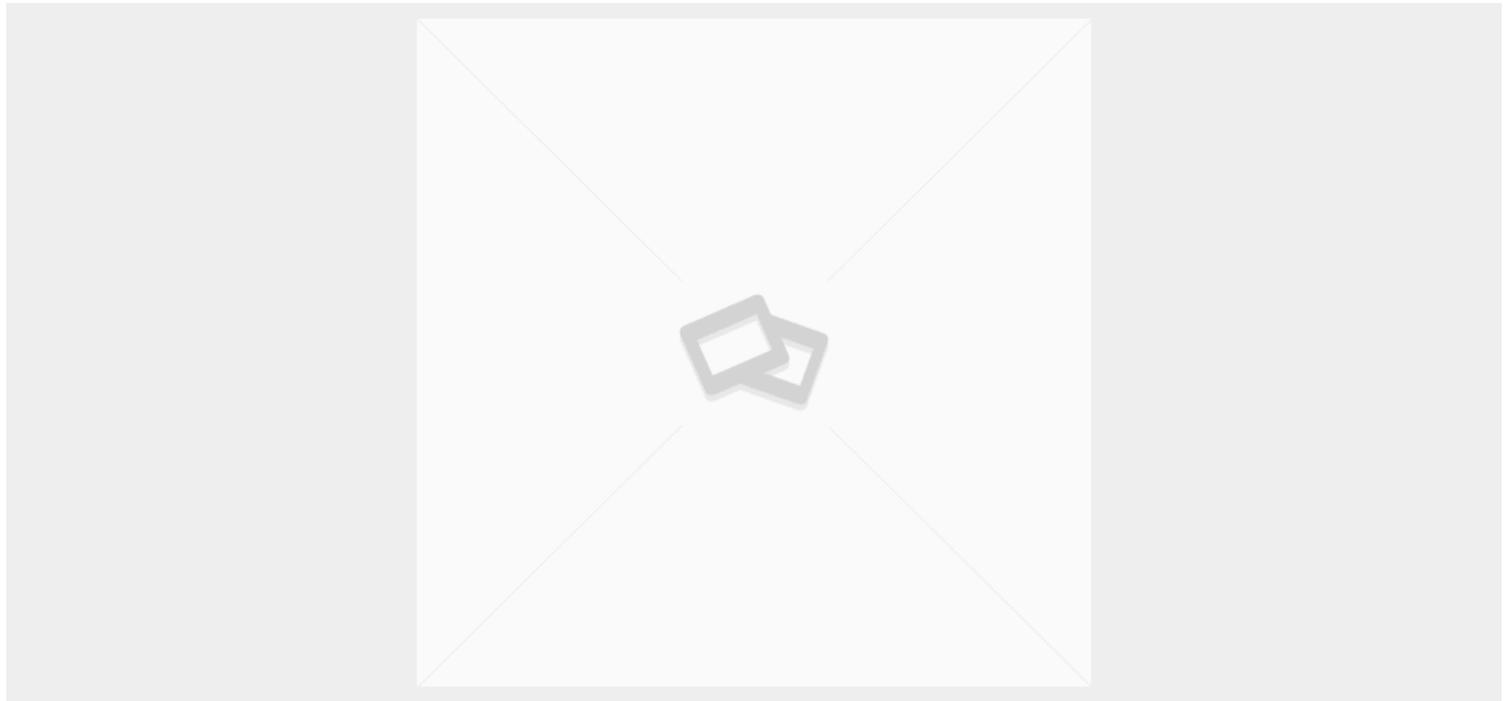


# THE WOBBLING PILLAR

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 Editorial, 14 July 2013

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The bad news is that one of the three pillars—the day-schools—are wobbling everywhere in the Diaspora.



There are anywhere from 600,000 to 700,000 Armenians in California. Greater Los Angeles prides in having almost a dozen Armenian day-schools. However, the student count is a depressing 5,000. While it's difficult to determine the number of school-age Armenian students in California, the student count is less than 1% of California Armenians. This might seem an embarrassing statistic for a community which prides itself as being the largest in Diaspora (if one discounts Russia) but for the fact that in various Armenian centres—Paris, Buenos Aires, Jerusalem--Armenian day- schools are also struggling.

