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And lots more – Publications of Interest, What's New?, SQE Activities, and Letters to the Editor

From the Outgoing President **If I Knew Then...**

By Nancy Wagner

On November 19 at OQE's annual general meeting, OQE members voted to let the organization's operations lapse. For more information, please turn to page 7 or give me a call at 519-745-6037.

I have had the honour of serving as OQE president for four years, and now the time has come for me to step down. I will continue to work for education reform as secretary-treasurer of the Society for Quality Education. This change comes just in time for me to take on another, equally-important responsibility.

Like many members I was first drawn to OQE when my son was having difficulty at school. When he could still barely read a word by mid-grade 3, I started looking for help outside the system. Eighteen months (and many dollars later), he was finally starting to catch up to his peers.

Unfortunately, James, now 23, still does not read for pleasure. This is a loss that angers me even now. Had proper steps been taken early enough, reading would not continue to be a chore for him today.

In Ontario, roughly one in three students has difficulty learning to read. This is virtually unchanged from when my first child entered school some 20 years ago. Virtually unchanged is the philosophy that underlies (some might say undermines) today's methods for teaching reading — guessing, using pictures for cueing, perhaps a little sounding-out as a last resort.

When James was in school, my inclination, at least initially, was to trust the public education system. Today, thanks to my long involvement with OQE, I know better. I have learned that I cannot compel our system of public education to employ best practices when it comes to any subject or any child.

That being the case, I refuse to leave the education of those I love to chance. My family members will not be falling through the cracks. OQE has taught me to be proactive, and for that lesson alone I will be forever grateful.

With his parents' permission, I am embarking on a new venture. I plan to teach my almost-three-year-old grandson to read this winter. Even though I have no experience as a teacher, Malkin assures me I can do it and has loaned me the book that is to be my guide. This winter, my new project will be to teach Aidan to read. I'll keep you posted.

A Long and Winding Road

By Malkin Dare

I first become interested in education reform back in 1988 when my son's school failed to teach him how to read. I believed then, and I still believe today, that the biggest potential payoff — the single most needed educational improvement — is to induce the educational establishment to adopt better teaching methods.

This objective, however, has proved to be deceptively simple. I have learned that you don't seem to be able to get there from here!

I began my quest, in my naïve way, by telling my son's teachers about superior teaching methods, proven methods that had been validated by empirical research. Imagine my surprise when I learned that the teachers simply were not interested!

I then turned to the local school board, and again I got the cold shoulder. In fact, I was astonished to find that they didn't seem to care about student learning at all.

I guess I was a slow learner, because the process took several years. In the end, I was forced to conclude that the solution to inferior teaching methods was not to be found locally. The solution (if there was one) had to lie at the level of the province.

Around this time, I was fortunate to encounter a number of like-minded parents and teachers from other parts of Ontario. These individuals had had similar experiences, and they had all come to the same conclusion.

Together, we formed the Organization for Quality Education (OQE), and we began to lobby Ontario members of parliament for measures designed to force the education establishment to improve.

At that time, in the early 90's, Ontario did not participate in international testing, and there was no provincial testing, no provincial curriculum, no standardized report cards, and no mandated school councils. We thought that the introduction of these measures would nudge educators towards better teaching methods.

Due perhaps in part to our efforts, all of these measures, and others besides, had been introduced by the provincial government by the end of the century.

However, even when subsequent international, inter-provincial, and provincial testing showed that Ontario students weren't learning enough, the education establishment clung to its old, long-discredited methods. And, of course, student achievement in Ontario improved but little, as the article on page 6 demonstrates.

Naturally, education leaders have all kinds of excuses to explain the low test scores — not enough money, bad parents, special-needs students, and so forth. None of these excuses stands up to scrutiny, as the article on pages 16-18 shows.

There is no reason to believe that kids in Alberta or BC or Quebec are smarter than Ontario kids. Yet those students routinely outscore Ontario students on comparisons of student achievement, and by a large margin.

There are significant differences between the Ontario education system, and the education systems in Alberta, BC, and Quebec. Most notably, those three provinces have a much greater degree of school choice. As well, all three systems boast exit exams from high school.

The Society for Quality Education would like to learn more about relatively successful education jurisdictions like Alberta — as well as the countries that do well on international comparisons of student achievement. We are particularly interested in the impact of school choice.

To date, the Society has produced and distributed a free DVD on charter schools in Alberta; sponsored an examination of the provincial science curricula; and published a free remedial reading program. All of these materials can be ordered for free at www.societyforqualityeducation.org or by telephoning 888-856-5535 (416-231-7247).

The Society also co-sponsored a visit from Dr. James Tooley who was here for the Canadian première of the BBC film, *School's Out*. This film tells the amazing story of hundreds of low-budget and unregistered independent schools in Nigeria's slums (more on page 7).

The Society is currently running a remedial reading project in an Ontario public school and a survey of the characteristics of Ontario families who send their children to independent schools. Projects in the planning stages include a visit from the recently-retired head of Edmonton Public Schools and a survey to find out how many parents pay for tutoring.

To the parents of struggling public school students, the Society's areas of interest may seem far removed from their children's here-and-now need for better instruction. As much as we are in favour of improved teaching methods, however, we have learned that there is no point focusing on this area. Voluminous research on teaching methods overwhelmingly discredits the "child-centred" methods that dominate Ontario public schools. Yet, apparently, no one cares.

The experience in other jurisdictions strongly suggests that the best way to induce educators to improve their performance is to introduce more competition. At present, publicly-funded educators have little incentive to improve.

For one thing, school performance is shrouded in mystery and, for another, schools are guaranteed to receive the same funding no matter what. If schools no longer had a guaranteed source of income (because parents could tell which schools are doing a good job and had the option of escaping to a better school), then educators might consider switching to better methods.

We appreciate the long-haul support from OQE supporters, and we look forward to your continuing support as we press ahead with SQE.

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*Views on different aspects of
education are many and
varied. This publication
contains opinions and theories
from a variety of sources.
The SQE executive does not
necessarily subscribe to or
advocate all or any of such
opinions or theories, and
readers are invited to form
their own conclusions.*

Publications of Interest

Cheating Our Kids: How Politics and Greed Ruin Education.

Joe Williams. Palgrave Macmillan. 2005. 264 pages. \$33.95.

The title says it all. The author, the education reporter for *The New York Daily News*, shows how special interests, particularly the unions, control public schools. None of it will come as news to anyone who has been paying attention, but some may enjoy reading about, for example, the 17-year-old New York student who was refused her diploma because school officials objected to her valedictory speech, or the 1990 Minnesota Teacher of the Year who was let go because of her low seniority, or the Florida parent who was threatened with legal action when she complained that her disabled daughter's teacher had walloped her on the head. Mr. Williams' proposed solution is a new brand of hardball politics that demands competence from school leaders and shifts the power away from bureaucrats and union leaders to the people who have the greatest reason to put kids first — concerned parents.

Crash Course: Imagining a Better Future for Public Education.

Chris Whittle. Riverhead Books. 2005. 270 pages. \$35.00.

The author is the inspiration behind and founder of Edison Schools, the largest for-profit provider of public schools in the US. It manages 157 public schools, mainly charter schools, with a total enrollment of 70,000, and is a \$400+ million entity. Mr. Whittle is a strong supporter of school choice and accountability; however, he regards them as "only two legs of a legislative stool that desperately needs a third", since "a choice with no place to go is meaningless". Pointing out that "only two institutions in our society remain largely unchanged from the Middle Ages: our schools and our churches", he predicts big changes in the near future. The book is packed with suggested innovations and Mr. Whittle's vision of how the schools of the future should and will be different. Its chapters contain dozens of revolutionary ideas, such as: how to more than double teacher pay without raising taxes; how to prepare a new generation of school principals; and how students in the future will spend far less time in traditional classrooms and much more in settings similar to today's work environments. Mr. Whittle's predictions are hard to swallow, but then who would have believed him 15 years ago when he started talking about Edison schools?

Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe About our Schools — And Why It Isn't So.

Jay P. Greene. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2005. 267 pages. \$34.95.

