

#63 Unmaking the Ontario Model: Austerity Comes to Canada

[“Thousands protest Ontario government's controversial education changes.”](#) by Lucas Powers, Canadian Broadcasting Corp.

[“Ontario students stage provincewide walkout to protest education changes.”](#) CBC.

[“Doug Ford: Brother of notorious Rob Ford takes over Ontario.”](#) the BBC, June 29, 2018.

[Empowered Educators in Canada: How High-Performing Systems Shape Teaching Quality](#), by Carol Campbell, Ken Zeichner and Ann Lieberman.

[“The Three Stories of Education Reform.”](#) By Michael Fullan

Andy Hargreaves, [Leading from the Middle: Spreading Learning, Well-being, and Identity across Ontario](#).

[“Results without Rancor or Ranking Ontario's Success Story.”](#) by Michael Fullan.

[Ontario, Canada: Reform to Support High Achievement in a Diverse Context](#)

[System on the Move: Story of the Ontario Education Strategy](#)

John Rogers, [Public Engagement for Public Education: Joining Forces to Revitalize Democracy and Equalize Schools](#).

Jennifer Berkshire: Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: And Jack people were probably noticing that we sound well a little far away. Why don't you tell people where we are.

Schneider: We are broadcasting live from Toronto at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association

Berkshire: And Jack for people who can't hold on any longer, what happens at AERA?

Schneider: This year, it's mostly celebrations of the podcast, but I think there are also 14,998 other people here doing other things. But in my book, you and I are here just to host an event around the podcast.

Berkshire: Well while you've been hobnobbing with the academic elite. I actually have been out in the streets of Toronto protesting with teachers and students here. I'm going to play a little clip for you.

[Audio clip of Rally for Education] "A massive turnout here at Queen's Park this afternoon over 10,000 teachers, students and parents gathered here protesting education reforms by the Ford governments. Everybody who relies on Ontario's high quality graduate."

Schneider: Jennifer, it sounds like you were really out there in the crowd and I'm wondering if that was safe for you, given the number of buttons you're wearing right now. It seems like the hazard of being jostled with this many sharp objects around could be significant.

Berkshire: I'm wearing one button, Jack and it says 'no education cuts.' Well, while you've been--

Schneider: But it's a big button

Berkshire: While you've been doing your thing, I have been learning everything about education in Ontario and specifically the proposed cuts that are so controversial. So I'm sure I don't have to tell you this Jack, because you're knowledgeable on all topics, but Ontario has a new premier as of June 28th and he's often likened to our president Donald Trump. His name is Ford and his brother was the controversial mayor of Toronto, who you may remember. He ran on a platform of lower taxes and cheaper beer and, and he won. He won quite handily. It's called the Progressive Conservative Party. And well, it turned out that when he got into office, the money to deliver on those promises has to come from somewhere. And where do you think it's going to come from?

Schneider: Well, I've been listening to conservative Canadians say that the government needs to do more with less and I can't think of a place easier to cut in terms of both the revenue spent on it and the difficulty of defending it and education.

Berkshire: Well, Jack, I think you could get a job in the Education Ministry of the Ford Administration because that's basically exactly what they're doing. Back in March, they unveiled a new platform called 'education that works for you.' It's got a really nice sort of DeVosian ring to it.

Schneider: And I believe that they have contracted with Ernst and Young for some of their analysis. And I wonder if Ernst and Young helped them come up with that branding as well. That sounds like a, a nice corporate approach to a revitalizing the educational system.

Berkshire: Yeah, it really does. And it's, you know, sort of a complex and contradictory set of proposals, but the ones we're really going to be hearing about today are the proposal to increase class sizes, which will result in the elimination of about 3,500 teaching positions across the province and a requirement that students take four courses online, that'll be mandated. And

that's, as you know your research, that's a very, that's a long held dream among American conservatives.

Schneider: And all of this, of course, runs counter to the strategy that had been in place for the previous decade, one that was put in place in around 2003, that not only reduced class sizes, but really introduced a comprehensive set of reforms designed to strengthen relationships between families and schools, between teachers and administrators, between students and teachers. And they had really borne fruit not only in terms of measurable outcomes like graduation rates and test scores and teacher morale, but also in terms of the kinds of practices that teachers were engaged in. A lot of qualitative research revealing that teachers were more collaborative, were getting more out of professional development, that students were more engaged in school. And so it seems really unfortunate to watch this get rolled back.

Berkshire: Well Jack, I'm going to recommend that you put on your tweed jacket with the leather elbow patches that you brought just to wear at AERA.

