

Editor's Note: Sorry for the delay in this month's Martha. We have switched list servs and needed to work out a few kinks. Please remember to write your letter ASAP and forward this email to anyone who might be interested in joining us. We will soon have our own website but for now please see www.womanspace.ca for info about Martha and about joining.

Martha's Monthly

October 2006

Free Education is priceless

Last month, as the nights got cooler, Martha came home one evening to find a tiger salamander on her doorstep. While it is a wild native reptile in Alberta, Martha had never seen one before and she thought some of the kids at the local school might like to see it too. So she found a good sized container and housed it overnight. The next day she took her kids to the pet store to get some food for the seven inch salamander. Her first mistake was to take children to a pet store. The perky pet-lover behind the counter insisted that the salamander (who less than 24 hours ago was wild) required special dirt (\$17), a special plastic container (\$25) and a cricket farm every week so he can be fed live crickets (\$3/week). The children looked at Martha with one of those looks that say, "Mom, you wouldn't let this poor salamander survive without \$17 dirt, would you??" Pretty soon Martha's free reptile that was going to be a great science exhibit at school became a \$45 nocturnal money pit that required daily water spritzes!

It occurred to Martha that sometimes when we sign on for something free we get stuck with a bunch of unexpected costs. It also occurred to Martha that letting down her kids was not yet an option. Wait until they get older for that.

Later, while Martha spritzed the salamander, she heard a news report about the BC Supreme Court decision to ban school fees in the province as they were "illegal" (see: [report](#)). She dropped the tiny spritzer (\$5) and did a little happy dance. Finally, someone else thought that paying for public education was wrong.

Martha has long opposed those little extras that her children are charged at school. This year, her grammar schoolers paid more than \$160 each in extra fees for their **free** education. Following the BC decision, the Alberta government was quick to make sure we all knew that, unlike the BC School Act, the School Act in Alberta **DOES** allow school fees. Read the following from the Alberta Education [website](#):

Under the *School Act*, school boards may not charge Alberta students tuition fees. They may set fees for such things as transportation; textbook, locker and musical instrument rentals; lunchroom supervision; art supplies; field trips; yearbooks and class pictures.

Martha thought that textbooks, lockers, art supplies, and lunchroom supervision were not really “extras”. They sure weren’t when she went to school. All those things were just part of a *public education*.

Lest you think this is either too little to worry about at an individual level or too much to consider covering at a public level, Martha will remind you that in 2003-04 school fees amounted to more than \$50 million dollars. That is a lot for just parents to cover but when we spread it out across all the population (through taxes) it becomes a small cost for a government. The Alberta government needs to adequately fund school boards for the **full cost** of education. Martha is certainly not alone in her dislike for the charges levied on children. The New Democrats have opposed fees. ([NDP policy](#)) and the Liberals have even helped distribute a parent petition calling on the Minister of Education to eliminate school fees. ([Liberal policy](#))

One of the main arguments used by the Alberta Education department for the inclusion of fees in our School Act is that the fees are not mandatory if parents cannot afford them. They point to “an appeal policy” within every school district to ensure that those who cannot afford the fees do not pay them. And then you read the websites of various schools in Alberta. Many mention the waiver, some even provide it online, but there are quite a few that make it clear that they see the fees as mandatory. Here are some of the worst Martha found:

[Elk Islands Public Schools](#) will use a collection agency to go after delinquent parents. [Senator Gershaw in Bow Island](#) will suspend privileges to children who have parents that can’t pay.

And a group called Parents for Public Education is finding that their members who are boycotting fees are facing collection agencies and bad credit. (See [report](#))

Martha remembers the look of her little ones in the pet store when she was told that \$17 dirt was required. So she really sympathizes with the many low income families that cannot pay the fees. In Ottawa, the city’s Poverty Issues Advisory Committee submitted a report to City Council outlining the many ways low-income families are shamed when they cannot pay that province’s “voluntary” fees. (see: [PIAC report](#)) Some of the ways will anger you. PIAC reported that some children who received the subsidy were told to come in and clean and paint the school to pay back the school. Others faced announcements over the P.A. naming the children who had not yet paid their fees.

The only fair way to manage is to make *free* education *free*. Alberta’s School Act needs to be rewritten to outlaw school fees for textbooks, lockers, supervision, art supplies, and everything else that is required for our children’s education. We pay taxes so that we all benefit from public education. School fees impede all our children’s ability to access public education without prejudice.

Please write an email to the Minister of Education. (Below is a sample you may use or add to). CC it to your MLA, and all the following people:

Edmonton.millcreek@assembly.ab.ca,edmonton.beverlyclareview@assembly.ab.ca,
st.albert@assembly.ab.ca, marthasmnthly@yahoo.ca

October 24, 2006

Hon. Gene Zwosdesky, MLA
Minister of Education

Dear Minister Zwosdesky:

I am a Martha of Martha's Monthly and we are writing you this month to ask you to change the Alberta School Act to remove the ability of school boards to charge school fees or instructional material charges. These fees are an unfair tax on all parents when not all parents have the same ability to pay. While I understand that your government has called them "voluntary fees" this is not the understanding of parents who have been hounded by collection agencies or had their child excluded from school activities because they were unable to pay. For these parents the fees are not voluntary.

Since the amount of money being discussed is about \$50 million a year I call on you to increase the budget to schools by that amount and ensure that school boards are not short instructional costs. I do believe that art supplies, food in home economics, textbooks, and lunchroom supervision are part of a child's education and I expect it paid by my taxes.

Please end school fees before the next school year starts.

Sincerely,

Your name and full address

CC MLA Jack Flaherty
MLA Ray Martin
