



Tri-national Coalition in Defense of Public Education

20 years building alternatives to neo-liberal policies in education

11th Conference, May 2014

Chicago Declaration

Participants in the 11th Tri-national Conference declare that education is a universal right of peoples and a responsibility of the state. It is a human rights imperative of modern societies and an international commitment that governments are obliged to recognize since education and culture are fundamental to the development of a people and their country.

Teachers and education workers have been the mainstay of the educational system in generating and transmitting knowledge for the cultural, economic and social development of our countries. Their work has been the basis of humanistic, critical and scientific development of our peoples.

The economic and social realities since the North American Free Trade Agreement

The 20 years of experience with NAFTA is far from the objectives of social justice and economic development promised by the governments of our countries. It has generated greater inequality and concentration of wealth at the expense of widespread poverty. It has resulted in greater exploitation of labor. With instruments such as NAFTA, governments and corporations have attacked social rights and democratic freedoms and have been particularly aggressive towards trade unions and teaching professionals.

NAFTA imposes the logic of the market, commercializing education and limiting social rights. This has fostered a greater accumulation of capital based on the reduction of wages and deteriorating working conditions causing further degradation of our societies. Governments have adopted policies of international organizations and multinational corporations: commodifying education, attacking employment rights, pensions and social security. Campaigns have been conducted against teachers and confrontations between youth and communities against teachers have been encouraged.

NAFTA after 20 years has contributed to a negative impact on economy, jobs and on education. The shared market has been used to create a race-to-the-bottom as the movement of capital and industry has driven down wages for some and perpetuated exploitation for others.

Mexico, the USA and Canada show the following neo-liberal patterns in education:

- The “Teach for America” program is being cloned in Mexico and Canada.
- Severe labor reforms are intended to limit the rights of teachers and their unions.
- Repressive tactics are being implemented to fracture the will of our movement.
- The view of education as the last great area of public expenditure which put it at a higher risk for privatization and rule by the market.
- The “business” of education is spreading and is increasingly “market driven.”
- Standardized tests are implemented as weapons to control and direct education for corporate interests.
- The increase in precarious jobs creates conditions where workers’ rights are violated and makes individuals vulnerable and afraid to fight for their rights.

Since the passage of NAFTA, provisions have been included in most of the bi-lateral and multi-lateral trade agreements that feature similar provisions. These deals would expand even further through the proposed agreements with the European Union and in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

The provisions of NAFTA that have increased corporate power and limited the provision of the most weakened public provision of such basic services like education. Neo-liberal globalization has spread well beyond our three countries and affects much of the globe in ways similar to us.

The characteristics and impact of neo-liberal globalization

What has been called “neo-liberal ideology and practice” has a number of features:

- It is an ideology that places the market above social rights.
- It reduces the role of government in delivering services and collecting taxes needed to support those services.
- It promotes privatization of services so the market rather than the public interest and equity drive the delivery of services.
- It eliminates labour rights and collective bargaining. Employers have more “flexibility” so they can hire workers under precarious conditions and minimum protections.
- The state uses its power of regulation and implementation in favor of corporate interests instead of protecting the public interest.
- It produces income inequalities within countries, while those at the top claim an ever-increasing share of the wealth.
- It increases the power of the private sector to finance elections and the corporate media to influence elections.

In education, these features are evident in cutbacks to education funding; the erosion of secure, full-time employment; constant attacks on collective bargaining rights of teachers and education workers; use of standardized tests to monitor teaching and curricula; privatization and investment of public funds for education in “charter schools” and private schools.

An international agency—the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—has an increasing influence on education worldwide. Its PISA exam is used to develop tables that rank countries on the elements of education that the OECD determines are most valuable. The underlying claim is that certain types of learning are necessary to successful economic development in a global competition. This approach ignores, not surprisingly, the many valuable elements of education besides those tested by PISA.

