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School Spending and Soothing Stories: Response to Critics of “A Short History of K–12 Public School Spending in British Columbia, 1970-2020”

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In my article (2021), I found that British Columbia’s education spending today is 250 per cent of what it was in 1970, even after adjusting for inflation, and even though there are only about 10 per cent more students in the system today than there were then. I called for more empirical research into this sizeable spending increase, for the simple reason that education researchers, and others, often assert the opposite – that neoliberalism and austerity characterize education spending over the last five decades.

I am relieved that the two responses published above – Hunter (2022) and Laitsch et al. (2022) – have not challenged my main finding. I am gratified that they have taken seriously my call for more research. Nevertheless, they have made legitimate suggestions about things I could have done differently or better in my article. They have also criticized outright parts of the article and the research underpinning it.

I agree with their basic suggestion that I could have paid more attention to costs. Of course, new costs in the period since 1970 contributed to the increased spending I found. Hunter (2022) referred to these costs as “mission creep” and mentioned new initiatives “to better serve the marginalized” (p. 4), such as special education students and francophone students. Laitsch et al. (2022), for their part, named new costs also, such as integration of Indigenous students who previously would have attended federal Indian Residential and Day schools, as well as measures to improve schooling for students with exceptionalities. A fine-toothed analysis of costs might fill in more details, which is a worthwhile undertaking; however, that analysis is unlikely to alter significantly the big picture of spending increase.

Unlikely, because I have already accounted for spending on these costs in my (2021) article. Operating expenditures on things like the cost of special education, or French language services, or Indigenous education, have come – more often than not – in the form of increased spending on personnel, mainly teachers. Bear in mind that 80 to 90 per cent of K-12 operating expenditures in any given year in the period since 1970 is still down to staff salary and benefits (British Columbia Education Funding Review Panel, 1992; Cutt et al., 1988; Young et al., 2008). So, whatever the new cost was in this period – the will to integrate special education students into mainstream classrooms, for example – successive governments’ rather consistent *spending* choice responding to that cost was to increase personnel expenditures. Consider, continuing with the same example, that if you teach special education students in mainstream classrooms and you reduce average class sizes to help with this, hire education assistants to also work in those classrooms to support integration, and limit the number of special education students a teacher may carry in her class (as class composition rules in many British Columbia teachers’ contracts do), then your personnel costs and personnel expenditures necessarily increase. You need to form more classes and hire more personnel to deliver instruction in these ways. In this sense, school districts do not spend money on special education. They spend money on special education *teachers*. This is precisely why I identified events in teacher union-employer bargaining – especially events relating to bargaining class size and composition, which have clear effects on the number of teachers the system employs – as major causes and correlates of rising spending since 1970.

Revenue – not just spending, or costs – matters too and Hunter (2022) called for more attention to

that side of “the ledger” (p. 5), especially taxation. I can agree also that we need more work on this. One of the biggest shifts in educational finance in the past fifty years is the province taking local property taxation powers and revenues from the districts and claiming these for itself. Events – spiralling district expenditures and stiffening provincial will to control them – are what caused that landmark shift to take place. This is why the other focus of my article, alongside union-employer bargaining, is government-school district financial wrangling.

Hunter (2022) and Laitsch et al. (2022) tried to take me to task for not using theory and methods from economics and statistics. There are no “dif-in-dif estimations,” “four-by-four matri[ces],” or “regression analysis” (Hunter, 2022, p. 4) in my article. I did not contemplate Baumol’s Cost Disease (Laitsch et al., 2022). However, Laitsch et al.’s (2022) accusation that my article “lacks a theoretical framework” (p. 8) is well wide of the mark. My framework is the historian’s careful study of change over time, its causes (and correlates) and effects (Stearns, 1984). Cause, correlation, and effect are hardly statisticians’ private property, as Laitsch et al. (2022) seem to claim when they accuse me of bait-and-switch for promising to look at these but not doing a purely statistical analysis of them. Education economists, if they choose to look at school spending over time in British Columbia, can apply the methods Hunter (2022) and Laitsch et al. (2022) recommend. I would be very interested in what they find.

Hunter (2022) and Laitsch et al. (2022) are critical of the data I used as well, because it is fragmented. However, historians often work with fragmented data, because often they are forced to when no other data on a question exists. Piecing data together, as I (2021) did, is acceptable practice, especially when the historian supports that with other documentary evidence (see Aydelotte, 1969), as I did extensively as well.

At one time, historians of education wrote soothing stories about the past – tales about public education battles joined and won – to “give teachers and administrators a greater sense of professional esprit and identity” (Tyack, 1974, p. 9). Rather than mythmaking for that purpose, the historian of education’s job today is to be thoroughly critical. We are supposed to (p. 4) “examine those educational institutions and values we have taken for granted...to turn facts into puzzles,” historian David B. Tyack (1974) wrote. The fact is British Columbia’s K-12 spending has increased considerably since 1970. The puzzle is figuring out what spending changes over time actually occurred, what events and other factors contributed to those changes, as well as what the changes mean. “The way we understand the past profoundly shapes how we make choices today,” Tyack (1974, p. 4) added. Hunter (2022) was quite right: in the future, British Columbians are likely going to have to choose between priorities like “hip replacements or early learning programs” (p. 4). To make these choices effectively and justly, we need a no-nonsense discussion of the past spending that got us here, including events that shaped that spending.

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