Schneider: I also brought a little maple leaf pin, so now we'll both have a pieces of flair to wear.

Berkshire: So you put on your jacket with your maple leaf pen, fire up your pipe and I'm going to recommend that you take a listen to what I heard when I ventured out into the streets of Toronto and talked to about 14,000 teachers, parents and students.

[Audio clip]

Berkshire: We are about to talk to a *lot* of people. So let me set the stage just a bit before we begin. I'm at Queen's Park in Toronto. It's where Ontario's legislature meets. The lawmakers aren't here today because it's a Saturday, but plenty of other folks are, which is why things are going to be, well, a little noisy. Some 10,000 teachers, parents and students have come out today to protest the Ford government's proposed changes to Ontario's education system and the rally comes on the heels of a massive student protests. More than a hundred thousand students walked out of their schools all across the province on April 4th and at the center of these protests is one key concern.

Liz Stuart: We're here today because over the last 15, 20 years, we've fought long and hard to make Ontario a world-renowned publicly funded education system and then the Ford government came in and what the Ford government is looking at doing is sending us back to a time pre-20 years ago,

Berkshire: That's Liz Stuart. She's the president of the English Catholic Teachers Association, which represents 45,000 teachers in Ontario's publicly funded Catholic schools. If the Fort government increases class sizes, they will increase at Catholic schools too.

Stuart: So looking at our class sizes within our secondary panel, so our kids in high school. Right now, our averages are 22 to one and because it's an average, we all understand that doesn't actually mean there's 22 kids in every class. Some classes will be smaller because those students may require that, others may be much bigger--they may be 30, 35 with these changes. Moving it to 28 to one, many of those small classes won't be able to run. So our most vulnerable students will be placed at risk and our average class sizes are going to actually balloon. So we could end up with classes of upwards of 40 or 45 students in a room.

And we're here today to say that's not good enough for our students. And we're also looking at our elementary panel and all the good things we've done there and all the movement we've made. And again, this government is being regressive and is pushing back. So once again, our most needy students are getting nailed. And then, now our high school students as well. So we're all raising our voices to say that is not okay.

Berkshire: Ontario also has a system of French schools and they're out in force today too. Monika Goodluck has three kids in the French system.

Monika Goodluck: It's a robust system in Ontario and Toronto. There are a lot of us here. Most kids are bilingual. You know, we represent and support teachers, whether they're in the French system and English system, all across Ontario. At a different rally for another cause, a friend of mine said she heard someone say, "compassion is cost effective," and that's partially what this is about, right? Like it's public education. You got to invest *now*. Sure you can save a few million today, but in five years, in 10 years, all of that's going to have a terrible impact. So let's not, you know, play political games and say, 'look how much money we saved by making all these cuts.' And then in five years or 10 years, it's all going to suffer and we're going to wonder what's happening.

Berkshire: Caroline McCall is an 11th grade student at Rosedale School of the Arts in downtown Toronto, part of Ontario's third school system, its public English schools. About half of the students at her school walked out on April 4th. She says that what's really driving students like her to protest is the idea that future students in Ontario will get less.

Caroline McCall: You know, I think the fact that people that I know that are coming into high school and people that are younger than, you know, people I babysit and the people that are around them. I want them to be able to enjoy things from the education system that I got to enjoy. Like the arts, like different programs, like trips and things and because those are the things that really, you know, made school fun and made school like an enjoyable place to be. And seeing that not being a possibility for them is something that I don't want to see happen. So yeah.

Berkshire: The Ford government is insisting that the 3,500 or so teachers whose jobs are being eliminated aren't really being cut. The teachers just won't be replaced when they leave or retire. But students will tell you that fewer teachers will mean less of what keeps kids in school, like

extra curricular sports. Emma goes to school at Angus Morrison Elementary School in Angus, Ontario where she is very serious about volleyball. She's one of 20 students from the school who walked out.

Emma: I don't think it's right of what Doug Ford is doing to our education. And I like sports and I still want to play some sports after school and it needs to be said. So the teachers think that they have, like the teachers have a lot of work after school and it doesn't have time to, for us for sports. So if they cut, if they put more kids in a classroom, we don't have time for sports and they're going to have to cut it completely.

Berkshire: When I asked Emma and Caroline why they can't just, say, play volleyball or practice the dramatic arts online, their response was pretty much what you'd expect.

McCall: I don't think that would quite work. You know, you can't really exactly do theater in a laptop or, you know, develop photos just on your phone. You can't really do that. Not everybody has access to those things. So, you know, being able to get those things through public education is really an important thing for those who can't access them outside of school.