In Canada there were four day schools (three in Montreal and one in Toronto). Last year one of the Toronto schools (owned by the AGBU) closed due to financial challenges. The three Montreal schools have 1,350 students. In recent years these numbers have been maintained at an even level, thanks to new immigrants from Syria and Iraq. One of the schools also admits Christian Arabs. The Toronto school has 550 students (0.8% of the Toronto-area Armenian population).

A primary reason Armenian day schools don't attract Armenian students is the cost of tuition. In Toronto and Montreal the average annual income (before taxes) per household is about \$68,000. In Toronto the tuition fees at the Armenian day school are \$4,800 (sans transportation and ancillary expenses such as registration, books, sports activities, school trips, etc.). This is a formidable financial challenge, and counts for approximately 10% of net family income per student. In Montreal combined tuition and bus transportation costs are a low \$2,600 because the Quebec government subsidizes the schools.

In the Los Angeles Basin cities where most California Armenians live, the annual (before taxes)

household income, according to the "Los Angeles Times" is \$34,000 (Hollywood), \$54,000 (San Fernando Valley), \$57,000 (Glendale), \$63,000 (Pasadena), and \$64,000 (Burbank). The average annual day-school tuition per student ranges (depending on the school) from \$500 to \$800 per month, not including ancillary expenses. You do the math about the size of the slice tuition takes from the family income pie.

While Armenian day school tuition fees have risen beyond the rate of inflation, they are still modest compared to those of other private schools. For example, in Toronto the average tuition fees for private schools are \$15,000.

Are these demands on Armenian families financially sustainable? It's a fact that families with two children, and who could send one child to Armenian school, choose not to send both children to Armenian school so as not to play favorites. In other instances, parents have pulled their children from Armenian school because of harsh economic conditions.

Armenian day schools are a barometer of the community's health. When a school faces tuition crisis it means the community is facing a crisis. Although the tuition crisis is palpable, nobody seems to be making a significant and over-arching effort to resolve the dilemma across the Diaspora.

The negative side-effects of Armenian day school "high tuition" are significant and self-evident. Because many Armenian parents can't afford to send their children to Armenian schools, they feel excluded from the community, and those who send their children to Armenian schools feel their lifestyle is demonstrably constricted due to the cost of providing their children education at an Armenian school. The tuition pressure also restricts parents from making greater financial contribution to their church, community centre, to Armenia and to Artsakh, to cite a few vital causes. Thus an institution vital to the continuance of the community may be eating away at the well-being of that very community.

Is the Diaspora buckling under the high cost of Armenian life? How much financial sacrifice do parents have to make to retain our Armenian life and make sure their children are educated in an Armenian atmosphere and are versed in our language, culture, and identity? Will our communities slowly implode under the costs of retaining a semblance of Armenian communal and family life?

The current vigor of North American Armenian communities is mostly due to emigration from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Istanbul. North American Armenian community life had begun to fade by the '60s. With the pioneers (Genocide survivors) of the community dead or in failing health, the second generation was often assimilated or half-hearted about carrying on the torch. A few could speak Armenian. It was the newcomers from the Middle East who revived these hobbling communities. With the Middle East emptying of Armenians, North American and European Armenian communities can't count on future white knights from Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo, Jerusalem, and Cairo to revive Diaspora communities. The Diaspora has to give birth and nourish its domestic community leaders and educators.

One of the aims of Diaspora Armenian schools is to be a primary source of our community future leaders and activists. Without Armenian schools our chances of knowledgeable and committed future leaders dim significantly. Without capable leaders there can't be a healthy community.

It's high time our communities took a serious look at the looming Armenian school crisis. Are we cognizant of the challenges or are we stuck in the mindset of previous decades? Do we appreciate the importance of our schools in the survival of our communities? Finally, how do we make sure our schools flourish and tuition fees are affordable?

Our schools need additional financial support from the community, from foundations, from wealthy Armenians and from Armenia. As much as a subsidy to Armenian parents who want their children to be educated in an Armenian milieu, the subsidy would be an investment in our communities' future. Armenian schools are not a luxury. They are crucial for our communal survival.

