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FROM THE PRESIDENT

This is the print-friendly version of the *SQE Forum*.

We rely - financially and morally - on the support of people like you. So if you enjoy our newsletter, please make a donation. You can do this securely on-line by visiting www.canadahelps.org/DonationDetails.aspx. Or you can send a cheque to Society for Quality Education, 57 Twyford Road, Toronto, ON M9A 1W5. We will immediately send you a tax receipt – along with our heartfelt thanks.

Another way you can help is by forwarding copies of this newsletter to like-minded friends and relations and telling them about our web-site (www.societyforqualityeducation.org). There is strength in numbers!

Regards, Malkin

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MAIL BAG

Entrenched Problems

Teachers still fail to see that there is a problem with how reading is being taught in the early grades. We have a whole generation of teachers who were themselves taught to read via whole language and have never experienced direct instruction.

I have pretty well lost faith in changing the education system. It saddens me to say this but, if I didn't have grandchildren, I probably wouldn't even care about the public education system. I suspect that my grandchildren (like my kids) will survive in spite of the system – because they have parents and grandparents who will help them overcome the system's deficiencies.

A former teacher myself, I have shifted my focus in retirement to educating the public on environmental issues where I know I can make a difference.

North Bay, ON

Private School Salvation

I am very grateful to Children First for making it financially possible for us to choose a private school for our children. Our children are very diligent with their school work and never want to be late for school. Further, they want to go on to university.

I come from an Old Order Mennonite family, for whom education usually stops at the grade 8 level, after which the children work on the farm. While many of the old ways are good, ending your education so soon is not good.

I would like to thank everyone who donates to Children First. I am sure they will never be able to fully grasp the impact of this program in changing people's lives.

Alliston, ON

Graduation Rate

While the graduation rate may be increasing, the quality of the "product" coming out the door is going down. My oldest graduated from high school last year and my youngest is currently in grade 9. I am amazed at the difference in just four years.

The criteria that my youngest will need to meet to graduate are significantly less stringent than what my oldest had to deal with. It is no wonder we get reports such as the one in the *National Post* earlier this week on how while average literacy skills may be improving, the skills for those at the high end are going down. CBC had a discussion on numeracy skills recently and, because rote learning has been eliminated (e.g., memorization of multiplication tables), some of the higher-level math is now problematic because students no longer can see the factors that can be pulled out (e.g., solving quadratic equations).

Ottawa, ON

SQE ACTIVITIES

President Malkin Dare has published the third edition of her book, *How to get the right education for your child*, a very useful manual for parents with kids who are struggling in school. You can read the introduction by visiting www.societyforqualityeducation.org/parents/malkin-book.html and, if you like what you read, order your free copy. Alternatively, call Malkin at 519-884-3166.

ASK AUNT MALKIN

A veteran of the school wars herself, with the scars to prove it, Malkin Dare has lots of advice. If you would like some been-there-done-that advice from Aunt Malkin, call her at 519-884-3166 or [e-mail](mailto:mdare@sympatico.ca) her at mdare@sympatico.ca. Aunt Malkin answers Maria's question about her daughter's math struggles.

Question

My grade 5 daughter is really struggling with math. I try to help her at home, but I find the textbook very confusing and my explanations seem to bewilder my daughter even more. Should I butt out?

Maria, Kitchener

Answer

For goodness sake, don't leave your daughter high and dry at this point. Math is a very sequential subject, and if she doesn't get back on track, she is unlikely ever to do well at math. And that would close far too many doors in our high-tech society.

Taught properly, every child can be an excellent mathematician. Unfortunately, few Ontario public elementary schools are teaching math properly. So my message is one of good news and bad news. The good news is that your daughter can become competent in math. The bad news is - it's up to you to make it happen.

There are two main reasons why kids have trouble with math. It is likely that your daughter is afflicted with both problems.

First, check if she knows her number facts — addition, subtraction, multiplication, division. If she doesn't, help her to memorize them. Kids who are not fluent with the basic number facts have almost no mental desk space left over for problem solving.

Second, the textbook and/or teaching may be at fault. The math in most Ontario textbooks is poorly explained and sequenced, and the practice exercises tend to be inadequate and confusing. The market has responded by making better materials available, for example **Jump Math** at <http://jumpmath.org/publications/order> or **Kumon Math** at www.kumon.com/ or **Saxon Math** at <http://saxonhomeschool.harcourtachieve.com/en-US/saxonhomeschool.htm> or **Singapore Math** at www.singaporemath.com/Homeschool_s/60.htm. The latter two web-sites offer free placement tests.

