CAPTIVE

THE CORPORATE CURRICULUM

BY GEORGE STEPHENSON

In Alberta the Calgary school board changes its policies to allow corporations to buy naming rights for such assets as schools and classrooms.

In British Columbia, energy conglomerate Chevron spearheads a high-profile *Fuel Your School* fundraising program to provide money for school supplies and projects.

Not to be outdone, oil companies involved in the Alberta tar sands -- Suncor, Syncrude and Cenovus – are recruited to help rewrite the province's education curriculum from K to Grade 12.

And in Manitoba, Investors Group sponsors a new addition to the Manitoba curriculum – so-called financial literacy.

Beyond the west, across Canada, corporations are inching their way into public schools and classrooms with, according to numerous critics, the long view of influencing what has been a protected market—or two.

"There is a reason why corporations get involved in education," says Erika Shaker, director of the Education Project with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. "It's a captive audience, two audiences really—the students and their parents.

"It's self-interest, it's all about branding. It's strategic philanthropy."

And it is not necessarily in the best interests of students.

Shaker says the attempts by corporations to insert themselves into the lesson plans and classrooms of Canadian schools aren't new, just relentless.

In 2007, author and activist Heather-jane

THE CORPORATE GOAL IS TO CREATE CUSTOMERS, NOT LEARNERS.

Robertson warned of the investment industries attempts to corral the eyes and minds of students.

"Getting schools to market products rebranded as curriculum is the dream of many a director of marketing," she said in an essay entitled Stalked by the Market: Market Populism as Curriculum. "As one marketing consultant put it in a pitch to prospective clients: 'Imagine a classroom using your brand creative … Envision groups of children huddled over your ad … Can it get any better than this?'"

And it appears to be getting better for those directors as governments of all stripes trying to offload their responsibility to fully fund education.

Shaker says she wasn't surprised that even the NDP government in Manitoba has embraced corporate sponsorship as a part of its curriculum.

It could be a surprise to some since it was the newly-elected NDP government that successfully booted the Youth News Network from Manitoba schools in 1999 after extensive criticism of YNN by The Manitoba Teachers' Society. YNN provided schools with equipment such as TVs and, in exchange, students had to watch a newscast every day loaded with corporate commercials.

Times change.

Now, online documents for the new financial literacy component of the curriculum are tagged with the government's and Investors Group's logos. The new materials, for grades 4 to 10, include lessons on borrowing, investing, managing debt and credit. The provincial education department worked with a group called the Canadian Foundation for Economic Education in putting together the curriculum.

The *Building Futures in Manitoba* program, announced last month, lists an advisory group that is almost entirely comprised of business, government and university representatives. The only person listed outside those groups is Pat Isaak, the former president of The Manitoba Teachers' Society, who attended one meeting years ago and whose term at the Society ended three years ago.

Education Minister James Allum has said the program will help students manage money better and help secure their financial futures.

Author Laura Elizabeth Pinto, assistant professor at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, has heard such arguments before. She has studied and written about many such programs and says the logic behind them "falls apart in so many places."

Aside from the questionable aspects of corporate sponsorship, the idea that telling students that if they just manage their money properly, they will be financially secure is faulty.

"There are many factors that lead to financial instability that have nothing to do with knowledge and they vary from person to person," she says. "The conventional personal finance curricula tend to place the blame squarely on the individual, when there are a host of factors.

"These include absence of a living wage, systemic factors beyond their control, and rampant consumerism that seems inescapable."

While the Manitoba material does touch on consumerism, most of the outline seems to assume that students will eventually have

CEO; THAT'S CHIEF EXPERT OFFICER TO YOU, BUDDY

BY ERIKA SHAKER

Parents, take note! Your search for clarity in the education debates is finally over. The Canadian Council of Chief Executives commissioned a report a few weeks ago that set out a fairly bleak picture of general dissatisfaction with public schools and then concluded with a series of recommendations about how to "fix" the problem.

You know, by measuring teacher quality through student outcomes, in addition to having students and other "impartial" parties judge a teacher's performance through more frequent (possibly surprise) evaluations…and then assigning bonuses to those educators deemed worthy. Because: incentives!

Not the "Finally! enough resources for field trips and extracurricular activities" kind of incentives—I'm talking cold, hard cash, people. After all, what teacher won't be incentivized to find an hour or two out of their day in which to be extra fabulous—in addition to coaching, tutoring kids after class, and scrounging for change to buy lunch or find bus fare for another student—if it means a little sumpin'-sumpin' on their paycheque?

Don't get me wrong. Asking CEOs how to improve pedagogy and student engagement makes total sense. I mean, just look at the stellar, kid-and-community-friendly corporate track record: their commitment to health promotion (evidenced by a range of fluorescent-coloured, high quality after-school snacks); their recognition of the dangers of socioeconomic inequality (surely we're only moments away from having workers and community members help set CEO bonuses and stock options in the interests of, you know, enough money that they can manage and save and invest.