Berkshire: Caroline's point that schools in Ontario are where kids get access to things like the arts that they might not be able to afford on their own is one I heard again and again take the Ford government's push to move students online. 14 year old Max rate of Davidson worries about how the policy will impact kids who don't have the resources that he has.

Max Davidson: [Missing]

Berkshire: [Missing]

Davidson: We were really upset with the lack of education about consent, LGBTQ people and we didn't want to like bring it back to the 20th century.

Berkshire: Making big cuts to education was not part of Doug for his political platform, but rolling back the sex ed curriculum was. In fact at one point the government set up a quote unquote snitch line where people could rat out teachers who refuse to teach the 1998 curriculum. Parent Monika Goodluck says that Ford wants to turn back time, something that will ultimately hurt students today.

Goodluck: It's really important that that there is a reliable source for children to learn about these topics. There are lots of parents who actually don't speak to to, to their kids. I heard someone at the health facility say like, she wants to talk to her, her 10 year old about menstruation. She said, well don't they talk about that in school? And I thought, oh my goodness, you're not talking about this with your, with your child and what if they're not talking about in school, you know, like what's going to happen? They're going to rely on the Internet.

And we all know what happens. I mean, any health professional will tell you, don't Google, you know, about your health condition.

So where are kids going to find out? They're going to find out from each other and, and where's the reliable source of information, right? Like it's important to have some, you know, clear, consistent guidelines that align with the values of Canada, including things around gender identity, about sexuality, etc. I mean, it's the reality of who we are as individuals. Let's support that. You can reinforce it with your own beliefs at home, you know, and, and frame that. But there needs to be some kind of foundation, you know, for, for, for kids and for families. And then it's more transparent once it's in the system. Parents, children can know 'okay this is what's being shared,' and now we can, you know, cultivate whatever messaging we want as as individuals, as families. But let there be at least some consistency. Take your child out for the day, guess what? They're going to come back the next day and the friends are going to tell them everything that happened and in their own understanding so they might still not get the right explanation.

Berkshire: This idea that Ford wants to take Ontario back in time is a big part of what he shares with a certain US president for Ontario schools. That earlier time means one when education spending was lower and teachers taught the basics, but that earlier time was also one. When students with disabilities like autism, we're pretty much on their own. Kayley is an education assistant or an EA who works with special needs kids and hers is exactly the type of job that's likely to be cut.

Kayley: Yes. Which I think is hilarious to be quite honest because clearly Ford doesn't know... Either he doesn't anybody who has autism or a developmental disability, but I don't understand how he thinks that getting rid of us is going to make a classroom a better place because teachers can't, they can't do our job. I mean like teachers do a really good job but without EAs in the classroom, they can't get their job done and they're worried too much about what that one student is doing. So with us in classroom, we alleviate that stress from them and make the classroom flow a little more smoothly. So without us, I don't really see how teachers are going to be able to do their jobs and adding in more students, I don't see how students that have autism or another developmental disability will be able to cope like within the classroom setting.

Berkshire: Kayley made another point that I heard repeatedly that cutting spending in the short term is going to end up being really costly for kids in the long term, especially the kids who need the most help.

Kayley: It's best that children who have autism get this sort of interventions when they're young because then they learn things like how to self regulate, how to pull their pants up, how to do just basic life skills like that. And so if they don't get those, if they're not taught those skills when they're young, then when they get older, those sorts of behaviors just kind of get worse. So they don't know how to cope in stressful situations. They don't know how to, or they can't even go

into classrooms. And then that kind of leads us towards, they're going to have to have their own special schools because they're not going to be able to cope in mainstream schools.

Berkshire: After 100,000 students walked out of their schools on April 4th, Doug Ford accused them of being union pawns, something that didn't sit well with a lot of them. I asked art student Caroline McCall what it feels like to be a pawn of Ontario's teachers' unions. Oh,

McCall: Well, I wouldn't know. Um, you know, our teachers were not really allowed to tell us to walk out because they're not supposed to engage politically with us. We did this all ourselves. It was completely student run. It was quite amazing to see what students can really do when we get together as a group and fight for something that needs to be fought for.

Berkshire: One of the disorienting things about this fight over the future of Ontario's schools is that the Ford government relies on the same anti union talking points that we hear so much of on the other side of the border. Ford's education minister recently accused the teacher's unions of running the schools into the ground, except of course the, by the measures that are supposed to matter. Ontario's education system is one of the top performers in the world. But the anti union rhetoric is basically the same that we hear from Betsy DeVos. Here's Tatiana Fedelisa, the mother of ninth grader, Max Davidson.