I would be happy to explain the strengths and weaknesses of the various programs on request.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Only in Alberta, you say? Pity!

If you live in Alberta, you can send your kids to a Montessori school for free. Or a Christian school. Or a traditional school. Or a Mandarin immersion school. Or a year-round school. Or an all-girls school. Or any of dozens of other possibilities. All for free.

But if you live in the rest of Canada, you would probably have to pay several thousand dollars a year to access any of these options. It gets worse.

If you moved to Alberta, your kids would learn a lot more in school than if they stayed home. Alberta students have outperformed the rest of Canadians on every single one of the dozens of tests of student achievement over the last ten years, usually by a wide margin.

It's not as if Alberta parents pay more in taxes (they pay less) or that the Alberta government spends more on education (it spends about the same). Or that Alberta kids are smarter. Or that there is any hidden downside to Alberta's superior education system.

No, the only difference is that several years ago Alberta's provincial government passed laws that broke up its school boards' virtual monopoly over the provision of elementary and secondary education. The resulting competition among education providers led to better customer service, higher standards, and lower costs.

There is no reason why other provinces couldn't pass similar laws, allowing competition to work its magic in their schools as well. So, if you want your children to attend better schools, talk to your member of provincial parliament about educational competition. Or else move to Alberta...

WHAT'S NEW?

Too Much of a Good Thing?

The Ontario College of Teachers reports that there is an "employment crisis" for most new teachers in Ontario. At present, some 7,000 more new teachers enter the job market each year than retire. The Elementary Teachers Federation opted not to urge the government to curb capacity at faculties of education, choosing instead to focus on reductions to class sizes as a way to create more jobs.

www.macleans.ca/education/universities/article.jsp?content=20071126_191435_7400

Grammar Rules

Public schools in Oregon have dramatically changed the way they teach English to non-native speakers, for the first time explicitly teaching the grammar, rules, and structure of English. This year, across the state, nearly 9,000 students passed the state English exam, compared to fewer than 4,000 the year before. www.ode.state.or.us/news/announcements/announcement.aspx?=3456

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Where's the Math?

A study of Ontario college students finds that one in three students who take first-semester mathematics end up in academic trouble, showing up stark differences in how well high school students are being prepared in mathematics. www.ysimste.ca

The Rich Get Richer

A Northwestern University study investigating the effects of class size suggests that high achievers benefit more from small classes than do low achievers – increasing the achievement gap. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/02/080228112004.htm

BOOK REVIEWS

2 Million Minutes

Broken Pencil Publications

This 54-minute DVD contrasts how high school students in China, India, and the United States spend the two million minutes between grade 8 and grade 12 graduation. The executive producer of the documentary, a venture capitalist and entrepreneur founder of four companies, is worried by parents' complacency about their children's futures. While American (and Canadian) teenagers are partying and working at part-time jobs, Chinese and Indian students are sharpening their minds for the new knowledge economy – one in which North America's best and brightest may find themselves irreversibly outdated. To watch the trailer, visit <http://www.2mminutes.com/trailer.html>.

Teaching and Learning in Japan

By Thomas Rohlen and Gerald LeTendre

This fascinating book disputes common stereotypes about Japanese teaching in the primary grades. Drawing on ethnographic and experimental studies, the book gives the reader an inside view of Japanese teaching methods, where the emphasis is on the process of learning, rather than the end product. In fact, Japanese classrooms are the ultimate in child-centred learning. The book also explores all kinds of interesting influences, including Zen meditation, the role of the individual, and noh drama.

Excerpt (page 158)

“We have frequently witnessed [western visitors'] shock as they watch a video program that we filmed in Japanese elementary schools or when we accompany them on visits to Japanese classrooms. Except for the large number of students in each class, Japanese elementary schools have little resemblance to what most Americans expect. Many aspects of the schools are uniform, but the rules are not so strict and rigid that they eliminate the expression of individuality by the children or by the teacher. American visitors tell us that they did not anticipate the liveliness of what they saw, especially the noise and wild activity that occur on the playground and in the school before class begins.”

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

Here's a fun activity that provides vocabulary enrichment and at the same time donates rice to the United Nations World Food Program to end hunger. www.freerice.com/index.php

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