵ Alex Hemingway is a Senior Economist and Public Finance Policy Analyst at the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, BC Office. See <https://policyalternatives.ca/>



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LIVE GRAPHIC RECORDING
Sam Bradd

Drawing
Change

Figure 2

The shape of privatisation in BC public education

15 BC teachers, as well as invited guests from the Institute for Public Education (IPE),⁶ the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) National Office,⁷ BCEdAccess,⁸ and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation,⁹ took the *mindset* into the *lived realities of privatization* within public education. Their insights are organized around the key facets of the commercial mindset, as proposed by Abrams. While discussed here separately, participants recognized and discussed how these facets are continually overlapping and building on one another (see Figure 3).

⁶ The IPE is an independent nonpartisan society that advocates for public education in BC. See <https://instituteforpubliceducation.org/>

⁷ The CCPA National Office publishes progressive reports, studies and commentary on key public policy issues. See <https://policyalternatives.ca/offices/national>

⁸ BCEdAccess Society is a volunteer-run organization for families of students with disabilities and complex learners in BC. See <https://bcdaccess.com/>

⁹ The OSSTF represents 60,000 education workers in Ontario, Canada. See <https://www.osstf.on.ca/en-CA>

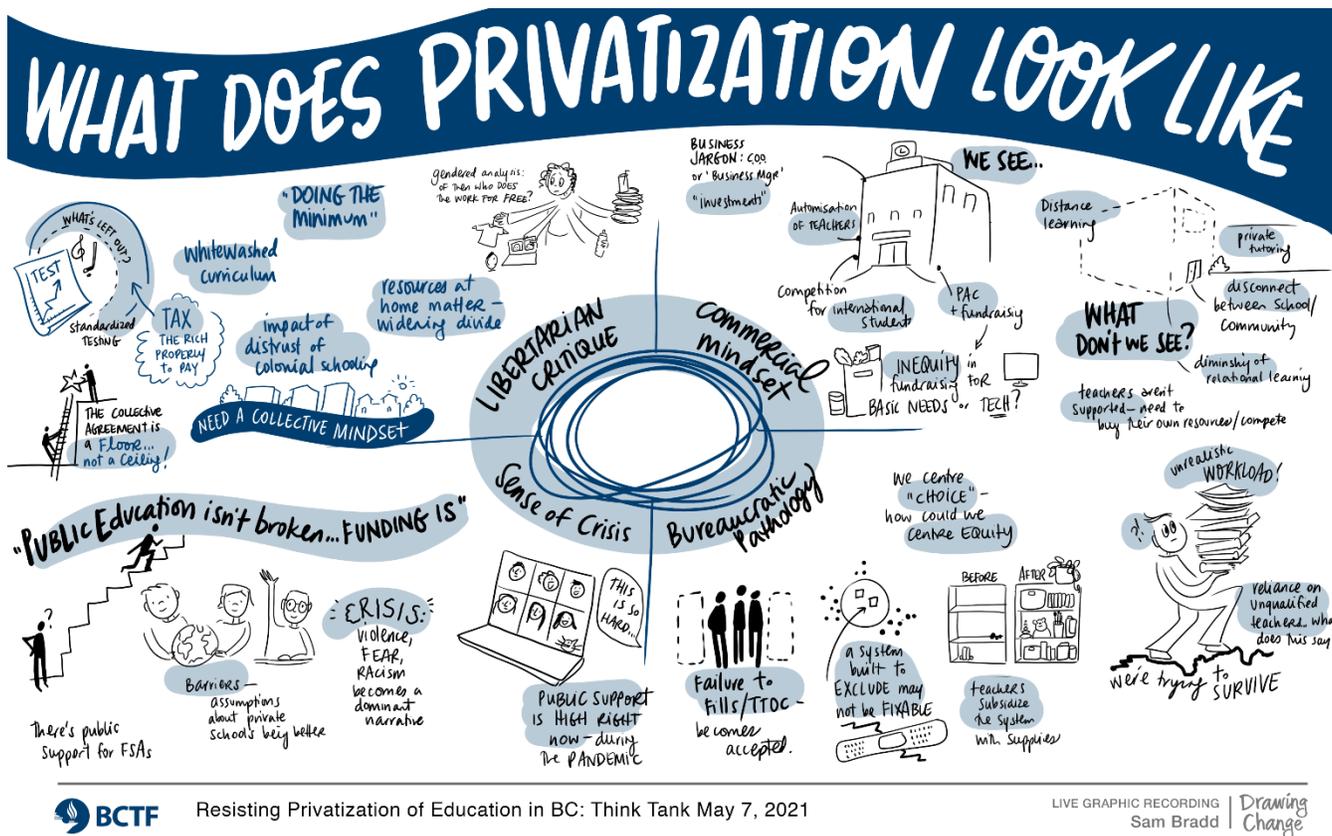


Figure 3

Participants saw the *libertarian critique* (do the minimum) within the focus on school as preparation for work, a focus that justifies cuts of elective courses and programs (such as Art or Music) and anything not deemed “core” or required by Collective Agreements.¹⁰ This fixation on minimizing the cost of services rationalizes the devaluing of progressive educational policy and programs. For instance, focusing on the perceived cost of a national school food program fails to engage with how local school food programs “would advance multiple provincial priorities including improving the health, well-being and education of BC children, strengthening and stimulating local agriculture and food sectors, and building a low carbon economy” (BC Chapter of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2022). The lived reality of this failure is that teachers report spending on average \$29 of their own money every month to meet the needs of hungry students (BCTF Research, 2015). Other examples of teaching within a “provide the minimum” system, cited by participants, include teachers purchasing curricular resources from sites such as Teachers Pay Teachers, parents paying for private psycho-educational testing to assess student’s inclusive education support needs, and the broader reliance on fundraising and donations for basic supplies and materials.