Tatiana Fedelisa: And Max came back from the walkout that they organized and he was quite upset cause he sort of said, you know, we were really, the coverage was good, but we were really dismissed as a bunch of, you know, young people who didn't know what we were doing and who were being made into pawns. And he said, you know, this, this wasn't why we organized this. We organized this because we got really upset that our classes we're going to get bigger and that there was going to be, um, you know, essential services that we're going to be provided online.

I think it's just rhetoric that's being used to sort of divide and conquer. I mean they talk about about sort of the whistle that's being blown to people who agree with you. So if you don't like unions, then you should agree with education cuts and that frankly makes no sense. I mean, we're talking about class sizes and about education for our kids. I'm a physician. I know that education impacts health. So it's important on so many levels.

Berkshire: There is one key detail that I've neglected to mention about today's Rally for Education. Most of the teachers here are wearing tee shirts that say Red for Ed. That's right. About two weeks ago, Red for Ed officially crossed the border and went transnational. Teachers here say they've been inspired by the walkouts that started in West Virginia, and listen closely and you'll hear some very similar themes. Just like in US states, education is among Ontario's biggest expenditures, making it a very juicy target. Nancy Manning teaches French at Brampton Centennial in Brampton, Ontario and both she and her dog, are sporting red for ed shirts. I asked her if she thinks that Doug Ford is trying to make Ontario more unequal.

Nancy Manning: Absolutely he is. Because he's trying to take away our social safety net because as we know, education and healthcare are the two things that keep people healthy and making good choices and being able to advocate for themselves and move up the economic scale, to be able to be self reliant and independent. And when people can be educated and make good choices in their lives, they can become good social citizens. And overall that's what we want. We want people to be able to function and live with dignity.

Berkshire: Remember Liz Stuart, the head of the Catholic Teachers Union? She's also wearing Red for Ed. Liz says, she's concerned that Ontario is headed down a path that looks a lot like the one Betsy DeVos envisions for the US.

Liz Stuart: I think this is about a corporate agenda. This is about trying to move Ontario's amazing publicly funded education system and privatizing it. I think that's what this ultimate agenda is going to lead to because what happens with parents in good conscience will look at classrooms and say, you know what? I can afford private school so I'm going to remove, move my child from those larger classes. And what that does is it undermines the system that we have in place and we need to push back against that corporate agenda because we need to recognize that because we have such an outstanding education system, our graduates are leaving and are good citizens, productive and able to enter the workforce despite what Mr. Ford may be saying.

And he really doesn't have a good argument to say that it's a good idea to dismantle this education system. The only argument they have is it's a fiscal responsibility and Ontario is one of the lowest spenders on social programs in Canada, so we actually spend less per capita than just about anywhere else in this country on our programs like our healthcare and our education. So to cut it still further will only worsen things for our students.

Berkshire: I heard those same fears about the future of Ontario's education system expressed by lots of people here, especially parents of young children. Fayven is a social worker who works for one of the local school boards. She just had her second child. She's actually still out on her year long maternity leave. Let that sink in for a minute. I asked her what she thinks will be left for her kids when it's time for them to go to school.

Fayven: It looks very bleak right now because of all the cuts and the crowded classrooms that are going to be, um, present when they are, when they enter school in a couple of years. I mean those who can afford it, we'll probably go to private schools and those who can't well struggle within the system. Right.

Berkshire: The most ominous prediction that I heard about where Ontario was headed came from Tatiana Fedelisa, the mother of ninth grader, Max Davidson. She worries that by divesting from its public system and encouraging parents to look for private options, Ontario could end up with something that looks like Chili.

Fedelisa: The other thing that, that I have to mention is I'm originally from Chile and we just did a trip back there and Max's cousin who's 15 goes to a private school and he was explaining that the public system there is so underfunded that anybody who can afford it abandons the public system to get a quality education in a private system. I don't want to see that happen to Canada. I think it hurts our democracy.

Berkshire: And then there's Sophie, a third grader at a bilingual school in Toronto. I asked her to put her language skills to the test and make the case for why she thinks cutting spending on schools to lower taxes is a bad idea.

[Third grader speaking impressive French]

Berkshire: Thanks to Sophie and everyone else who talked to me today and an extra special things to my assistant for the day, JoAnn Wipijewski. I'll be back after the break to wrap things up and I'll be rejoined by a certain cohost. I wonder what he's been up to.

