

The Secretary's Secrets

A school secretary spills the beans — on the condition that she remain anonymous.

There is something wrong when 12-year-old students who help in the school office cannot write a comprehensible simple message received over the telephone. Poor writing, spelling and grammar are commonplace and, because they lack phonics, the students have no idea how to spell names or other words unknown to them.

I observe some work coming out of classrooms at all grade levels that is very poor: a lot of “creative” writing is gibberish and incomprehensible to the casual reader. What is frightening is that this kind of work is marked “very good” or “good effort” or “excellent work”, and very few corrections are made by the teacher.

Treated as though they are at university, the children are given choices among activities, although they are patently too young to choose, and the result is confusion. Child-centred learning seems to have formed children unable to concentrate on a task for more than five minutes, sit still for any length of time or receive and follow simple directions. The notion of hard work is alien to most, and everything must be “fun” or “exciting.” The result is bored children who lack challenge and are led to misbehave.

At report card time, I see reports that bear no relation to the child in question. I can see what the teachers are trying to do by giving every child high self-esteem but, in the long run, we do children a real disservice if we shelter them from the realities of life. This generation of students will be really surprised when they go into the outside world and find that they have been denied the fundamental tools to earn a living: good literacy and numeracy skills.

What is almost more worrying is the fact that there are young teachers coming into the schools who have come through the same system and whose

own basic skills leave much to be desired. The spelling and grammar errors of some of the teachers are deplorable, not to mention their lack of general knowledge.

The teachers complain of the difficulties nowadays of teaching undisciplined children. Of course, parents are firstly to blame, but to a large extent school boards are culpable as well, since real discipline has been discarded. The only disciplinary methods now employed are so ineffective as to be worthless — and even young children know it. What is a young child to make of a vice-principal who kneels in front of him (while the child sits comfortably in a chair) to discipline him by “talking it through?” Children have been known to enter my principal’s office for disciplining and leave with a candy!

I continually question the number of off-campus trips: along with play days, they combine to make June a virtually worthless teaching month. Do the grade sixes really need to be taken to Canada’s Wonderland?

A review of the over-use of supply teachers is long overdue. Perhaps they could be paid by the hour, to avoid paying them for the many hours they spend sitting in the staff room while their class is with the music teacher or during their teacher’s planning time. There are many instances where supply teachers are brought in to fill in for specialty teachers, such as music or core French teachers, yet do not have that particular capability. They are thus high-priced baby-sitters.

In fact, there is a great deal of irresponsibility on the part of school administrators when calling in supply teachers. P.D. days, principals’ and vice-principals’ “retreats”, teachers’ conferences in Vancouver, New Orleans, Texas, etc., all need to be reviewed. I recall one occasion when

eight of our teachers went away together for two days. No wonder the school board’s salary bill is so high!

Contributing to the high cost of education is the large number of “experts” (consultants) who converge on one child’s so-called problems in order to decide what would be best for the child. There are so many of these review committees, usually consisting of up to six or seven highly-paid people, that I question how many “normal” children we have in the school.

There are a few “old-fashioned” teachers in the school but, sadly, two of them teach behind closed doors when they can, because the principal doesn’t approve of their structured approach. It is noticeable that these teachers have next-to-no disciplinary problems

The waste of money on special education (such as trips to a local plaza by school bus for six children, accompanied by a teacher and two assistants), the cost of general transportation, the cost of food provided at meetings at the board’s headquarters, the incessant monetary demands of the teachers’ unions and the fact that the whole system appears to be run more for the staff than for the students need to concern us very much.

It is sad to write in this vein. What a pity that the most expensive educational system in Canada, perhaps in the world, cannot produce students who can read and write satisfactorily, surely a fundamental requirement in our advanced civilization. Although too late for a whole generation, let us hope that something can be done for the next generation.

(The author is a school secretary somewhere in Ontario. To communicate with her, please contact OQE, and we will pass it along.)