

From the President

It's Time to Renegotiate the "Bargain" With our Schools

By John Bachmann

Increasingly, "society" is taking the rap for the failures of our public schools. Reformers know that inappropriate methodologies and child-centred philosophies have also contributed to poor student achievement. Even if we use the best methods and materials, however, many otherwise capable students will perform sub-optimally because of home influences.

But what can we do about this? Actually, a lot but not using traditional public school governance.

Adding Responsibilities to Rights

Our societal pendulum has begun to swing back from an extreme emphasis on individual rights to a position that considers the community. The unbridled individualism that incubated in the fifties, flourished in the hedonistic sixties, and reached a heady maturity in the "me decade" is now under siege.

The communitarian movement, gathering steam in the U.S. is one of the more visible manifestations of this trend. Scott Peck, who first gained attention through his writing about personal growth, is now being widely quoted about his concept of team-building and "community." While many of these ideas have spiritual overtones, they also have some important practical applications for those trying to improve the institutions in our society.

As we steadily reduce government spending to levels that our great-grandchildren can afford, many social services are falling back onto the community. This is a problem because we had come to expect that Big Government would look after us.

Management guru Peter Drucker, along with others, claims that the challenges of our past industrial society demand that we go beyond the traditional private and public sectors. They call for the formation of a "social" sector that will provide services, some government-funded, but many voluntary, at the community level. At the core of the social sector, we must have "learning communities," equivalent to the "learning organizations" that first gained prominence through the writings of Peter Senge. This learning must be not just about computers and new job skills, but also about parenting, listening, and teamwork skills.

The Unholy Bargain

If developing "community" is the solution to much of what ails our society today, then our public schools as they are currently constituted are unfortunately part of the problem.

In the “feel-good” 60’s, an unholy bargain was struck between Canadian schools and parents. Educators said: “Give us your children and your unwavering trust in our ability to run the schools and we’ll give you freedom from your children to pursue whatever your hedonistic hearts desire.”

At first the bargain wasn’t too hard for either side to keep. Increasing affluence meant that funds kept pouring into the system. Teachers’ salaries increased at a much faster rate than equivalent positions in the private sector. Monies were available to try and then retreat from many ill-conceived experiments such as open-area classrooms. Students were still, for the most part, well-behaved and motivated.

Rather than working with outside agencies to develop adequate parenting skills in the community, schools assumed an increasing number of social service functions from sex education to breakfast programs. Parents, when they took a few minutes from their frantic yuppie schedules to look at what their kids were doing at school, saw that they were contented. And that was good enough.

Certainly there were dissenting voices in those decades. But PTA’s quickly formed protective circles around school staffs whenever any questions were raised about learning results and the effectiveness of teaching methodologies. Any parents raising such questions were, and lamentably in many cases still are, dismissed as “negative” and “uncooperative.” Canadian public schools began to be treated with religious deference. They came to be viewed as a precious, but fragile, resource needing protection from outside threats. This emphasis on “fragility” is still evident today in the response of educators to the prospect of even a handful of charter schools.

The parent/system love-in continued until the early 90’s when the costs of servicing debt began to have a major impact on government funding. People began to question why per-pupil costs were climbing dramatically faster than inflation rates. As Mexico and the Pacific-Rim countries began to siphon off the highly-paid unionized jobs which teachers unions had used to justify their salary levels, we all became more conscious of the need to be globally competitive.

Commentators like Lester Thurow pointed out that in the information age a nation’s competitive advantages resides in the knowledge and skills of its people. Canadians became much more aware of international comparisons of academic achievement — and they didn’t like what they saw.

On the other side of the bargain, teachers were becoming overwhelmed by the demands begin put on them. Class sizes began to grow. Teachers were con-fronted with a seeming epidemic of attention deficit-disorder and poorly-disciplined kids. Elementary school principals de-professionalized their staff by inspecting every report card to ensure that

Mrs. Smith's nose wasn't put out of joint by a truthful report that her son was a constant disruption in the class. And, to add insult to injury, teacher wages were being frozen, and in some instances cut.

Time for a Paradigm Shift

- It's time to strike a new bargain between our schools and the society that they serve.
- It's time to create true communities of responsible, involved and caring individuals.
- It's time to start thinking of schools as being part of the community rather than a group of mercenaries from the board office.

But a true community can be created only if its members have real power. In our schools, that means that parents must have more than an advisory role. School councils with a majority of parents must have the power to hire and fire principals and define the character the school. Once that is done, however, the community must treat the principal and staff as true professionals and allow them to choose the best ways to get the required results.

We must build support systems within communities to provide everything from mathematics tutoring to parent mentoring. We must build an expectation that community members will assume their responsibilities as parents and community members will not default these responsibilities to external, professional public agencies that increasingly will be able to deal only with the extremely needy.

No doubt this plan sounds Utopian and naïve. But what are the alternatives? Big Government, Big Labour and Big Education have had their spendthrift day. We must start to build bridges across the chasm separating the haves and the have-nots in our economy. The future belongs to empowered communities.

The path to that future will be difficult. It involves a paradigm shift of frightening proportions. We will have to introduce cooperation within communities in ways that complement the intricate efficiencies inherent in our market economy. Intra-community barter-based economies may facilitate the development and delivery of necessary services.

If experience in corporate boardrooms with the implementation of teamwork is any indicator, learning how to govern these new communities will have its traumatic moments. There is no doubt that at first some special interest groups will try to grab power at some schools. As the community "learns" about governance, however, this situation should be self-correcting.

Many in our society have been marginalized and rendered hostile to civilizing influences. Approaching such parents today with offers to provide effective parenting assistance would probably not be too kindly received. But with time, as the expectations are learned by communities,

individual members will succumb to the desire to belong and become more cooperative.

Our Schools are the Place to Start

This is a long journey that will span generations. We have to start by renegotiating the bargain we have with our schools.

We must, as community members, assume ownership of our schools. We must define the values and emphases of individual schools and hold teachers accountable for results. But, in turn, we must work within the community to lessen the social loads being placed on the classroom by providing education and support to the under-privileged and unmotivated in our communities.

Part of this step will be to uncouple school governance from the existing tangle of governments. Contrary to the argument from opponents that charter schools will destroy communities, it is the present system that has been destructive of “community” by encouraging individuals to “contract out” parenting. Charter schools, introduced in an orderly way to allow learning through best practices, will be an important part of healing what ails our communities and our society. They will encourage a greater degree of involvement by parents in the education and overall development of their children. And that’s what providing our children and our country with a hopeful future is all about.