In this book, Dr. Greene examines 18 widely-held beliefs about education and finds they just aren't true. As long as the public in general, and policy-makers in particular, continue to support education reforms that are based on incorrect beliefs, student learning is unlikely to improve. As Dr. Greene points out: "one of the major harms inflicted by education myths is that they block the adoption of promising reform policies."

An article adapted from this book appears on pages 15-17.

The Pampered Child Syndrome: How to Recognize It, How to Manage It, and How to Avoid It. Maggie Mamen. Creative Bound. 2004. 157 pages. \$24.95.

The author, a clinical psychologist, is writing about overly-indulged children. She postulates that many pampered children develop into children who "are not learning active or creative problem-solving strategies, or how to be resilient and responsible, or how to build up a range of internal resources to manage stress, loss, failure or disappointment." Her hypothesis seems reasonable for the most part; however, in our opinion, she stumbles badly in writing about children with learning problems and/or hyperactivity. Dr. Mamen chooses to ignore the possibility that some children's refusal to complete their schoolwork or settle down in school may indeed be because, as the children themselves often explain, it is too hard for them. The author makes the seemingly-reasonable assumption that most children are receiving exemplary instruction and that any school problems are the fault of the students or the parents, not the teachers. Chapter 14, "Sparing the Rod Without Spoiling the Child: 10 Strategies that Work" is excellent.

A Deceptively-Simple Question

The recent teachers' strike in BC was about control over public education.

By Katherine Wagner

On November 19th, school boards across British Columbia were elected – one month after an illegal teacher job action closed down all public schools for ten days. In Maple Ridge, BC, the local teachers' association posed this question to candidates: *"In your view, what caused our schools to be closed for two weeks in October?"*

Although the responses were not made public, it seems likely that many of them reflected the carefully-constructed message the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) repeated continuously to the public (paraphrased): *This government created a crisis, forcing teachers to an act of civil disobedience to restore learning conditions for students, particularly those with special needs.*

Public education in BC is the responsibility of the provincial government and its 60 school boards. A single teachers' union represents all 38,000 public school teachers and wields considerable power politically and through collective bargaining.

The "cause" of October's job action began in 1988 when BC public school teachers were asked to choose between forming a professional association and becoming a trade union. They called then-premier Bill Vander Zalm's bluff and voted for "unionism" over "association". The BCTF is currently a member of the BC Federation of Labour.

The BC school boards were quickly overwhelmed by the superior organization and strategies of the provincially-led local teacher unions. For example, teacher wage increases were substantial (21% between 1990 and 1992), as weaker school boards were targeted for precedent-setting collective agreements.

The NDP provincial government of the time responded by taking local taxation power from school boards and forming a provincial teacher bargaining agent for school boards – the British Columbia Public School Employers' Association (BCPSEA).

The BCTF opted to adopt a "no concessions" stance and, since 1994, there has never been a provincially-negotiated teacher's contract.

In 2002, the newly-elected Liberal government enacted legislation that significantly impacted the ability of the BCTF to influence and control conditions in schools. Class size and composition clauses in all teacher contracts were removed and placed into the public policy arena.

The government also passed legislation declaring education an "essential service", effectively placing limits around the use of strike action as a negotiating tool.

The same year, the BCPSEA and the BCTF once again failed to negotiate a contract. The government legislated a three-year contract including a 7.5% salary increase. Don Wright was appointed to review an obviously-failed teacher bargaining structure.

That contract expired in 2004, but the parties were still miles apart in September 2005. It was *déjà vu* again at the bargaining table. The BCTF began unfurling a job action strategy, and the government ordered a fact-finder's report which concluded there was *"no prospect for a voluntary resolution at the bargaining table in these negotiations"*.

The government acted quickly, bringing down legislation to extend the current teacher contract for two years with no salary increase but timed to coincide with the expiry of the existing three year "no increase" public sector wage mandate.

The government also announced the formation of a provincial "Learning Roundtable" to look at contentious issues such as class size. Well-respected negotiator Vince Ready was appointed to recommend a new teacher bargaining system.

Teachers reacted almost immediately to Bill 12 by walking off the job in an illegal action. The courts ruled them in contempt.

The teachers' union was adamant: learning conditions are the same as working conditions and no limits should be placed on the scope of teacher bargaining. Alarming stories involving specific incidents of excessive class size and under-supported special-needs students' generated considerable public support for teachers.

It was found that few districts had a handle on classroom-specific information, though the BCPSEA contended that the average class size had increased by only .06 students since 2001.

The illegal strike ended after two weeks and a day when Vince Ready came up with recommendations which the government and the teachers accepted unconditionally.

Within days of the end of the illegal strike, campaigns for school board elections began. As always, teacher organizations were active participants in local elections, supporting candidates sympathetic to union objectives.

"In your view, what caused our schools to be closed for two weeks in October?" is a loaded question indeed, and one that was likely answered in a sentence or two by most respondents. Hopefully, this brief outline of the events leading up to the illegal strike makes it clear that this is not a question that can be answered in 50 words or less.

This most recent job action was only the latest clash in a power struggle stretching back many years in BC. At its root is a deceptively-simpler question than the one asked of Maple Ridge candidates. The fundamental question requiring a considered answer is: *"Who should control public education in British Columbia?"*

(Katherine Wagner is a three-term school trustee in Maple Ridge, BC. She did not run again for the office in the Nov. 19th election. Katherine can be contacted at citizen@shaw.ca or through her web-site at www.publiceducationcanada.ca.)

Demerit Pay

Lock-step salaries make the profession less attractive to the best teachers.

By Nicole Gelinas

Student test scores rose in New York City this year — and in some classrooms and schools, kids made truly-significant gains.

Consider Region Five, a poor district of eastern Brooklyn and Queens. As Julia Levy reported in the *New York Sun*, the district was an “educational wasteland for decades”, with two-thirds of students failing at everything.

But this year, the district’s elementary- and middle-school students pulled off testing gains of 17 percentage points in English and 10 percentage points in math, outpacing the city’s average gains in both areas.

It’s no mystery why Region Five’s scores are going up: a gifted, determined manager who motivated teachers to succeed. The district’s leader, Kathleen Cashin, established clear expectations for principals and teachers, and pushed the schools in the district to meet them. Principal Myron Rock enthuses that his teachers worked evenings, Saturdays, and vacations to push students.

The teachers must be glowing with pride from the praise they’ve garnered. But they won’t see more money for the feat — unless every New York public school teacher also sees it.

In mid-June, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) released its latest pay demands, and rewarding the best teachers is no part of them. Instead, the union wants a 19% pay hike across the board, raising top salaries to nearly \$100,000 within three years.

But without the introduction of merit-based pay, the new money won’t do much to build upon this year’s rising scores, as a recent study conducted by Harvard economics professor Caroline Hoxby and Andrew Leigh of the National Bureau of Economic Research makes clear.

http://post.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/hoxby/papers/hoxbyleigh_pulledaway.pdf

In most professions, the best workers usually get the top pay — a situation that once held in teaching, before the unions arrived on the scene and began to mandate lock-step salaries.

Hoxby and Leigh found that smart women teachers (the study looked only at females), frustrated by the absence of reward for ability in the public schools, have looked elsewhere for more rewarding career paths, as you’d expect.

Forty years ago, as unions were just gaining control in public schools, Hoxby and Leigh report, 16% of American female teachers were of low aptitude in relation to other college grades (determined by mean SAT scores at their respective universities). By 2000, 36% of women teachers were of low aptitude.

In 1963, 5% of women teachers came from the highest-aptitude group; by 2000, that figure had plummeted to 1%. The main reason for this startling decline in teacher quality, Hoxby and Leigh conclude, is the elimination of financial rewards for talent.

Back in 1963, the smartest teachers earned more than average teachers, while the lowest-aptitude teachers earned less; by 2000, all teachers earned about the same for the same level of experience, regardless of talent.

If New York wants to attract and keep the best teachers, then the solution isn’t to increase teacher pay across the board. That might draw more people to teaching, but not necessarily smarter or harder-working people.

Those in charge should instead seek to structure financial incentives to reward teachers like those who did so well in Region Five. The chancellor already backs school-based merit pay for teachers — that is, if a school improves, he wants every teacher there to receive a financial reward.

But for merit pay to work best, Hoxby explains, it should offer bonuses or raises based on individual teacher performance. Otherwise, she asks: “What happens if you’re a great teacher in a school with problems?” Answer: the best teachers will just leave bad schools for good ones, perpetuating a race to the bottom in the worst schools.

If he could get the teachers to cooperate, the chancellor might take his proposal at least a step further, and award schools bonus pools that would vary from year to year based on each school’s individual performance.

The principals could then distribute the bonuses among teachers at the schools, based on test-score improvements in individual classrooms, as well as on more qualitative evaluations of individual teachers.

Teachers would have an incentive to work together in a school to get the whole school to do well but would also be encouraged to excel in their own classrooms.

But the UFT remains hostile to any merit pay for individual teachers. Striking a Marxoid note a while back, their leader declared that merit-pay plans “pit teachers against each other instead of encouraging a collaborative school culture”.

What the UFT doesn’t see is that competition is healthy: in a merit-pay system, for instance, a teacher who could be effective but who has lost any incentive to improve under the existing system might see her colleague down the hall try, succeed, and get rewarded — and want to emulate that colleague.

Until the union budges, though, virtue will have to be its own reward for New York’s teachers.

(Reprinted with permission from “Cheating Great Teachers” in City Journal, Summer 2005, a publication of the Manhattan Institute)

2004-2005 Grade 3, 6 & 9 EQAO Tests

School Board	Grade 3 & 6		Grade 9	
	Passed	Change	Passed	Rank
Huron-Perth CDSB	74.17%	+6.67	58.3%	19
York Region CDSB	71.17%	+2.84	63.77%	6
Halton CDSB	70%	+3.50	64.33%	4
York Region DSB	69.67%	+3.00	61.59%	11
Ham/Went CDSB	65.5%	+6.00	59.34%	15
Niagara CDSB	65.33%	+4.66	47.64%	49
London CDSB	65%	+1.17	64.18%	5
Halton DSB	64.5%	+4.50	64.73%	3
Ottawa/Carl CDSB	64.5%	+5.83	55.77%	25
Wellington CDSB	64.5%	+3.00	71.43%	2
St. Clair CSB	64.17%	+4.84	53.10%	36
Windsor-Essex CDSB	64%	+2.33	54.78%	29
Waterloo CDSB	63.17%	+1.84	61.77%	10
Dufferin-Peel CDSB	62.83%	+5.16	58.92%	18
Rainy River DSB	62.83%	+5.83	47.95%	48
Durham CDSB	62%	+4.50	41.40%	55
Thunder Bay CDSB	62%	-2.00	54.54%	31
Upper Grand DSB	62%	+0.67	61.25%	12
Peel DSB	61.83%	+1.50	54.45%	32
Avon Maitland DSB	61.5%	+4.50	63.17%	7
Province	61.17%	+3.67	54.49%	
Durham DSB	60.67%	+5.34	51.07%	42
Renfrew CDSB	60.67%	-0.16	61.24%	13
Niagara DSB	60.5%	+3.67	49.07%	45
Toronto DSB	60.5%	+2.17	49.13%	44
Upper Canada DSB	60.5%	+7.67	51.23%	41
Bruce-Grey CDSB	60.33%	+8.50	56.56%	24
Bluewater DSB	59.67%	+4.50	53.6%	34
Ottawa-Carl DSB	59.67%	+7.17	62.73%	8
Simcoe/Musk CDSB	59.67%	+6.84	43.56%	52
Brant/Hald/Nor CDSB	59.17%	+6.17	59.27%	16
Lamb/Kent DSB	59.17%	+2.84	48.26%	47
Pet/Vic/Nor/Cla CDSB	59.17%	+2.67	54.71%	30
Kenora CDSB	59%	-0.67	76.1%	1
Toronto CDSB	58.83%	+0.50	46.85%	51
Algoma DSB	58.67%	+9.67	37.64%	57
Waterloo Region DSB	58.67%	+2.00	62.62%	9
CDSB of East/Ont	58.5%	+4.17	57.16%	21
Kawartha/PineR DSB	58.33%	+3.66	54.16%	33
Trillium/Lake DSB	58.33%	+5.34	56.86%	23
Northwest CDSB	57.67%	-0.66	NA	NA
Algonquin/Lake CDSB	57.33%	+5.50	51.79%	37
Limestone DSB	57.33%	+3.50	51.56%	39
Sudbury CDSB	57%	+0.67	60.38%	14
Lakehead DSB	56.83%	+3.66	43.47%	53
Thames Valley DSB	56.67%	+1.67	56.87%	22
Renfrew County DSB	56.33%	+1.83	59.13%	17
Greater Essex DSB	56.17%	-0.83	55.58%	26
Ham/Went DSB	55.67%	+5.17	51.78%	38
Superior North CDSB	55.5%	+1.17	NA	NA
Simcoe County DSB	54.83%	+5.16	43.12%	54
Keewatin/Pat DSB	54.5%	+3.17	47.28%	50
Northeastern CDSB	54.5%	+6.33	33.72%	58
Huron-Superior CDSB	54.17%	+6.17	55%	28
Grand Erie DSB	54%	+3.33	51.4%	40
Hast/PrinceEd DSB	53.33%	+3.66	57.99%	20
Ontario NE DSB	53.17%	+2.84	40.03%	56
Superior/Green DSB	53.17%	+2.50	53.35%	35
Rainbow DSB	52.17%	-0.83	49.42%	43
Nipissing/PS CDSB	48.83%	+3.00	55.28%	27
Near North DSB	48%	+0.50	49.05%	46

Go West, Young Man

Boys are doing well in the Huron-Perth Catholic board.

Malkin Dare

Once again, we used data from the annual EQAO provincial tests to rank the major Ontario English-speaking boards on the basis of the percentage of their students that met or exceeded the provincial standard (achieved level 3 or 4).

To find out how many of the province's students are succeeding at grade 9 math, we multiplied the number of students in each group by the percentage of students who met or exceeded the provincial standard, added the two products together, and divided the sum by the total number of students. For example, here are the calculations for the province: $(51,155 \times .27 + 104,100 \times .68) \div 155,255 = 54.49\%$. The fourth column shows the percentage of successful students and the fifth column shows each board's rank compared to the other school boards. As a whole, the province's English-speaking grade 9 students made virtually no gains over last year.

For the grade 3 and 6 tests, the score for each board was calculated exactly as it was last year, namely by averaging the average percentage of grade 3 students who met or exceeded the standard in reading, writing, and math with the average percentage of grade 6 students who did the same. The boards are listed in rank order. The second column shows the average percentage of successful students and the third column shows the difference between last year's average and this year's.

As a whole, the grade 3 and grade 6 students improved by an average 3.67 percentage points. In 2003-2004, 57.5% of students scored at or above the provincial standard. In 2004-2005, 61.7% of students were in this category.

There is, unfortunately, no way of knowing whether the rise in the grade 3 and grade 6 results indicates a real improvement in student learning. The problem is that variations from year to year in the test itself, the test conditions, and the grading of the test can influence test scores.

Some of the factors include: the percentage of students exempted from the test; the percentage of students granted "accommodations" and "special provisions"; the timing of the test (this year, the tests were administered several weeks later than customary); and the difficulty of the test (this year's test was much shorter and contained more multiple choice questions). The available data do not allow us to tell whether the higher test scores are the result of real improvements in student learning or variations in the way the learning was measured.

These uncertainties must be borne in mind when it comes to modest increases like 3.67 percentage points. However, the Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board is in a different category. Last year, the board racked up a staggering improvement of 12.33 percentage points. This year, it improved by another 6.67 percentage points. In two years, the board has improved so much that it now outscores every other English-speaking board in the province, and by a respectable margin. Furthermore, the boys are doing almost as well as the girls!

What is going on in Huron-Perth and why is no one talking about it? Given that all Ontario boards receive more or less the same funding, it seems highly unlikely that the Huron-Perth Catholic board has reduced class size significantly or raised its teachers' salaries. The student body probably hasn't changed appreciably. Could it be that the teachers are doing something different? Might this school board have something to teach us?

OQE/SQE Activities

OQE Annual General Meeting

OQE's annual general meeting was held on Saturday, November 19 at Wainbee in Mississauga.

The OQE members present accepted the following financial report from treasurer Denise Heard.

Financial Report For the Year Ending November 19, 2005

Revenues

Donations	\$2,209
Interest & misc. income	<u>155</u>
	\$2,364

Expenses

Newsletter	\$1,632
Annual Meeting	900
Office Expenses	227
Rent	<u>50</u>

2,809

Excess of Expenses Over Revenue -446

Fund Balance, beg. of year 10,875

Fund Balance, End of Year \$10,429

Financial Position November 19, 2005

Assets

Investments (ING)	\$9,185
Cash in Bank	<u>1,244</u>
	<u>\$10,429</u>

Liabilities

Fund Balance \$10,429

At the meeting, the OQE directors reported on their activities of the previous year. The organization has been unable to accomplish a great deal in recent years, due to the fact that the provincial government will not meet with us or even invite us to their consultations.

Because of OQE's inability to work with the current government, it was agreed to let the organization's operations lapse, at least until such time as it seems likely that its activities could be more fruitful.

Anyone who is interested in learning more about this decision is invited to contact Nancy Wagner, 519-745-6037, nawagner@sympatico.ca.

Society for Quality Education

At a meeting of the directors of the Society for Quality Education on Nov. 26, the Society's directors elected a new board, as follows.

Malkin Dare, Waterloo
Greg Gribbon, Bradford
Frank Gue, Burlington
Jon Kieran, Toronto
Anne Maranda, Kitchener
Nancy Wagner, Waterloo

The Society's activities are described in the president's report on page 2 of this newsletter. For more information about the Society, contact Doretta Wilson, Executive Director, 888-856-5535, 416-231-7247.

The *OQE Forum* will carry on with a slightly-altered name, the *SQE Forum*. As part of our on-going efforts to increase the *Forum's* e-mail reach, we are encouraging our readers to set up subscriptions for other people by sending their e-mail addresses to editor Malkin Dare at mdare@sympatico.ca. All she needs is the person's name and e-mail address.

The Society is very grateful to the members of OQE who voted to contribute \$10,000 to support the society's survey of the characteristics of Ontario families who send their children to independent schools.

As a non-profit charitable society, the Society for Quality Education is allowed to issue tax receipts for donations. Any amount is appreciated. To support our work, send a cheque to Society for Quality Education, 47 Twyford Road, Toronto, ON M9A 1W5. We expect soon be able to accept credit card donations on our website www.societyforqualityeducation.org.

Unless the donor indicates otherwise, all contributions will be set aside in a special fund for a project to compare the provincial math curricula, similar to our well-received 2005 examination of the provincial science curricula. As Ontario is apparently poised to drop calculus from the high school curriculum, this seems an excellent time to carry out such an examination. The budget for this project is \$20,000.

Private Education for the Poor

On September 7, 2005, the Society co-hosted the Canadian premiere of *School's Out*, a BBC film on the work of Dr. James Tooley. Dr. Tooley has documented the existence of thousands of unregistered independent schools for the poor in India, China, Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya. This particular film profiles some of these schools in Makoko, a shanty town on the edge of Lagos, Nigeria.

Dr. Tooley has discovered that very poor people are willing to invest up to one-fifth of their tiny incomes to buy a decent education for their children. They make this sacrifice because the local public schools are of such poor quality.

Dr. Tooley's work suggests that parents, even very poor and uneducated parents, know what is best for their children and can be trusted to make good decisions. To obtain a free DVD of *School's Out*, contact Doretta Wilson, 888-856-5535, 416-237-0108.

1872 Rules for BC Teachers

- Teachers each day will fill lamps, clean chimneys.
- Each teacher will bring a bucket of water and a scuttle of coal for the day's session.
- Make your pens carefully. You may whittle nibs to the individual taste of the pupils.
- Men teachers may take one evening each week for courting purposes or two evenings a week if they go to church regularly.
- After ten hours in the school, the teachers may spend the remaining time reading the Bible.
- Women teachers who marry or engage in unseemly conduct will be dismissed.
- Every teacher should lay aside from each pay a goodly sum of his earnings for his benefit during his declining years so that he will not become a burden to society.
- Any teacher who smokes, uses liquor, frequents pool halls, or gets shaved in a barbershop will give good reason to suspect his work, intention, integrity, and honesty.

Magnets for Students

There are many public schools of choice in the GTA, and they are successful.

By Tess Kalinowski

Caitlin Rosenbaum has been dancing since she started taking private lessons around the age of 3. This fall, Caitlin made the leap to Ryerson University's dance program, which concentrates heavily on dance theory.

It's a whole new level of study, but the transition was eased by the preparation she received at Mayfield Secondary School in Brampton, one of two arts-focused high schools in the Peel District School Board.

Mayfield's arts focus is one of dozens of specialty programs proliferating in Toronto-area boards. These "magnet" schools attract students from outside their district for specialized programming in the arts, business, athletics, and science.

They're meeting the demands of parents who increasingly want choices for their children's education. And they're another way boards can compete with each other and independent schools for enrolment that means thousands of dollars in government funding per student.

Specialty programs are what parents and students want and, in some cases, need, say school officials. "If they're not happy with a school, or the programs we're offering, they walk. They walk to other schools, they walk to private schools," said Dominic DiFelice, executive superintendent of school services for the Toronto District School Board.

"(Parents) are looking for variety. They believe their children have special skills and special needs and they're looking to try to find programs that really engage kids and keep their interest so they will continue to go to school and enjoy that experience," said Janet McDougald, chair of the Peel District School Board.

But even those like McDougald, who support choice in public schooling, worry specialized programs aren't accessible to all students. Any student can audition or apply for magnet school programs, but there can be costs.

A Few of the Choices

- In **Peel**, an international business and technology program at Allan A. Martin Senior Public School and Gordon Graydon Memorial Secondary School in Mississauga will be expanded to Brampton next year.
- In recent years, the **York** Catholic and public boards have launched International Baccalaureate (IB) programs at St. Robert Catholic High School in Thornhill and Bayview Secondary School in Richmond Hill. The IB is a rigorous two-year academic curriculum that also requires grades 11 and 12 students to perform public service and learn a second language.
- The **Toronto** District School Board, which already has more than 35 specially designated schools with programs ranging from arts to IBs, has approved 20 new ones for next year if it can find the \$600,000 to fund the programs.

"We would love to be able to provide the funding that would create access to all students, but we can't at the moment. We believe creating choice is extremely important, but there is some inequity," said McDougald.

Many Mayfield parents, for example, pay about \$1,000 a year to bus their children from outside the school district because the board doesn't have the government funding for transportation. There's a \$140 late bus fee for students who want to participate in performances, sports and other activities. Arts students also are asked to submit a \$100 arts enhancement donation to pay for visiting artists and other program add-ons.

Despite the demand for specialized programs, the province doesn't give boards any extra money to offer them, but school officials try to make programs accessible to students from all backgrounds and most principals

will try to help if a student can't afford activities and fees.

Mayfield principal Bruce Par-rack flatly rejects perceptions of élitism. Most Mayfield arts students, who make up a little more than half of the school's 1,860 students, have had private lessons. But it is possible to get in with virtually no experience, he said.

Students in these specialized schools still take compulsory courses under the provincial curriculum and generally use up their optional credits such as dance, arts or music classes. Courses under IB programs differ in that they're at a level well above the normal curriculum.

The benefits of specialized programs can extend beyond the school, according to York public board chair and former Olympian Bill Crothers. "When we built Unionville as an arts school, it really promoted arts development in other schools," he said.

When York introduced an IB program at Bayview Secondary School two years ago, there was a concern that all the high academic achievers in the board would want to go there, but it hasn't happened, said Gerry Trefler, who co-ordinates the program.

About 75% of Bayview's IB students come from out-of-district and they are highly motivated academically. "It's a different kind of education. It's not for everybody. They have to take a second language and some kids don't want to do it."

Toronto doesn't charge students for IB programs, but York levies a \$1,500 fee in each year.

"The kids have a lot of fun because the teacher can deal with the subject in a lot of depth," said Trefler. "There's no discipline problem. The teacher doesn't have to waste time with the kid who hasn't done their homework."

(Adapted with permission from Tor-star Syndication Services, "A magnet for students", Toronto Star, Oct. 1, 2005)

Choosing Wisely

Here are criteria for determining which independent schools should receive public funding.

By Mark Holmes

Being able to choose your children's school is almost a no-brainer in Ontario today. Nearly all parents who think carefully about their children's education are going to make some kind of choice, perhaps among public, Catholic, and independent schools.

Many choices exist within individual schools and school boards as well. Some parents choose French immersion for their children, or gifted classes, or the International Baccalaureate program. One school may be preferred over another on the basis of its staff or location.

In the case of one's own children, parental "right" to choice is obvious. Ontario's discrimination against funding religious schools (other than Roman Catholic) is particularly egregious in the context of widespread and increasing choice.

The problem is that other parents' right to choice is less widely approved. Most people who are opposed to school choice take the position that every school should provide good, normal education to all children. The problem is that people have very different definitions of what is good and normal.

If you ask average Ontario parents if they are in favour of provincial support for Christian "fundamentalist" schools, or Islamic schools, or schools for the academically-talented, or (as the *OQE Forum* recently did) schools emphasizing Black culture, there will be considerable disapproval even when the respondents are members of an organization whose prime goal is parental choice.

In retrospect, it is clear that the Harris government made a political mistake in providing partial financial support for students attending all independent schools, irrespective of the schools' programs, goals, and tuition fees. The Liberal, NDP, and trade union attacks on funding for the "rich" (and, gently whispered, "religious bigots") were devastating.

But it was an ethical and educational error as well as a political error. Reasonable limits should be applied to any scheme to fund independent schools.

- **Access to the school must not be limited on the basis of religion, race, or ethnicity.** This does not disallow Christian, Muslim, or Black cultural schools, provided that admission is not limited to Christians, Muslims, or Blacks (as it is not to Catholic high schools).
- **The school must not deny entry on the basis of academic ability,** but it must have the right to determine the grade and the program level, based on the student's demonstrated competence. This prevents elite schools from skimming off the talented.
- **The school must use either English or French (or both) as the first language of instruction.** This introduces the important matter of society's obligation to ensure that all children, irrespective of their parents' culture or religion, prepare themselves for full participation in Canadian adult life.
- **The school must provide instruction towards the official provincial goals and objectives in all major fields of study.** This ensures that all children have the right to choose programs leading to post-secondary education or employment such that they may choose a future in accord with their own abilities and interests. It does not require independent schools either to follow detailed provincial curricula or use provincially-approved instructional methodology.
- **The school must provide access to and recognition of a broad, age-appropriate representation of human knowledge and to bona fide versions of the truth other than its own.** A good, readily-accessible library will generally satisfy this requirement. This prevents a narrow and blinkered form of indoctrination.

- **The school must not inculcate, promote or approve ideas and behaviour that are incompatible with a liberal, democratic society and the rule of law,** e.g., hatred of others based on their own or group characteristics, superiority of one religion or race over another, or the use of violence to achieve political goals within a democracy such as Canada.
- **The school's public funding should be related to its commitment to equality of opportunity.** Practical expression of this principle means that grants should be tied to per-pupil expenditure, with schools spending very much more than the public schools receiving little or no public support, and schools spending the same as or less than the equivalent public school receiving close to full funding.

Some readers will wish to add more regulations (e.g., hiring of provincially-qualified teachers), while others will find some of the above overly restrictive. There should be a balance between making independent schools clones of public schools on the one hand, and providing so little regulation that miseducation and malfeasance are invited on the other hand.

Clearly, some form of provincial inspection will be necessary. A body of qualified personnel representative of the independent schools should provide that service, just as public schools are supervised by their representatives.

Choice is necessary, desirable, and unavoidable. But, like all government programs, it must be politically defensible and, above all, fair in the sight of all except those with conflicting self-interest (e.g., the trade unions) and narrow ideologies (e.g., those who believe all children should be compelled to have the education they want for their own children).

(Dr. Holmes is the author of The Reformation of Canada's Schools.)

Stone Age Math

Discovery math programs waste time on easy concepts, leaving no time for harder ones.

By Ralph A. Raimi

A simmering controversy about the math programs in the Penfield, NY schools should be of equal interest to a good number of other school districts that have recently been using the same “reform” math programs in their own schools.

In Penfield, the parents are in open opposition, and have presented a petition signed by 700 or so residents asking the Penfield Board of Education to permit an alternative choice to parents.

An article in the local paper about the dispute characterized the disagreement as if it were a question of style. A prominent sidebar article was headlined “What’s at Stake?”, and began its answer with “the way the children are taught math”.

But this is not the issue, even though the boxed explanation went on to say, “The new curriculum encourages students to develop problem-solving strategies instead of giving them a list of formulas to memorize”.

Now if you put it that way, there is no contest. Goodness, who can prefer “a list of formulas to memorize” to students “developing strategies”?

But there is a contest, a serious one, and not the one suggested by catch-phrases handed out by the publishers of the reform programs. It is not a contest between rote memorization of meaningless symbols and deep understanding of problem-solving strategies.

Those are not the only two choices, even though the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the colleges of education invariably paint it that way, repeating it so often that even the newspapers have come to believe it.

But as in Penfield, parents across the country, now with the support of scientists and mathematicians not previously involved in school mathematics, have also been finding their voices.

The real contest in Penfield — and hundreds of other school districts across the country — is between mathematics and non-mathematics, between academic content and childish time-wasting, between what children can learn and what the present Penfield curriculum is pretending to have them “develop”.

A good mathematics program takes advantage of the mathematical discoveries of thousands of years of civilized effort, while Penfield has them counting with sticks, starting history all over again. Arithmetic is not trivial math, and it certainly will not be “discovered” by school children. It must be taught and practised.

Arithmetic is not “a list of formulas to memorize”; its algorithms, such as “long division” and “invert and multiply”, are not made obsolete by hand calculators. They are not merely “ways to get answers”. Their understanding is basic to the understanding (not the “memorization”) of more advanced mathematics.

When teaching is governed by a program that absolutely does not contain needed information, there is no “way of teaching” that can overcome the gap. By the time Penfield students get to grade 5, they are a good two years behind Singapore students of the same age. International comparisons of student achievement show Singapore at the top and the United States very close to the bottom.

The trouble is the lack of real math. The style of teaching is not the problem; it is the material. If experience in education has any lesson to offer, it is this: Children tend not to learn what they are not taught.

(Adapted with permission from “Why American Kids Aren’t Learning Math” in Greece Post, July 8, 2005. Dr. Raimi is professor emeritus of mathematics at the University of Rochester.)

Discovery Math

*(From TERC Investigations[®]:
for use in Grade 5 and
“suitable for Grade 6 too”)*

Number of students in your class

Suppose you get 6 cents for each bottle you return for recycling. For each problem show how you found your solution.

1. You have collected 149 bottles. How much will you earn?
2. If you share what you earn with one friend, how much will each person get?
3. If you share what you earn with two friends, how much will each person get?
4. Find the fairest way to share what you have earned with everyone in our class, so there is no money left over. How much will each person get?

Singapore Math

(Workbook Grade 5B)

24. Adam bought 8 note pads at \$1.45 each and 10 towels. He gave the cashier \$100 and received \$46 change. Find the cost of a towel.
25. A group of children went swimming. $\frac{3}{8}$ of them were girls. If there were 40 boys, how many children were there altogether?
26. Three boys, Juan, Seth and Jared shared a number of stamps in the ratio 3: 5: 7. If Seth received 45 stamps, how many more stamps did Jared receive than Juan?

Students Without Borders

Increasingly, globalization will force universities to compete for students.

By Brian Lee Crowley

I stand before you as a recovering academic, one who has taught in at least five of Canada's post-secondary institutions and studied at several more. I gave up tenure to found my own think tank, because it had become clear to me that the universities had largely lost the ability to think critically about themselves, let alone about many social issues.

The post-secondary world we are accustomed to is collapsing around our ears. Most people are only dimly aware of it, because the collapse is so far relatively slow and silent and there is much denial going on, but it is gathering pace and will soon be sweeping some if not all of our institutions before it in a way that is unprecedented in the post-war era.

Until recently, the post-secondary world has been a largely-closed system in which powerful institutions — chiefly governments and public sector universities and their now essentially unionized professoriate — have totally dominated the provision of services.

This cozy oligopoly has been dominated by the fiction that there are no important differences between universities, that real competition between institutions (as opposed to superficial competition for high school graduates) is somehow vulgar and a social solecism.

Other assumptions underlying this world have been that universities should be chiefly funded through tax dollars rather than through the free choices of the consumers of their services, and this has been justified, among other things, by social equity concerns.

In practice, the effect has been to isolate university administrations and the professoriate from the consequences of their decisions in terms of salary, workload, and course offering responsiveness to students, among other things.

The result has been precisely what Adam Smith observed 200 years ago about the difference between Oxbridge and the University of Glasgow.

At the University of Glasgow, (where Smith taught), the well-being of the professors depended on their satisfying the expectations of their students (because students paid their lecturers directly). Those students were well-served. At Oxbridge, where the professors lived essentially from the endowment of the university rather than from the money freely given by students in exchange for quality services, the professors were awkward, indifferent, and distant.

Smith's analysis is directly relevant to the mobility question. Mobility is, of course, not a cause but an effect. People need to have a reason to move, and so the phenomenon of mobility must be driven by both a perception of inadequate opportunity locally and superior opportunity elsewhere.

Thanks to a host of technological changes, as well as the rising cost of university education paid by the student (or his or her family) within Canada, a range of options is now available to Canadian students.

As *The Economist* notes: "Numbers studying abroad were statistically negligible only two decades ago.... Now growth is soaring: two million university students — approaching 2% of the world's total of 100 million.... were studying outside their home country in 2003. Since the late 1990s, the higher-education market has been growing by 7% a year."

Basically, Canadian students don't have to accept under-performing institutions in this country, any more than students in other countries have to accept it in theirs. Increasingly, they will not even have to leave their own country to do so. They will have access to some of the best post-secondary education in the world through a computer and the Internet.

There is no way in the world for the Canadian government to regulate a private transaction in which students pay an institution that exists in another country and delivers its education via the Internet. Nor can it stop the emergence of private tutoring services designed to help local students meet international standards.

Those snobs in the university world who do not believe that quality education can be delivered over the Internet remind me of those in the early part of the 20th century who thought that the telephone was merely a toy because no one would ever do business over the telephone — people needed to look each other in the eye.

Not only will the rising generation be very comfortable with e-learning, but they will be much less moved by the misty-eyed romantic nostalgia so many older people attach to their undergraduate beer parties and mate-hunting rituals.

Canadian universities and students can benefit from the coming changes. But the challenges for the universities will be enormous.

I predict fierce battles over unionization, deregulation of tuition fees, new accountability standards and methods, and a growing division and specialization of labour within the post-secondary teaching world.

Universities are about to learn what the goods and services markets learned a long time ago about globalization, namely that the idea of a sheltered home market you can use as a base to launch yourself into the wider world is obsolete. Your home market is now an export market for everybody else in the world.

(Adapted with permission from an address to the National Association of University Board Chairs and Secretaries. Dr. Crowley is President of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies.)

Teach the Subject, Not the Child

There is no research basis for catering to students' modalities (visual, auditory, etc.)

By Daniel T. Willingham

QUESTION: What does cognitive science tell us about the existence of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners and the best way to teach them?

The idea that people may differ in their ability to learn new material depending on its modality — that is, whether the child hears it, sees it, or touches it — has been tested for over 100 years. And the idea that these differences might prove useful in the classroom has been around for at least 40 years.

Cognitive science has taught us is that children do differ in their abilities with different modalities, but teaching the child in his best modality doesn't affect his educational achievement.

What does matter is whether the child is taught in the content's best modality. All students learn more when content drives the choice of modality. Let's review a few things that cognitive scientists know.

1. Some memories are stored as visual and auditory representations, but most memories are stored in terms of meaning.

An important finding from the research is that memory is usually stored independent of *any* modality. You typically store memories in terms of meaning — not in terms of whether you saw, heard, or physically interacted with the information.

For example, you may have learned that a fire requires oxygen by a visual process (watching a flame go out under a glass) or auditory (hearing an explanation), but the resulting representation of that knowledge in your mind is neither visual nor auditory.

How did cognitive scientists figure this out? An important clue is the types of errors people make on memory tests. People who listen to a story will later confidently “recognize” sentences that never appeared in the story — so long as these new sentences are consistent with the story's meaning.

2. The different visual, auditory, and meaning-based representations in our minds cannot serve as substitutes for one another.

Our minds have these different types of representations for a reason: Different representations are more or less effective for storing different types of information.

Visual representations, for example, are poor for storing meaning because they are often consistent with more than one interpretation. A static image of a car driving on a snowy hill could just as well depict a car struggling up the hill or slipping backwards down the hill. And some concepts do not lend themselves well to pictures: How would one depict “genius” or “democracy” in a picture?

Because these different memory representations store different types of information, you usually cannot use one to substitute for another.

3. Children probably do differ in how good their visual and auditory memories are, but in most situations, it makes little difference in the classroom.

We've said that some memories are stored visually, some auditory, and some (most) in terms of meaning. And it's likely that some students should have a relatively better visual memory or auditory memory. Shouldn't that mean that some students will more easily remember material that is presented in their stronger modality?

It does, but what advantage would this superior memory provide for a student in a classroom? Teachers almost always want students to remember what things mean, not what they look like or sound like. For the vast majority of education, vision and audition are usually just vehicles that carry the important information teachers want students to learn. Whether information is presented auditorily or visually, the student must extract and store its meaning.

QUESTION: What does the research say about teaching to a child's strongest modality?

Although it is technically true that the theory hasn't been (and will never be) disproved, we can say that the possible effects of matching instructional modality to a student's modality strength have been extensively studied and have yielded no positive evidence. If there were an effect of any consequence, it is extremely likely that we would know it by now.

Teachers should focus on the content's best modality — not the student's. We have seen that the mind uses different representations to store different types of information and that these representations are poor substitutes for one another.

That indicates that teachers should indeed think about the modality in which they present material, but their goal should be to find the content's best modality, not to search (in vain) for the students' best modality.

If the teacher wants students to learn and remember what something looks like, then the presentation should be visual. For example, if students are to appreciate the appearance of a Mayan pyramid, it would be much more effective to view a picture than to hear a verbal description.

There are other ways in which modality of instruction can influence the effectiveness of a given lesson — but the influence applies to all children. There is no benefit to students in teachers' attempting to find auditory presentations of the Mayan pyramids for students who have good auditory memory. Modality matters in the same way for all students.

(Adapted with permission from “Ask the Cognitive Scientist” in American Educator, Summer 2005, the newsletter of the American Federation of Teachers. Dr. Willingham is professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Virginia.)

Official Language of the European Union?

The European Commission has just announced an agreement whereby English will be the official language of the European Union, rather than German, which was the other possibility.

As part of the negotiations, the British Government conceded that English spelling had some room for improvement, accepting a five-year phase-in plan that would become known as "Euro-English".

In the first year, "s" will replace the soft "c". Certainly, this will make the sivil servants jump with joy. In addition, the hard "c" will be dropped in favour of "k". This should klear up confusion, and keyboards kan have one less letter.

There will be growing public enthusiasm in the second year when the troublesome "ph" will be replaced with "f". This will make words like fotograf 20% shorter.

In the third year, public akseptanse of the new spelling kan be expected to reach the stage where more komplikated changes are possible. Governments will encourage the removal of double letters which have always ben a deterrent to akurate speling.

Also, al wil agre that the horibl mes of the silent "e" in the language is disgrasful and it should go away.

By the fourth yer, people wil be reseptiv to steps such as replasing "th" with "z" and "w" with "v".

During ze fifz yer, ze unesenary "o" kan be dropt from vords containing "ou" and after ziz fifz yer, ve vil hav a reil sensibl riten styl.

Zer vil be no mor trubl or difikul-tis and evrivun vil find it ezi tu understand ech oza. Ze drem of a united urop vil finali kum tru.

Und efter ze fifz yer, ve vil al be speking German like zey vunted in ze forst plas.



What's New?

