

# DO EDUCATION REFORMERS WANT TOO MUCH?

by John Bachmann

---

Our schools, like all institutions in our modern society, are very complicated organisms. But if we want to affect their future course materially, we must be careful not to let our efforts become too diffuse. Instead we must focus tenaciously on a few key issues that, because of their criticality, have the potential to eventually bring about many of the changes that we want.

What are some of the issues that OQE might consider to be "key" to any reforms? I would like to suggest that focusing on just three would provide OQE with the best return for our efforts: 1) the unacceptable financial costs of the present centralized structure of public education; 2) the need to make teaching a true profession, including significant reforms to teacher training; and 3) the use of charter schools as a low-risk route to reform.

## **FOCUS ON FUNDING**

While the eyes of school trustees and ministers of education glaze over rapidly at the mention of phonics, sequential curriculum, and standardized testing, mention finances and you'll have their undivided attention. That's because all agree that there is a funding crisis in our schools. Simply put, we can no longer raise enough in taxes to keep operating our public school systems as they are currently structured. The fact that there isn't similar agreement on what to do about this funding shortfall is beside the point. Funding is also a key issue because it involves a much wider political constituency — all taxpayers — than just those involved in instructional issues.

Understood and properly integrated into OQE's reform message, funding issues can provide the key to dealing with the performance crisis that is the primary concern of most of our members. Why?

Because most rational cost-cutting must take place in the upper and middle levels of our ministries of education and boards of education, which traditionally have been the positions most resistant to change. Reformers must hammer at the need to cut at these levels rather than by axing teachers.

## **WE'RE NOT TEACHER BASHERS**

Not all the resistance to change, however, resides in ministry and board offices. In response to unrelenting, and sometimes unfair, criticism of our schools, teachers and their unions have circled their wagons and dismissed the swirl of outside critics as "teacher bashers". OQE must

show teachers that quite the opposite is true: what we are calling for is the reprofessionalization of teaching.

We must state with the repetitiveness of a mantra that we do not question the competence and commitment of classroom teachers. The proportion of incompetents in teaching is no higher than in any other occupation. But we should question a system that does not allow teachers to use their talents and skills to the fullest, a system that doesn't give them the professional discretion to choose instructional methodologies and materials to produce the best results, a system in which many elementary schools are still feudal patriarchies that are deplorably poor role models for all children, but especially girls.

Any focus on the teaching profession must also include teacher training. Change will be glacially slow if faculties of education do not welcome candidates with educational philosophies differing from the prevailing child-centred orthodoxy. This is a particularly difficult area, impacting as it does on "academic freedom". Still, it must become part of the debate.

### **REFORM, ONE CHARTER SCHOOL AT A TIME**

OQE needs to admit that expecting an entire school board, let alone a whole provincial education system, to change radically is unrealistic. The dilemma confronting reformers is to introduce creative chaos and local accountability in a relatively orderly way so as to minimize risk. Charter schools provide a low-risk, low-cost route to introducing meaningful differentiation to the system and facilitating the evaluation of various approaches.

Once the effectiveness of particular methods has been demonstrated at these schools, they will spread to others. The net effect will be faster and more extensive reform than if we concentrate on system-wide changes at the start.

### **REMEMBER YOUR AUDIENCE'S PRECONCEPTIONS**

OQE and its members must communicate about these three key issues of funding, teacher reprofessionalization and charter schools with sophistication and political savvy. Firstly, we must understand that our target audiences have often already pigeon-holed us before the first words leave our mouths as back-to-basics teacher-bashers. They believe that we are hopelessly out of touch, trying to impose "Leave it to Beaver" values on a "Boyz n the Hood" reality.

We have to pre-empt these reactions by tailoring our messages to the realities of sound-bite journalism. We have to stop harking back to the traditional 3R's. Instead we must focus on the "new basics" such as problem-solving, research skills, computer literacy and decision-making, always noting, however, that literacy and numeracy skills are prerequisites to the acquisition and mastery of these "new basics". By tying reading

proficiency to problem-solving we will be seen as crying "forward" to the new basics rather than "back" to the old ones.

### **LET'S KIDNAP THE "WHOLE CHILD"**

We must always refer to the needs of the "whole child". This phrasing has been co-opted by the defenders of the educational status quo to imply that those asking for more academic rigour in our schools are trying to make robots of our children. We should be pointing out that balance is required, that being able to cope intellectually in this world to the extent of one's abilities is an important prerequisite to being able to cope emotionally. And we do care about our children's ultimate happiness — just as much as those in the school system!

We must admit to ourselves that it is a very different world that today's schools are operating in. It is a world where eroticism and violence, which in past generations were restricted to adulthood, now saturate the advertising and "entertainment" that four-year-olds are exposed to. It is a world in which school boards cower before rampant individual rights and force teachers to integrate high needs children into regular classrooms at the expense of the other students in the class. It is a world in which teachers routinely brush shoulders in high school halls with armed, drug-dependent students.

Let's get real and admit that things are very different in our schools. Let's admit that a deplorably large number of parents have succumbed to the siren songs of ego and shirked their responsibilities to nurture and guide their children. Let's admit that, as the support systems of the past such as churches and extended families have lost their ability to influence and guide, our schools have had to step in to fill the need. Let's not deny these things, because they are true. But let's also use them to bolster our case for introducing profound change in our schools.

### **AVOID THE VALUES EDUCATION MINEFIELD**

Education reformers should come across as those most in tune with an increasingly demanding future and the preparation of our children for it. Instead we have often allowed ourselves to be portrayed as a sect of "back-to-basics" Puritans. We should refrain from linking our reform efforts to positions about moral, personal issues such as values and sex education. Reformers can, and do, disagree passionately among themselves about the appropriateness of these programs in our schools, and still agree on most other issues. The important thing is that we have choice in our schools to accommodate these differences.

### **WHAT'S GOOD FOR OUR SCHOOLS IS GOOD FOR OUR SOCIETY**

We can't wish or chant away the shortcomings of our society. But the same things that we are promoting for our schools, especially the effective use of increasingly limited tax dollars and the need for account-

ability from all stakeholders, including parents, will be required to redirect our society to a more caring, hopeful and pragmatic future.

As education reformers, let's continue to fight the good fight. But let's do it by focusing on a few "alarm button" issues, all the while sounding modern and caring, not because it's politically expedient to do so, but because we are.