[Music]

Berkshire: So Jack, one of the things that I found just absolutely fascinating in talking to all of those people is that you really hear that somehow they have escaped the kind of marketization of education that we have in the United States. That all those people that I talked to, you really don't hear them defining education as an individual good. And when the students express concern about taking courses online, it wasn't just because, you know, they're not that keen to, you know, swap out their teacher, their flesh and blood teacher for an algorithm, but they all, to a one, they were all really worried that students in more remote parts of the province were really going to suffer. And that as a result Ontario was going to become a more unequal place.

Schneider: I think one important way to look at this is within the broader Canadian context. Canada has a very strong social safety net and less social and economic inequality than we have in the US and I think that's one of the things that's shaping the responses of some of the folks that you talked with. It's also worth thinking about the culture of education and you know, as you said, the way that people talk about education in Canada. Michael Fullan, a retired professor who was a big part of the educational reform movement in Ontario from 2003 to 2010 and beyond, his three pillars for the reform movement that he helped guide were people and relationship building, knowledge building and innovation and transparency and those really fly in the face of the three things that we are hearing right now from the new regime: Outcomes based funding, accountability and value for money.

And especially when we're thinking about relationships, you know, I think that it's hard to talk about value for money. When we are looking at some of the particular policies that were pursued, uh, in the previous administration, so there were significant investments in teacher capacity building and leadership capacity building, Michael Fullan said. And something he wrote about it, that school improvement will never occur on a wide scale until the majority of teachers

become contributors to and beneficiaries of the professional learning community. Now that's something that is hard to measure in terms of return on investment. That's something that I could see just being cut. Right? That's hard to defend in terms of dollars and cents and the bottom line. But it's something that very clearly aligned with the theory of change that had been in place previously.

Berkshire: Jack, the other thing that, that really stood out to me in talking to all of those people was that as we heard, Ontario has all sorts of different schools. We heard from the president of the Catholic Teachers Union, we talked to people in the French system. We talked to people who are in sort of the plain Canadian system is. And so you have all sorts of school choice. And yet somehow people don't perceive choice as the vehicle for sort of competing against each other for a limited set of resources. Right?

Schneider: I think that, you know, that squares with something that I have perceived in higher education in Canada, which is a kind of parity among schools, right? That the Canadian higher education system may not be as heralded as the American higher education system, but part of the reason for that is that Canada's schools are in many cases not directly in competition with each other. They are all supposed to be good. Whereas in the US there is this market competition that happens that does result in some schools having just phenomenal wealth, incredible resources that of course distinguishes those universities from their international peers. But that comes at a great cost.

So I think what we're seeing here is, uh, a K- 12 and higher education system that really reflect a broader set of values and that those values are really being contested right now and that the future of Canadian education is a bit up in the air.

Berkshire: So Jack, I'm guessing that that listeners probably want to know why it was that I was alone talking to all those teachers, parents and students. Where was my podcast cohort?

Schneider: The truly delicious irony here, as you know, Jennifer, baiting me, is that I was on a panel, a Division L invited panel, looking at teacher activism. And so we sat in a little dark room and talked all about teacher activism while the masses were outside. You know, fortunately we had thick enough walls that we weren't disturbed by their chants

Berkshire: I take it the 'L' in division L stands for laughter cause that's what I'm doing.

Schneider: I don't know. You're making a signal with your thumb and forefinger and holding it to your forehead. I think you were telling me that L stands for something else too, Jennifer. That's not nice.

Berkshire: Well as our regular listeners know, we rely on your support to help us keep the podcast going and take the occasional exciting trip to places like Toronto. If you go to Patreon.com you'll see all cool extras you can get for supporting us including a feature that we

like to call 'In the Weeds.' Jack, I thought as a special treat for this episode, the topic of In the Weeds could be teacher activism. I understand we have an expert here with us.

Schneider: You know what? I'll just phone up the rest of the folks from the panel and as long as we don't have 15,000 shouting teachers, we ought to be able to get that done. I also want to take this opportunity to remind people that there's another way to support the show that doesn't involve their bank accounts. That telling your friends and family and colleagues about it always helps. And going online wherever you get your podcasts and giving us a rating, preferably a friendly one also helps make the show more visible.

Berkshire: Of course, if you are feeling particularly generous and you want to go to Patreon.com and search for Have you Heard, that would be great too. And of course we accept Canadian and US denominations. Isn't that right Jack?

Schneider: Yes. But if you're donating in Canadian, then you'll have to make the adjustments. So you'll want to give about 1.25 times the U s dollar amount.

Berkshire: On that note, I'm Jennifer Berkshire

Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: This is, have you heard,

Schneider:

