

Do educators respect democracy?

By John Bachmann

Parents and others interested in the long-term health of our society want school choice for many reasons. Systematic phonics, unsemestered high school programs, respect for religious values, and strict discipline codes are just some of the things that are not readily available in our publicly-funded schools. After attending an education conference last spring, I can add another type of schooling that we need: one that respects and *teaches* democracy.

What I heard and saw at the conference caused me to reflect on developments over the last few years that I had personally witnessed in a number of schools or had learned of through the media. In the end, I had to reach the very sad conclusion that many of those running our schools are contemptuous of democracy.

In late May, the Education Improvement Commission hosted an excellent conference on shared decision-making in education. The presentation of one of the lunch speakers, John Wright, was particularly timely because his company, Angus Reid, had just released the results of an independent poll detailing how Ontarians felt about the Harris government's education initiatives. On every issue except mandatory extracurricular involvement (which was split 50-50), respondents had given the Tories a strong thumbs up.

As coffees were sipped and desserts nibbled, Mr. Wright walked his increasingly-attentive audience through a string of education poll results starting in the Frank Miller days of 1986 and ending with this latest survey. On issue after issue, from student testing to the power of teacher federations, he showed how the electorate had grown increasingly disenchanted with Ontario schools.

He remarked that the electorate had given the Conservative government free rein on education issues because those within our school systems and in previous Queen's Park administrations had not taken those long-standing concerns seriously. He concluded, without endorsing the way that reforms were currently being pursued, that an aggressive education reform agenda was inevitable regardless of which government was in power.

By the end of his presentation to an audience that filled the room to the fire code limit, you could have heard a pin drop on the carpet. Eager to see what impact these sobering observations would have on conference attendees, I tactfully eavesdropped as I circulated between sessions and paid close attention to what was being said in the sessions themselves.

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By evening, the shock of the lunch presentation had worn off, and educators had begun to lament how unfortunate it was that the Tories were pandering to poll results. Rejected out of hand was the notion that the public's call for accountability, a call that had swollen to a scream by the time Mike Harris was first sworn in, should be listened to, let alone respected.

I left the conference with the distinct impression that educators feel they are not answerable to anyone but themselves. This observation echoed one of the most ubiquitous and scary Bill 160 placards, the one that read "Leave Education to the Educators!"

During the Bill 160 debate, I had a chance to talk to a number of high school students. Their teachers and administrators had led them to believe that the Harris agenda had been foisted on an unsuspecting public but that the public was now realizing their great mistake and would summarily boot out the Conservatives at the next available opportunity.

When I told these students that I thought Harris would win the 1998 election, they were incredulous. Even though some of them came from families that I strongly suspected would be voting for the Tories, the idea that a plurality of Ontario voters would disagree with educators was just too weird for these students to contemplate.

Mike, of course, did win. Did the teachers and their federations then say "the people have spoken" and go on to look at the issues underpinning Tory support? Did they encourage students to join them in this reflective exercise as a way of teaching respect for democracy? Not on your life!

The results from the last polling station were barely in before the excuses started. Harris won by pandering to the anti-Toronto prejudices of the 905 belt. He bought voters with promises of more tax cuts. And so on.

Right away, educators started dreaming up creative ways to avoid complying with Bill 160 and the other education reform bills that followed.

What does this teach students? That democracy is something to be respected selectively? That the electorate is not to be trusted on important matters like education?

There is no denying that rednecks are a part of the Tory constituency, a suspicion supported by polling data that show Harris' approval ratings dropping as the education level of voters goes up. But on education issues, there is good reason for the less affluent to be more disenchanted with Ontario schools. Without access to resources and encouragement at home to supplement what schools offer, the children of the less-educated suffer more from the shortcomings of our schools.

“I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”

Thomas Jefferson

Rednecks or not, there are long-standing education issues that Ontarians want to see addressed. If the federations and their members respected the democratic voice of the electorate, they would proactively move on a number of these issues and win the public over to a more moderate approach.

Instead, by taking a knee-jerk negative stance on everything from curriculum reform to teacher testing, they have encouraged the Tories to use confrontation with educators as a fail-safe way of boosting their ratings in the polls.

Some of the latest government initiatives, such as the re-certification requirement of the new teacher testing program, are very heavy-handed, and teachers (including many OQE members) are justifiably angry about them. But the public is applauding the program because the federations have done such an abysmal job of looking after teacher incompetence themselves.

Teachers, principals, school boards and ministries of education are not above the rule of democratic law. It's time they all started to listen to the electorate and use the education debates as an opportunity to teach students that democracy doesn't give everybody what he wants.

Democracy is a system of checks and balances, frustrations and victories, trade-offs between individual desires and the collective good. Most of all, it's the best system for making politicians and public institutions accountable to their constituents. We know it's not perfect but, as Winston Churchill wisely noted, it's better than any of the alternatives.

Any politician knows that disrespecting his or her constituency is the quickest way to lose the right to govern. Unfortunately, such is not the case in our publicly-funded schools. In the absence of school choice, educators continue to be able to dismiss the democratic voice of parents and other taxpayers without fear of losing their power.

Until parents have the ability to choose schools for their children that respect democracy through both their words and actions, our schools will remain an undemocratic embarrassment.

In the meantime, we urge the many teachers and administrators who are not afraid of sharing power with parents to challenge their federations and boards to listen to the voices of concern speaking to them from that most democratic of institutions, the ballot box.