

# Principals and Principles

by Donald T. Cropp

Following nine years of industrial research, I spent the mandatory half-wasted year at McArthur College before I began my 25 years of teaching chemistry, physics and lately mathematics. Unfortunately I had not been informed that, although as a teacher I would be expected to teach, mark, test, evaluate and examine my students, it could all be turned to ashes by the stroke of a principal's pen. Such power in the hands of persons rising by the Peter Principle who were for the most part totally ignorant of the subjects which I taught!

I first had a whiff of this process when my first principal crushed me in an argument about standards with the vehement statement that HE would decide who passed or failed in his school. During what is quaintly called a "promotion meeting," the principal demanded that his favourite student be awarded the average of at least 80% to ensure that she won an Ontario Scholarship. While deferring to the principal's demands in this matter, the teaching staff did find sufficient common cause to request equity for those students over whom the favoured student had been leap-frogged. We generated six more scholarships that way; it was much easier than teaching.

The general principles of the administration were cogently expressed by the vice-principal who asked whether I used the successes (or failures) of my students when they went on to college or university as a gauge of my teaching at the grade 13 level. When I pointed out that I had no other way of evaluating my performance, he told me that these successes or failures were the responsibility of the tertiary institutions and had nothing to do with secondary education.

One last anecdote of my early "promotion" problems. A student had earned marks of about 70% in both mathematics and biology, but a mere 35% in my chemistry course. In all three subjects, she had a habit of being absent on days when unit tests were written, and so she wrote them during the activity period some days later. Since I endeavoured to return marked tests on the following day, I had to cobble up a series of second tests for this one student, and she discovered that this was distinctly unfair since she could not derive any assistance from friends who had written the original. However, the more generous mathematics and biology teachers allowed her to write the original tests, and she achieved satisfactory marks thereby. At the promotion meeting, I was publicly vilified by the principal for being out of line, and he unilaterally raised her mark from 35% to 50%. This elevation was good for about a month's attendance at the local community college.

The first principal's successor liked my student evaluations even less. One September, he pulled me aside to tell me that, "rightly or wrongly, probably wrongly" under his pen a mark of 35% had metamorphosed into the magical 50%. His hypothesis was probably right, for again it was worth one month's attendance at a community college for that student. He once told me that I was 'from the wrong place, the wrong time and the wrong philosophy of education.' In retrospect, I think that he was probably right again.

My fifth principal responded to the parent of a visible minority student who wanted a 68% to be raised to 80% in order to enter nursing school. My arguments with this fellow resulted in his spending three successive evenings "adjusting" my class marks until the water of 68% had been converted into

the wine of 80%. Why it took him three evenings I do not know; arithmetic was obviously not his forté. Finally, he produced the rigged — I mean adjusted — distribution with the top student at 105%!

My seventh principal decided that he could not have "half" of my physics class fail. Of the four failing students (out of a class of 24 which is some indication of his need for remedial work with fractions), he promoted three to the sought-after 50%. Since it was very likely that he would not have recognized any one of them if he had ventured out into the corridor, I wondered what he had against the "token failure." She must have offended him in some unfathomable way since she was a reasonable and quiet student, although physics was virtually *terra incognita* to her.

It seems that my own principals were not the only ones preemptorily raising marks, and so it came to pass that teachers everywhere came up with creative ways to pre-empt the process. Over the years, they have made their courses much easier to pass, reduced the course content and devised a variety of mark-rigging schemes to produce the numbers which will satisfy parents and principals.

The baleful aspect of this and other factors has been the massive erosion of standards within academic education in Ontario. Let's face it: we have been party to the dumbing down of high school education, and the results of the odd international test confirms that this is so. The absence of provincial examinations during the past 30 years has permitted the intense politicization of education in the high schools and resulted in a calamitous fall in standards. Borrowing from Jimmy Porter, the "angry young man" in *Look Back in Anger*, we have been part of a system steeped in "mendacity and pusillanimity."

*(Mr. Cropp is a high school teacher who lives in Kingston .)*