Shaker, and other critics point out, too, that it tells students if their families are in financial difficulties, well, it's the fault of parents not managing their money properly.

"It doesn't take into account inequities," she says. "If there is a problem, it's because you are not taking into account your own finances, not other factors such as women making less than men."

Pinto compares it to the McDonald's corporation recent financial advice it gave to employees: such as how much employees should tip their pool cleaner or housekeeper. It provided a sample employee budget that showed the worker would need two jobs in order to make ends meet and that's only if they didn't have to buy gasoline for a car or spend money on heating. The corporation has since taken down its advice website.

It is one thing, however, for corporations to put their advice on websites, it's another for authorities to allow them to buy their way into schools full of potential customers.

Jonathan Chevreau, writing in the business-centric Financial Post, questioned the industry's motives. After the release of a federal task force report on financial literacy in 2011, Chevreau wrote: "I hate to rain on the parade but financial industry profits are made on the backs of financial illiterates."

He was joined by Carleton University public policy professor Saul Schwartz, who said the task force report read like "soothing words of the foxes, spoken upon taking command of the chicken coop.

"The big financial service providers profit from financial illiteracy, whether in the form of bank fees and service charges or in the form of 'advice' disguised as sales pitches for their own products."

Schwartz says the most effective policy approach is to decrease the need for, rather than attempt to improve, Canadians' financial capability.

Pinto says the many financial literacy programs she has examined do not address deeper financial issues that students may face.

"Basically these curricula tend to position financial literacy as value-neutral – a fallacy – and convey the idea that all people experience finances the same way.

"A person's gender, race, ethnicity, and social class have huge implications on not only their values when it comes to money, but also their opportunities."

She echoes Shaker's example that women face financial hurdles that men don't.

"Women face pay inequity, disproportionate unpaid household labour, and a glass ceiling: all of which compromise their ability to participate in earning and saving money the same way that men do. A holistic approach to financial literacy would have to address these things."

But, as many critics say, that isn't the point of corporate involvement. The corporate goal is to create customers, not learners.

As Shaker and Pinto say, corporations are not in the business of financing efforts that don't provide some opportunity for profit, whether directly or indirectly. They tend to fund projects that prominently display their trademarks.

In British Columbia, some school cafeterias are run by Burger King, Pizza Hut and Subway. There's a Bell Performing Arts Centre at one Surrey school.

Scholastic sponsors 11,000 book fairs in 7,000 schools across the country.

M&M's candy produced a math text for primary students across North America. It teaches kids to count using M&M's. The book is still being used in classrooms even though Mars Inc., creators of M&M's, itself stopped advertising candy and snack food to children under 12 in 2007.

McDonald's sponsors the *Go Active Fitness Challenge* that replaced the Canada Fitness Program.

And, less obvious, the financial industry is quite willing to underwrite the financial literacy curricula.

"Unfortunately, you're going to see more and more of this," says Shaker. "It is all very strategic. Attach the word literacy to something—like financial literacy or computer literacy—and you can fly under the radar."

fairness); their demonstrated transparency, public accountability and adherence to public safety regulations (in rail transport, for example); their ongoing desire to give back to the community in tax rates that are indicative of the degree to which they too benefit from and are responsible for public infrastructure.

So it's no wonder that, when talking about how to "improve" our schools, the first group we should turn to for thoughtful, not-at-all-self-interested advice is Corporate Canada.

My question—and no doubt you are wondering about this too—is: why stop at education?

After all, we're talking about a very elite, specialized, qualified group of hyper-talented experts—and let's be honest: the proof is in the pudding. Or rather, in the pay cheque. Only those with a superhuman skill-set and a work ethic that would make Spartans look like slackers could be worthy of their 24-carat compensation.

So who better to provide advice on any number of puzzlers?

Leaky faucet? Call a CEO.

Nothing in the fridge for dinner? Don't panic—call a CEO.

Need a babysitter? A family doctor? Advice on getting out red wine stains? Help with homework? Filing your income taxes (heh heh)? Persistent post-nasal drip? Finding the source of that mysterious and unpleasant kitchen odour? Come on people, don't waste time doing research or committing sociology—if you're looking to get the most bang for your buck, you know which experts to turn to.

I checked: 1-800-CALL-CEO appears to be available. And with a bit of luck—otherwise known as unpaid interns—hopefully someone can provide immediate assistance, saving you from a recorded message that goes something like this: There's no one available to take your call: third quarter results were particularly impressive after the last round of layoffs so to celebrate we're off to Turks and Caicos!

Beeeeep

Erika Shaker is the Education Project Director at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives