

How to Eliminate Teachers' Strikes

These past few months have seen teachers in a number of school boards in Ontario go on strike and engage in other pressure tactics as teachers' unions prepare for another round of collective bargaining with the province. Predictably, this has led to teacher-bashing by angry parents and taxpayers even as teachers place the blame on the Ministry of Education for disrupting the education of students.

Overall, it adds up to a lot of drama. However, why are strikes and other pressure tactics so common in publicly-funded schools? Could we enjoy the benefits of public education without the disruption (for students, parent and teachers) of occasional strikes?

The key issue with publicly-funded schools is that they are, in most parts of the province, the sole employer of teachers. This potentially gives the Ontario Ministry of Education and local school boards a great deal of power in contract negotiations. If there is only one buyer for a commodity but many sellers, the buyer gets to set the price because he can go from seller to seller until he finds one desperate enough to agree to the price that he is offering.

One response to this situation is for the sellers to band together to match the buyer's power which is precisely what teachers' unions did in demanding and winning collective bargaining rights in the 1970s.

However, one has to wonder if creating a single supplier of teachers was the best solution to the problem of there being a single employer of teachers. A better solution would have been to break the school system's monopoly on hiring by making schools more independent.

My own career as a teacher tells me that a change of this nature can work. I started out working at the Canadian International School in Singapore 25 years ago and have worked in independent schools for over 20 years. The cities where I have taught (Singapore, Montreal, Muscat and Abu Dhabi) all have a number of competing independent schools. These schools offer parents and students different facilities, curricula and activities and charge different fees.

The schools also offer teachers very different salaries and conditions. None of them, though, offer their teachers union protection. If a school decides that it no longer requires a teacher's services, it can, subject to the conditions laid out by labour law, choose not to renew their yearly contract. Despite this lack of apparent job security, though, I never felt any anxiety over possibly losing my job.

The fact that there are so many other independent schools in each city means that there are positions opening up all the time as people move and as schools grow. Happily for teachers, these opportunities also mean that schools and school principals work to keep salaries and working conditions attractive in order to discourage staff from moving to competing schools.

Thus, the majority of my career as a teacher has been spent in work environments familiar to other workers in the private sector. I, as an employee, have not enjoyed the benefits of union-provided job security. In return, though, I have been free to change employers in pursuit of better

pay and conditions and have felt secure in my job prospects so long as I worked hard and kept improving my skills.

Ontario's public education system, structured as a bureaucracy with a unionized workforce, offers a very different work environment in which the education ministry and the teachers' unions wield enormous power. Reflecting on my own career, I propose that a system of independent schools financed by public money allocated according to the choices of parents regarding where to send their children (also known as a school choice or school voucher system) would make everyone else involved in education much better off.

At a stroke, parents would be able to drive real accountability in schools. By looking at results and other information, parents would be able to choose the best school for their child taking into account the child's temperament, ability and ambitions. Schools managed by administrators with a clear focus on offering students a supportive learning environment would attract families and their funding. Ineffective schools saddled with either poor administrators or many poor teachers would, on the other hand, drive students away, lose funding and eventually close down.

School administrators, faced with such competition and its consequences, would be motivated and empowered to make the staffing and other decisions necessary to create effective schools. Freed from the often contradictory and nonsensical directives emanating from the ministry, many current public school administrators would be thrilled to be able to get on with the challenging but rewarding task of creating great schools where teachers, students and parents work together to make learning happen.

Effective teachers would enjoy working with such administrators because they have integrity. When administrators have clear goals and are seen to work consistently to achieve them, this inspires teachers and encourages them to offer their best to students as well. Further, working in effective schools keeps their skills sharp and makes them stronger candidates for opportunities in other such schools.

At the top, the current educational bureaucracy both in Toronto and at the board level would largely be made redundant. A few hundred curriculum experts, materials writers, examiners and school inspectors would be sufficient to ensure that every school in the province had sufficient resources and met minimum standards.

The teachers' unions, meanwhile, could be done away with entirely. With a more dynamic and competitive labour market there would always be opportunities for effective teachers.

Overall, the current system empowers the bureaucracy and the unions even as it keeps those parents, students, teachers and administrators who are serious about improving education relatively powerless. A publicly-funded system of independent schools, on the other hand, would introduce meaningful competition into education that would result in greater parental choice, more student learning and clearer goals and consequently better working conditions for both principals and teachers.

Oh, and as a bonus, it would also eliminate teachers' strikes.