

Cynicism 101

What our kids are learning that isn't on the curriculum

By John Bachmann

My son's spring report card came home with an interesting attachment entitled "A Fond Farewell ... to our Staff Members who received lay-off notices as a result of the funding regulations imposed on Peel District School Board 19 by the Provincial Government under Bill 160". Pictures of 20 teachers at my son's high school with their names, the subjects they taught and their extracurricular involvement were spread across four pages.

I thought about the announcement over a couple of weeks. Finally, I decided it shouldn't go unchallenged, and I made an appointment to see the school's principal, Dr. M, a man whom I had come to see as fair and open-minded and truly dedicated to excellence in education. Under his active encouragement, the International Baccalaureate program was being introduced into his school – a first for Peel.

It was common knowledge that the school board's contract with the teachers required that it hand out pink slips in anticipation of a worst-case scenario. The board was forced to assume that no teachers (other than those who had already announced their intentions) would be retiring. This was not a new requirement introduced with Bill 160 – it's a lay off/rehire ritual boards have had to go through for years.

This year, however, was different in that the provincial government was expected to announce a one-time sweetening of the retirement package. Naturally, any teachers contemplating retirement would wait to see the terms of this package before making and announcing any final decisions. It was thus reasonable to expect that a significantly larger number of teachers than usual would take early retirement. If ever there was a year in which announcements of lay-offs should be handled cautiously, this was it. Yet, here was an announcement that conveyed none of this uncertainty.

I started the discussion by asking Dr. M if there was a chance that some of these "laid-off" teachers would still be teaching in his school come September. Without hesitation, he responded that, in fact, some of them had *already* been rehired! Somewhat taken aback by the quickness and candour of his response, I asked whether this meant that a 'We're thrilled to announce the rehiring' announcement, with photos, names and lists of extracurricular activities, would be going out with the June report cards. "We hadn't thought of doing that," was his half-hearted (yet no doubt completely honest) reply. [And, of course, the reports went out without such an announcement.]

What are parents and students to make of this? If, behind the scenes, the teachers in question had been informed that their chances of being rehired were indeed quite good, then the deception of less than full disclosure was clearly aimed only at parents and students. If, on the other hand, the teachers in question were not given this background information, one must regretfully conclude that they were used as pawns by their own federation and school administrators in a less-than-honest quest for

public sympathy. Either interpretation assumes a cynical betrayal of the trust parents must be able to have that their children will not be manipulated by the adults in our schools.

Honouring a Position of Trust

The second point I raised with Dr. M concerned the difficult position in which students find themselves when confronted with very visible teacher job actions which are often, like the report card announcement, endorsed by the school administration. This is a very important topic, because the relationship between a teacher and a pupil incorporates an imbalance of power and a potential for abuse.

As a society, we are unequivocal in dealing with teachers who step across the line *sexually* with their students. But shouldn't there be similar taboos against teachers who conscript students to take their side in a political fight? And conscripting is the right word for what has been going on.

What real freedom did students have to hold dissenting opinions in the highly-charged environment of our schools during the Bill 160 debate? *The Globe and Mail* reported that a grade 8 class she visited was asked by their teacher the first day back after the strike to write about the strike. At that age, students seldom have any opinions of their own. Much of what they "believe" is based on agreeing with the authority figures in their lives, including teachers and parents.

But what did the majority of parents think about the fight over Bill 160? A CBC poll taken shortly after the strike found that 60% of the Ontario public thought that the teachers' strike was primarily about working conditions. Only 28% bought the teachers' federation argument that it was about the quality of education. Can you imagine a 13-year-old feeling free to quote his parents in his essay? Hard to imagine him making the honour roll this year! Asking students to take positions at odds with those of their parents is unfair and borders on being unethical.

I certainly couldn't find evidence of strong public disagreement with the teachers' federations when I attended the government's announcement of the new funding formula at a Pickering high school. Instead, I saw many students sporting green ribbons and the kind of mindless earnestness I would expect to find at a Moonie convention. I didn't get the feeling that a vigorous debate was going on about the important issues raised by Bill 160. Instead, the air was filled with righteousness and the excitement of working for *the cause* — a significant cause, a cause that would be covered on the six o'clock news.

Educational Geneva Convention

No doubt such comments can sound very patronizing, especially given that some of these 'conscripted' students have reached the age of majority. But we can't lose sight of the fact that manipulation of impressionable young minds is dangerous stuff. We have to insist that the combatants in this struggle abide by certain rules — an educational Geneva Convention.

For starters, political discussions about our schools should be kept out of the pre-secondary classroom as much as possible. If any reference is made to the situation, it should be brief but balanced: "The other teachers and I believe that what the

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government is doing is hurting our schools. However, it is important for you to realize that many other people agree with what the government is doing. If enough of them stop agreeing with the government, they will vote them out and put in a new government. That is how democracy works in our province.”

At the secondary level, debates like the one sparked by Bill 160 provide an excellent learning opportunity. But, without a balanced treatment, we get propaganda, not learning. The one-sided ‘information’ meetings held in many schools during the Bill 160 debate indicate that the educational establishment still has trouble allowing and respectfully listening to opposing views in *our* schools. This is not at all surprising to the Ontario Parent Council who has been prevented from communicating with parents through the schools — a fact made all the more frustrating by the easy access to school mail systems enjoyed by “parent” groups who promote the federation agenda.

Teaching as a profession suffers the most when the professionalism of individual teachers in the classroom is overshadowed in the public mind by the shrillness of their federation leaders. But teachers are not the only ones to suffer when opponents of the federation agenda are shouted down or physically intimidated at public meetings. Our children are also hurt, because they are being taught the wrong lessons. We Canadians pride ourselves on our tolerance and moderation. The sentiment underlying Barry Goldwater’s famous line that “Extremism in the defence of liberty is a virtue” still makes most of us squirm. And Canadian teachers who have been particularly vocal in promoting racial tolerance in our schools probably squirm the most.

Teachers and, more importantly, their federations must start seeing tolerance as something that must be applied to political issues as well as social issues. They must welcome honest debate in our schools. Otherwise, the hypocrisy of their actions will breed only cynicism among their young charges. And there’s far too much cynicism in the world already.