Secondly, the model of service provision was seen by participants as being driven by the demands of *commercial profit*, with a focus on money, profits, and results. Participants recognized the ways in which business language has permeated education, with managerial positions in schools and a market mindset focused on cost/benefit more than equitable educational opportunities for all students. For example, some districts rely heavily on tuition from international students, a system which distributes money inequitably across the province (Kuehn, 2018). The “profit” from these

¹⁰ In March 2022, for example, the Greater Victoria School District is considering cuts to a music program. See <https://vancouverisland.ctvnews.ca/students-parents-protest-potential-music-cuts-at-greater-victoria-schools-1.5825077>

students' tuition allows a small number of districts to offer additional educational services and supports to students. Another source of uneven resources is the increasing reliance on private technology companies, such as Google, Microsoft, Apple, and Fresh Grade, to provide educational services both in BC and internationally (Williamson & Hogan, 2020). On this uneven playing field, the success of students, defined narrowly in terms of quantifiable academic outcomes, can hinge on their ability to pay for private tutoring or being streamed into speciality programs within public schools, such as Advanced Placement Classes or International Baccalaureate Programs. Indeed, one participant noted how the union has also been drawn into this aspect of the commercial mindset, with campaigns that stress that kids are "worth investing in."¹¹

A *sense of crisis*, in turn, was seen by participants as permeating educational "transformation" in BC. For instance, participants considered how the Framework for Enhancing Student Learning¹², recently brought into policy by the Ministry of Education, relies on "data" to measure student success, driving the ongoing focus on standardized testing and the misuse of testing to compare jurisdictions (or public versus private schools) and further extend the "crisis" of public education. This is exacerbated by the lack of data transparency in the Ministry of Education, allowing everything to become a vague "issue" that needs to be fixed. Coupled with the pressures of educational reform, underfunding of public education drives a turn to private funding. However, as one participant pointed out: "public education isn't broken. Funding is." Crisis also fuels a reactive mode of critique and action. This prompted the question as to "how are we complicit in furthering claims of crisis? A crisis in funding, a crisis in control, a crisis in privatization?"

Finally, participants recognized that public education isn't perfect in BC and that there is what Abrams calls a *bureaucratic pathology* at play. When educational leadership is framed as educational management, bureaucrats, rather than educators, are privileged for these roles. Unrealistic workload and staffing shortages are the realities in many schools, amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic and leading some teachers to burn-out (Gacoin & Watts, 2021). Students with special needs do not receive services because there is not enough targeted funding (Rozworski, 2018). Furthermore, Canadian public education systems have yet to fully grapple with how they are built on colonial school structures that do not benefit all students (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

All of these dynamics, unaddressed, potentially undermine confidence in public education and can contribute to the privatisation of educational services. What is starkly missing in the commercial mindset is fulsome acknowledgement of the work of teaching and the deeply relational aspect of education.

From resisting privatisation to reclaiming and rebuilding public education

The final part of the Think Tank session moved to group discussion on strategies to resist privatization. However, as the conversation unfolded it moved beyond resistance to privatisation and toward strategies for reclaiming and rebuilding public education (see Figure 4).

¹¹ See for example the BCTF campaign on change.org: <https://www.change.org/p/the-bc-ndp-government-our-kids-and-their-teachers-worth-investing-in>

¹² See <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/public-schools/framework>



Figure 4

Participants broadly saw the need to build awareness about privatisation. Multiple participants expressed their own surprise as to the extent to which privatisation has permeated public education. They pointed to the necessity of educating parents, teachers, and other stakeholders about what is happening. This could involve holding awareness campaigns for parents and teachers (e.g. in local newspapers) and creating spaces for people to discuss privatisation and its impacts in their community (e.g. panels and town halls).

Building awareness is one step in shifting privatisation narratives and trajectories. Participants stressed that what is also needed is a clear articulation of what public education is for and why it is important. This could involve, for instance, running public education “success stories” campaigns as well as political action efforts to elect less corporate-minded school boards. Furthermore, participants recognized how decolonization should underpin this work and how working towards decolonization is an act of resistance to the commercial mindset. Land-based curriculum, and meaningful engagement with land, for instance, is antithetical to individualistic conceptualisations of education and educational “success.” Stories can also play a powerful role in changing the narrative. Sharing teacher stories is an act of resistance that can illustrate the importance of teacher autonomy and highlight teachers as professionals who deserve fair compensation and resources. Teacher stories can also provide a starting point for common good bargaining built around collective interests and a positive narrative for public education as a public good.

Activist research and action

As schools look toward post-pandemic recovery, teacher unions and researchers are at a crucial junction in the defense of public education. Schools are key public spaces of collective learning and community care for children and youth. Privatization, in contrast, privileges individual and financial interests and undermines education as a public good.

Privatisation discourses position teachers as passive providers educational services. The *BCTF Think Tank on Privatization* provided a space for teachers to speak back to that assumption, weaving together a theoretical understanding of privatisation with their lived realities in classrooms and schools. This allowed space for concrete, teacher-led recommendations and actions for political organising and advocacy.

More broadly, the interactive research space created through the Think Tank offers a unique model for how academic and union researchers can work collaboratively. Unions, and the teachers they represent, are often framed as “sources” of data. For instance, the BCTF is frequently approached to circulate surveys created by external researchers, or to help recruit teachers as participants for interviews or focus groups. The Think Tank as a form of activist research foregrounds the voices and experiences of teachers and facilitates a shift from research *on* teachers to research *with* teachers, working together to fight for education as an equitably delivered public good.

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