

Plus Ça Change

This commentary was written in 1983, well before the latest amalgamation of school boards.

By James Daly

Ontario's recent consolidation into 'megaboards' has had the subtlest but most far-reaching consequences, some of them quite sinister.

The advantages were obvious, of course. There was to be more efficient administration (which was always a ridiculous hope), a fairer distribution of resources, so that poor areas got better facilities, and a greater variety of options available to their students.

But too many of the wider options were 'mickey-mouse' courses to allow students a spurious achievement, and too many of the better facilities were consequently unused and unappreciated. But the real blight created by the megaboards was the shift of attention away from the individual school to the larger multi-school organization.

A school is really an intangible thing, not nearly as solid or monolithic as its physical bulk leads one to think. It is full of unseen tides of force, of shifting allegiances and personal factors which are invisible to the outside world.

I have seen a few teachers dominate a staff and inspire both them and students with an indefinable sense of responsibility and leadership. Above all, the principal sets the tone. For the school is a *community*.

This school-community must have an ethos, a sense of purpose which binds class after class and provides both meaning and continuity. That ethos is set by a combination of the student body, the teachers, and the principal.

We all remember the striking characters on the staff of our own school, the principal's foibles, the stories passed down by older students. Though we never knew it, these apparently incidental characteristics were what held the school together and made it what it was.

And among such characteristics, none was more important than the sense of trust within the staff and be-

tween staff and principal. This sense of trust cannot exist without consistency in personnel and a knowledge that everyone's loyalty is first and foremost to the school.

The construction of the megaboards struck a body-blow at the school as a community. The actual results vary from board to board, but in general the megaboards accentuated a shift of loyalty from the school to the board.

Multi-school boards had always existed, but the new ones were so large and necessitated such industrial organizational techniques for their management that a new atmosphere gradually replaced the old.

Decisions formerly taken at or near the school were now made more distantly. Power was taken from the principal and given to administrators. Principals and vice-principals were often moved from school to school, weakening their sense of identify with the staffs among whom they flitted.

Where a principal had made his mark by holding the school together and leading it, he now did so by pleasing his masters, mindful that his further prosperity depended upon his fitting into a master plan of which his (highly-temporary) school was only one part.

So vicious can this process become that a principal can be put into a school for the deliberate purpose of weakening it to the point where it can be closed — as the master plan demands. One part of a county can be played off against another, and factions within board and administration become more important than anything that happens in a mere school.

It would be unfair to see such developments as the fault of cynical administrators. The fault lies in what the megasystem forces them to do. It has to be administered with the rationalized structures and bureaucratic habits appropriate to large-scale industry.

It cannot exist without these methods and the mentality which goes with them. And that mentality is fatal to each separate school-community and, I would say, to the process of education itself.

Add the related need to switch teachers from school to school in a time of declining enrolment and soon the integrity of every school is affected, and always for the worse. Though students may never even suspect the fact, they are no longer parts of a community, but units in a great machine.

What can be done about the problem? The money is running out, the schemes of the Hall-Dennis era have been discredited, the staffs are hanging onto their jobs for dear life, and the administrators are trying to keep the stuttering machine looking like an education system.

Sadly, there is no use looking to the province for solutions. The Ministry of Education was the source of the mistakes of the sixties, and it still clings to their considerable remains. Recent announcements by the minister, Bette Stephenson, are largely cosmetic, since increased core requirements are accompanied by a retreat from grade 13, the only real factor in quality control that remains.

To try to get educational improvement from the ministry is to plough the sea. If the polar ice-caps ever melt and the planet is covered by a hundred feet of water, the Ontario Ministry of Education will continue to function as if nothing had happened, pushing mountains of paper back and forth from meaningless committee to redundant task force.

Compared to the ministry, the worst of the megaboards are educational heroes.

(Adapted from "Why are our schools failing us?" in "Hamilton," February 1983. The late Dr. Daly was a former high school teacher and professor of history at McMaster.)