

# The Silver Lining

*This parent is overjoyed that his kids' public school was so awful.*

By Jon Kieran

This is a story of eventual triumph. A parable of faith, luck and reward. This tale recollects how children who were failed by the public education system grew to become better off – but only when the system's failure became too much to bear. It's a reminder to desperate and tired parents that the darkest clouds can still hide the most perfect of silver linings. There is reason to hope! Read on.

Our situation was not unique at the time. I acted as chair of a school council in 2000-2001 at a JK-8 public school in south-west Scarborough. These were the darkest days of Mike Harris's fight with Ontario educators – and their fight back. Viewed with the wisdom of today, villains occupied both sides to be sure but, at the time, we knew only that our children were caught in the middle.

In my case, circumstances were made more challenging by the peculiar conduct of the principal. He had a reckless knack for putting his tantrums in writing: issuing threats of transfer from the school; reminding parents that their involvement was only a "hobby"; confiding that he was "getting medical treatment for anxiety". I had never dealt with such a troubled personality in all my life.

It quickly made me a target, since I was the voice of a parent group who were concerned about a host of issues but reluctant to raise questions directly. This strained dynamic took an evil twist on a cold day in February. We received a letter from the principal indicating that our children were ineligible to attend the school in September, having moved outside the school boundary.

I was flabbergasted. We had indeed moved – closer to the school – two years earlier, but our children had been enrolled there for five years! The school was listed at less than 75% of capacity! We couldn't seem to find other out-of-area families who received this letter!

My complaints were swift – directed to the superintendent whose indifference had empowered this principal, to the school trustees whose anti-government rhetoric had nurtured it, and to the Minister's office, which pounced on the political issue but lost sight of the impact this tactic had on two precious children.

Four days' later, a second letter from the principal invited our kids to remain until graduation – and took credit for enabling them to stay.

Our disgust turned to shock. No longer could we ignore the mediocrity of our children's education, the annual job actions, the constant bickering and complete lack of accountability.

It wasn't that the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) was broke and needed to be fixed – in fact, the entire paradigm of public education was bankrupt and begged to be reformed from top to bottom.

But we had a more urgent problem: find a worthy place of learning for our kids in September. We needed a miracle. Enter Voice Intermediate School (VIS).

[www.voiceintermediate.com](http://www.voiceintermediate.com)

VIS had begun in 2000, when a TDSB teacher in the Beaches convinced 15 families in her grade 6 class to leave their children with her for another year – in an independent grade 7 program that she developed over the summer. That first year took place in the back of a church.

By the second year, a grade 8 curriculum – and 15 more grade 7 students – were added. As demand outstripped space, a building was purchased. Still demand grew, so the building was expanded. In the past four years, more grades, teachers, programs, and activities have been added.

Today, VIS has more than 40 children enrolled in grades 6-8. It's a challenging and academic learning environment based on the philosophy of global education.

Students are expected to think critically, and constantly invited to do so. They learn about the world's diversity and the need for charity in their community. They practise forgotten skills – like persuasive writing, time management, and teamwork.

The principal is accountable and passionate about education. The teachers are innovative and committed to excellence. It's the proverbial Little Red School House of your dreams – but made relevant to meet student expectations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century!

With the graduation of my youngest this spring, we'll be completing four consecutive years at VIS. Our kids entered as public school refugees; they leave as extraordinary learners – bolder, better prepared, more worldly, empathetic and scholarly.

I could never have believed such a difficult hour in my life would lead to such a shining result. We made sacrifices to purchase this independent option, and feel nothing but gratitude for at least having the choice. My only regret is to observe the many families around us who experience similar anguish in a monolithic public education system – without the resources to exercise a practical alternative.

The lesson here is simple. Parent choice in education is an idea whose time has come. In Ontario, there is no more powerful idea.

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