

Martha's Monthly
September 2008
First it's red pens, then it's Adopt-a-Teacher for a Week!

During the Depression in Saskatchewan, Martha's Uncle Mort became a teacher. Money was tight among farm families so he was paid in room and board: each family with children had the responsibility to have him stay with them for a week to a month (depending on the number of children attending school) and the farm family would have to feed and lodge him for the time. To Martha's uncle it provided a job and his daily bread. For the families it meant they could afford to have their children attend the one room school that offered the children a chance at a better life.

Martha had to wonder last week, while stuck in a line-up at a popular school supply shop, if we aren't just a heartbeat away from the same idea here in Alberta. Martha had her basket overflowing with overhead marker pens, Kleenex, photocopy paper, red pens, band-aids, and anti-bacterial soap. This load represented the "school supplies" for her little Johnny as he enters grade 4. The bill for his "supplies" was over \$120 and Martha wondered how, exactly, a grade four student would be using his overhead markers. Or was she subsidizing the school budget by providing most of the essentials?

School supplies is one of the last ways a school can ensure that tight budgets can be met. Martha does not begrudge the teachers their red pens and overhead markers. She knows more than a few teachers that buy books, stickers, and pens out of their own pocket when budgets are too tight. The problem is that we are not living through the Depression in Saskatchewan. We are living in the richest province in Canada at the richest moment of its existence. Projected budget surpluses are now over \$8.5 Billion (see : [surplus story](#)) for the province this year and yet Martha is paying **retail** prices for photocopy paper and band-aids!

The Teacher's Union (the ATA) [welcomed](#) the 4.5% increases in funding to school operating budgets this year yet their own documents make it clear that, at 4.8%, [inflation](#) is still outpacing those budgets. But some parts of the budget are very unpredictable. Transportation costs have increased so much that school boards are finding their buses are costing them thousands more than expected. Heating costs, too, are unpredictable. With little maneuverability in the budgets school boards have only a few options. They can charge parents a "fee" to cover things like an agenda or other sundry items. But there are limits to what can be included.

Where there is no limit, however, is in "required school supplies" and while most of these items are understandable, Martha has noticed that since Johnny started

school a few years ago the sheer amount of “required supplies” has ballooned like Elvis at a buffet. It took Martha 3 stores, nearly 4 hours, and about \$120 bucks this year to satisfy *the list* but she couldn’t help wondering how it made any sense to have thousands of parents doing the same! Would it not be cheaper to buy these things wholesale from a supplier and avoid the markup of the middleman? Wouldn’t parents be happy to pay an amount to someone else to handle that for them? What if we parents all pooled our money to buy wholesale? And we could base the amount you paid on your income? What an idea.....**BUT WAIT!! We have that system...it’s called TAXES and a GOVERNMENT!**

See, with all that time spent in retail-land Martha had a thought...why not make our government do their jobs and hire purchasers to buy the red pens, photocopy paper, overhead markers, and Kleenex required by a school board? It seems ridiculous to have the 200,000 + Alberta students (and their parents) each buying a red pen for the teacher while the school boards could do it if they were just given the budgets to carry that out.

Parents probably spent \$20,000,000 on school supplies last week and many, many hours in long lineups. If we funded schools to buy red pens we would save money AND time. A long time ago we figured out that making parents pay teachers with room and board was both inefficient and unfair. It seems too silly to imagine now. Martha hopes that in a few years nobody will believe that parents in 2008 were buying the teachers’ red pens either!

Please copy the following letter and add your thoughts and experiences. Simply [paste the letter into a new message](#) and when you send it, the message will be delivered to:

premier@gov.ab.ca, edmonton.whitemud@assembly.ab.ca,
calgary.varsity@assembly.ab.ca, edmonton.highlandsnorwood@assembly.ab.ca,
marthasmnthly@yahoo.ca

September 8, 2008

Premier Stelmach
and Minister Dave Hancock
Alberta Legislature

Dear Premier Stelmach and Minister Hancock:

I write you with concern about the increasing costs of school supplies for students in the public and separate school systems in Alberta. Some have estimated that parents have paid between \$100 and \$200 per child to send them

to school with paper, red pens, and Kleenex. Many of the items on the school supply list seem to be ones which the school boards should be able to provide, if they had adequate budgets to do so.

While I note you provided increases to the operating funding that *almost* met the rate of inflation at the time, it is clear that schools need more flexibility in the funding for transportation, heating, and other highly volatile budget items. They also need to have more allocated to basic supplies so that parents are not buying, at retail prices I may add, photocopy paper, markers, and Band-Aids and so that teachers are not forced to use their own money to cover the shortfalls.

With Alberta's budget surpluses from oil at all time highs I find it unacceptable that school boards need to ask parents to provide Kleenex. Surely we have the ability to see how silly it is to have thousands of parents spending their time to buy one box of Kleenex each and the teachers taking their time to make sure each child brought in their Kleenex! Please budget more wisely for school boards so that we can avoid such nonsense next September.

Sincerely,

YOUR NAME AND FULL ADDRESS

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