Extensive research supports the view that the success and impact of education is related to social position and poverty. However, neo-liberal policies are framed to place all the responsibility for improvement on the teacher, rather than focusing on creating more equitable social conditions and therefore greater equity in school outcomes.

The impact of new information and communications technology (ICT) in education

Along with neo-liberal globalization, the rapid spread of information and communications technology has a significant, general impact on our societies that provide positive and negative possibilities. We can use the technologies to forge closer alliances and supports for the future of

public education partnerships. However, the new technologies can produce negative results, such as inequality of access.

For example, inequities in access—the digital divide—increases, with ever-greater impact on those without access. These divisions will increase as the technology develops under the logic of the market.

Increasingly, the application of technology in the schools is controlled by one major corporation—Pearson. This company describes itself as the global leader in education. The corporation gains huge influence by creating products for all aspects of education—textbooks, digital resources, tests, consultations on education policies based on its tests, student information systems, testing for graduation from teacher education programs, teacher professional development. In addition, Pearson has the contract to carry out the next OECD PISA examination in 2015.

Corporate development of education and foundations—exemplified by the Gates Foundation—is gaining more and more influence over education systems on a global basis. This further contributes to making education into a consumer product rather than a social right.

Challenging standardized tests

Standardized tests—instead of being used as an instrument to improve education—are used as a weapon against students and teachers. This has become increasingly important and controversial as teachers and parents challenge the validity of these tests.

Although in different ways, teachers in the three countries have refused to administer the tests and made public the negative impact of standardized tests. In Mexico in 2013 about five hundred thousand teachers in basic education rejected the use of standardized tests for evaluating student and teacher performance. In Seattle, teachers in one school started a boycott of tests that gained great support. In Canada, many parents of students in British Columbia rejected having their children take the tests.

Preparing for a just and democratic future

For many years, many teachers, students and communities have resisted privatization and other elements of neo-liberalism.

While it is essential to challenge those elements that damage public education, it is essential that we go beyond that and develop alternative proposals built on pedagogy for transformation. For the future of humanity and the planet, we need to put forward a positive vision of what public education should be and could be.

Groups in each of our countries have addressed this challenge. They have produced alternative pedagogical approaches, plans for different types of education and documents such as the “Charter for Public Education” and alternative education projects in different states of Mexico.

Twenty years after its formation, the Tri-national Coalition in Defense of Public Education is a valuable tool to articulate our struggles, to contribute to a more just and democratic future.

Actions of the Tri-national Coalition to support public education and more equitable and democratic societies in North America

1. Carry out communications on key issues between conferences using websites and social media such as Facebook.
2. On World Teacher Day (October 5 each year), focus on the reality of education in the three countries and the similar issues faced by teachers and their unions. Develop resources that can be used by unions.
3. Organize one tri-national seminar each year to focus on one or more of the key issues raised at the 11th Conference, such as: education as a right rather than a service; analysis of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM); challenging standardized testing; the role of the OECD and PISA; precarious work.
4. Support the organizing of a student seminar on the role that students can play in tri-national work.
5. Hold the 12th Tri-national Conference in Defense of Public Education in 2016 in Vancouver, Canada.

This declaration is a reflection of a process of discussion by participants during the 11th Tri-national Conference.

What is the Tri-national Coalition in Defense of Public Education?

The Tri-national Coalition is made up of people supporting and defending public education in the NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) countries—Mexico, the United States, and Canada. It was formed in 1993 in response to NAFTA and its projected increase in economic and social integration of the three countries.

The Coalition is an informal organization that brings together people from the three NAFTA countries—teacher union activists, higher education academics and students, support workers in schools and parents—all of whom value public education for their children and for its key contribution to a democratic society.

The Coalition has held a conference every two years, alternating between Mexico, Canada, and the United States. The 11th Conference in Chicago again provided an opportunity for participants to learn more about the different realities in the three countries, as well as the similarities that reflect the influence of globalization on public education.