- Denver voters have approved a tax increase to fund a **merit pay** system for classroom teachers. The new Professional Compensation System for Teachers (Pro-Comp) scraps the traditional way of paying teachers based on experience and education and instead rewards them on the basis of their students' achievement and their willingness to work in Denver's toughest schools. This is the first merit pay scheme to be implemented in a North American public school board.
- The English education secretary has set out a white paper proposing to offer parents more **choice over their children's education** by bringing new providers into the system. Every primary and secondary school in the country will be expected to become a self-governing trust, made up of individuals and organizations under the command of the school's governing body. Failing schools will be closed if they do not improve after a year, with a new provider being found to run the school.
www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/schoolswhitepaper
- A new study has fo www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/schoolswhitepaper und that students attending **private schools outscored their public school counterparts** in mathematics. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reports that even when family background is accounted for, 15-year-olds in countries such as Canada and Germany have a 25- to 40-point advantage in test scores.
www.oecd.org/document/34/0,2340,en_2649_201185_35289570_1_1_1_1,00.html
- In Columbus, Ohio, the school board is facing a budget shortfall because it is losing so many students to charter schools. (In Columbus, 30% of students attend charter schools.) Consequently, the board has decided to **compete with the charter schools** by offering three single-sex schools. It is also investigating the popular schools-within-a-school model.
- The CD Howe Institute has issued a commentary entitled "School Class Size: Smaller Isn't Better". The report finds no solid base of empirical evidence to show that **smaller classes** improve student achievement beyond kindergarten and grade 1, and even at this level the gains in achievement are relatively small and do not carry through to later years. http://www.cdhowe.org/pdf/commentary_215.pdf
- A new report shows that **direct instruction**, a teaching method relying heavily on phonics and repetition, has helped raise reading and math scores, particularly among minority and low-income students, in Milwaukee's public schools.
www.wpri.org/Reports/Volume18/Vol18no4.pdf
- A study by Mary Ann Evans of the University of Guelph and Jean Saint-Aubin of the University of Moncton has found that **reading to preschoolers** does not make it easier for them to learn to read themselves. Using cameras that tracked the preschoolers' eye and head movements, the researchers found that the preschoolers looked at text for an average five seconds per book compared to three minutes spent looking at the pictures.
- New York City's teachers' union has offered to allow the state to raise the **cap on the number of charter schools** if the government will strip the city's charter school teachers of their right to a **secret-ballot vote** on unionizing. Of the 79 charter schools in New York City, the teachers at only five have chosen to unionize.
- As part of Ontario's recent four-year teacher contracts earlier this year, every unionized school board employee became eligible for a **tax-free grant of up to \$500** for "professional development". The term is being broadly interpreted to include such things as classroom supplies and buying a computer for home use.
- Nearly half of Canadians aged 16 and over, and 12% of university graduates failed to meet the **basic standards for reading comprehension** according to a recent Statistics Canada report. Residents in the Yukon and the three western-most provinces had the highest scores, while Ontario was slightly below the national average. <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/051109/d051109a.htm>

How to Teach Your Child to Print

Good printing habits are necessary for speed, legibility, and comfort.

By Malkin Dare

One of the many casualties of child-centred learning is penmanship. When it is left up to young children to “discover” how to hold their pencils and form their letters, they frequently come up with some very unfortunate solutions.

One young student, for example, solved his problems with the letter “r” by printing an “n” and then erasing the unwanted section. Regrettably, this slowed down his printing quite a bit.

The way students hold their pencils can also be a problem. To see the surprisingly wide range of methods out there, watch how young tellers and waiters wield their pens these days.

Students with unorthodox pencil grips are at a disadvantage when the time comes to write three-hour exams. They are not able to write as quickly or as legibly, and they are more prone to muscle cramps.

The “tripod” grip is the correct way to grasp a pencil (or crayon), and it should be taught to very young children when they first begin to make marks on paper.

The pencil should be positioned so that there is equal pressure between the thumb, the side of the middle finger, and the tip of the index finger.



There are many excellent web-sites with tips on good pencil-holding practices. One example is www.drawyourworld.com. This website, along with many stationery stores, sells “pencil grips”, inexpensive training tools that can be attached to pencils.

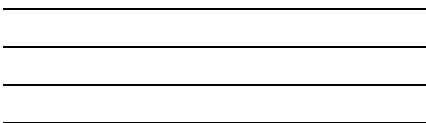
As with so many other things, it is much easier to get it right the first time. Students who have been allowed to establish a non-tripod pencil grip may resist breaking their bad habit, but it is definitely worth the effort.

Once a good pencil grip has been established, the student is ready to begin learning correct letter formation. The same principles apply: correct letter formation is important for speed, comfort, and legibility; and it is better to get it right the first time.

Once again, there are many good web-sites on correct letter formation. Information on the direction the pencil should be travelling in as it forms the various letters can be found at www.psych-ed.org. This site also offers free downloadable lined paper and worksheets.

In general, students should learn to print letters in the same font as they will see in their beginning reading books. Lower-case letters should be taught before upper-case letters.

Printing should be taught and practised on special lined paper, with four guide lines.



The letter “a” will sit in the middle space, while the letter “t” will occupy the top two spaces, and the letter “g” the lower two spaces.

Most straight strokes travel from left to right (the exception being the letter “x”) and from top to bottom. Thus, the letter “b” begins with a downstroke followed by a circle, while the letter “d” is the reverse. (Be sure to separate the introduction of these two letters by at least two weeks to avoid confusion between them.)

Letters that involve circles or semi-circles, should usually be formed using counter-clockwise motions (exceptions are “b” and “p”).

The letters should be presented one by one, in combination with their most common sound. If students say each sound while forming its corresponding letter, their acquisition of reading skills is symbiotically speeded up.

There is no agreed-upon best sequence of letter presentation. Since the letter “l” is the easiest one to form, it is a logical one to begin with.

Once the student is proficient at printing “l” correctly, top to bottom, through the top two spaces, saying its sound every time, it is time to introduce another letter. The letter “i” might be appropriate (first a downstroke in the middle space, then a dot in the top space), in combination with its short sound (/i/ as in “pin”).

When mastery has been achieved, the letter “t” might be introduced (first a downstroke through the top two spaces, followed by a shorter stroke from left to right along the second line).

Once the student is solid on all three sounds, blending can begin. With the letters learned so far, the words “it” and then “lit” can be sounded out and written.

If the next letter learned is the letter “o”, for example, the word “lot” could be added. Then “cl”, making “dot” and “tot” and “did” possible. And so on.

The exact sequence is unimportant. What is important is that the student learns to form each letter fluently, legibly, and automatically, so that when the time comes to print words he doesn’t have to squander any of his scarce brainpower on mechanical considerations.

Since children typically start making marks on paper long before they get to kindergarten, their parents are likely to be in the best position to ensure that young children get it right the first time.

(Mrs. Dare is a former teacher.)

Basic Black

This independent school is turning around many troubled Black students.

By Paul Dodds

Before the debate about Black-focused schools goes much further, it would be instructive to take a look at Shiloh Christian Institute in Brampton. It's been a Black-focused school for more than 10 years.

Shiloh Christian Institute is an independent school run by an expatriate Jamaican teacher. The student body is Black, as is the vast majority of the staff. Not by design, but by necessity, Shiloh has become, at the secondary level, a school of last resort.

The students who come there have usually gotten themselves into trouble both academically and behaviourally in the public system. Some have been banned from attending any school operated by their local school board.

The school enforces strict discipline. Students are required to be neat and wear a uniform, including dress shoes and tie. Boys cannot have long hair; girls are not allowed to wear jewelry or make-up.

Every student is required to have a homework assignment book in which all tasks are listed. This book is signed by the teacher after each class and is available to parents wanting to check on their children's progress.

One advantage to a Black-focused school is that the issue of racism disappears. In their old schools, these students often complained that the discipline meted out to them was based on race.

At a "Black" school, the issue of race simply disappears. In fact, a remarkable bond among students develops. More than I have seen in any other school setting, these students genuinely want their fellow students to succeed.

Their applause for each others' achievements is spontaneous and boisterous. In many public schools under-achieving Black students bond to encourage each other not to conform to the school's discipline and expecta-

tions — represented by white teachers and administrators. To these students, working hard at school is to play the white man's game and betray their friends.

In a school with Black students and staff, this formula changes. Superior academic performance no longer represents a "betrayal" of friends and race.



Shiloh is effective because it has a family atmosphere.

It is small, the principal knows each student and parent personally. This is crucial in matters of discipline. Students at the school are disciplined for seemingly small offences involving tardiness, appearance or manners that no public school would dare punish.

At the same time, students can be forgiven offences that in other schools would see them expelled. The decision is based not on an inflexible code of discipline laid down by some distant board, but involves the personal knowledge and understanding held by staff about that particular student.

Discipline is respected by troublesome students when they realize that it is based on concern for the well-being of the student as an individual.

Black students in the Toronto area are overwhelmingly of Caribbean origin where family life, discipline and personal communications follow certain patterns.

Caribbean-Canadian teachers at Shiloh fully understand these patterns and use them for more effective communication, discipline and motivation every day.

A low student-teacher ratio is another essential element. The seriously alienated student almost always lacks fundamental skills. The student often reacts with embarrassment and anger at this weakness. The only effective instruction involves direct one-on-one involvement from a teacher outside the usual classroom setting.

Yet even Shiloh is not able to help every youth in trouble. Many students know within hours of arriving that they simply cannot meet the expectations of behaviour and academia. These students are free to depart and many do leave. But many others do make remarkable turnarounds in their academic progress and behaviour.

Considerable challenges face any public board seeking to establish an effective school for alienated students. Teachers' unions stand in the way of selecting the best teachers, regardless of seniority.

At Shiloh, some of the finest teachers do not have teaching certificates; in the public system these teachers could not even have been hired.

School board budgets dictate against the low student-teacher ratio needed for success. A disciplinary regime that is not inflexibly controlled by a set of objective rules would probably run afoul of our courts.

Yet, the remarkable difference that such a school can make in the lives of young people is most certainly worth overcoming these obstacles.

(Adapted with permission from "Here's one that's working", Toronto Star, Sept. 16, 2005. Mr. Dodds is a lawyer and teacher who taught At Shiloh Christian Institute for five years. He can be reached at pauldoddstoronto@yahoo.ca.)

Education Myths

Without reliable information, it is difficult to make good policy decisions.

By Jay P. Greene

Myths aren't lies. They're beliefs that people adopt because they have an air of plausibility, people want to believe they're true, and they are consistent with at least some pieces of evidence. But of course, myths aren't true — or at least they're not the whole truth.

Unfortunately, much of what people believe today about education is as mythological as anything from Homer or Aesop, even if it isn't nearly as poetic. Education is dominated by myths.

The people promoting these myths may not be fools or liars, but the myths themselves do real harm to children. They cause us to misunderstand the nature of the problems in our schools, to continue engaging in practices that shortchange students, and to resist the adoption of effective reforms that would improve education.

For example, if not for education myths, we wouldn't think that schools fail because they lack adequate resources. We wouldn't continue paying ineffective teachers the same as effective ones, and we would support proven reforms like accountability and school choice.

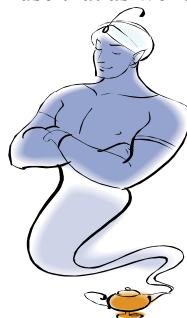
Before we can bring about real improvement in schools, we have to start by dispelling the education myths that facilitate mediocrity and block progress.

People believe these education myths for a variety of reasons. Because it involves children, education is a highly-emotional issue, which tends to cloud people's thinking. And it doesn't help that people tend to assume they already know about education policy just because they went to school themselves or they have a child going through school.

Public perceptions of education policy tend to be distorted by people's subjective experiences in the classroom, from which they may draw the wrong lessons if they don't step back and look at the facts objectively.

But by far the most important reason myths dominate education policy is that they are promoted by organized interests. These interest groups fundamentally shape education policy, just as similar groups fundamentally shape every other kind of policy.

To gain an advantage in debates over policy, some interest groups promote myths that support their positions. Of course, if systematic evidence supports their positions, interest groups will use that as well.



Their goal is simply to advance their agendas; they are relatively indifferent to whether their claims are based on myths or facts. This is the way democratic governance works, and education policymaking is not immune to its normal practices and problems.

Though it can be ugly, this democratic process usually works pretty well. But it is malfunctioning in education because most people fail to appreciate the role interest groups play in shaping education policy.

Education policymaking is no different from other policymaking in a democratic system, but people prefer to think that it is different because it involves our children.

Rather than face this uncomfortable reality, most people are inclined to view the actors in education policy debates as wise, disinterested experts even when they are obviously-interested parties. This allows people to believe that education policymaking is a discussion among professional experts rather than a political struggle among organized interest groups.

Education practitioners, such as teachers, school administrators, and professors at education schools, are not necessarily reliable judges of an education policy's merits. Just as doctors are not neutral parties in health policy discussions, education practitioners are not neutral parties in education policy discussions, since education policy affects their interests.

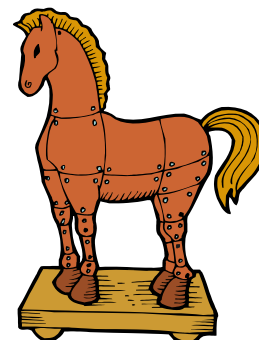
While reporters regularly consult education practitioners for their opinions about education policy, they should be careful not to treat educators' claims as though they were comprehensive assessments made by neutral experts.

And if the practitioners themselves aren't necessarily objective, their professional associations certainly won't be. These organizations exist to promote the collective interests of their members.

We should expect the policy positions of organizations like teachers' unions, school board associations, and education bureaucracies to reflect their members' interests, just as the policy positions of the American Medical Association reflect the interests of doctors.

No one should treat these organizations as anything other than what they really are — interest groups that seek to advance their agendas regardless of the evidence.

(Dr. Greene is head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas.)



Education Facts

Many people believe some or all of these statements, but they are all false.

MYTH Schools perform poorly because they need more money.

FACT Eric Hanushek of Stanford University examined every available study on the relationship between spending and educational outcomes that conformed to basic social science methods — a total of 163 studies — and found that only 27 had identified a statistically-significant relationship.

Other researchers analyzing the same set of studies with somewhat different methods have argued that the studies justify concluding that more school spending does affect student performance, but the size of the effect they identify is so small that it is dwarfed in comparison to the large increases in school spending over the past 30 years.

Such a tiny effect from such a large increase in spending does not justify the Money Myth.

<http://edpro.stanford.edu/hanushek>

MYTH Special education programs burden public schools, hindering their academic performance.

FACT If a school decides to devote more resources to helping students who are falling behind in reading, the school must bear the cost of this program itself. But if the same school redefines those students as “learning-disabled”, the government will help pay for their remediation.

The number of disabled children is not really getting bigger. Instead, special education programs have grown for the simple reason that this growth, far from bleeding money from school budgets, is profitable for schools because it brings in additional funding for programs schools would otherwise have to pay for themselves.

Thus, not only is the Special Education Myth false, it is the reverse of the truth: special education is not draining school budgets, it’s inflating them.

MYTH Social problems like poverty cause students to fail; schools are helpless to prevent it.

FACT If the influence of disadvantages on student achievement were as overwhelming as the Myth of Helplessness implies, we would expect to see little variation in levels of achievement at schools serving similar student populations. Yet a recent study by Dr. David Johnson of Wilfrid Laurier University found substantial variation in achievement among similarly-disadvantaged student populations in Ontario. www.cdhowe.org

MYTH Schools should reduce class sizes; small classes would produce big improvements.

FACT The Class Size Myth is not totally baseless. Research does give us reason to believe that there might be some benefits to smaller classes. But if the research supporting smaller classes is correct, the benefits of class size reduction are only moderate. And whether this research is in fact correct is still very much open to debate.

Even if the research is correct, other evidence suggests that reducing class sizes does not produce similar gains when implemented on a wider scale. When California introduced a state-wide reduction in elementary school class sizes, the students who were in larger and smaller classes improved at about the same rate.

Given that there are other reform strategies that are more promising and less costly, the modest benefits of class size reduction simply can’t justify the very large financial sacrifices that would have to be made.

MYTH Certified or more experienced teachers are substantially more effective.

FACT The Abell Foundation’s review of studies conforming to basic social science methods found that teachers holding master’s degrees did not produce higher student performance (except for high school teachers with master’s degrees in the subjects they taught, as opposed to degrees in education) and among new teachers traditional certification makes no difference in student performance.

When it comes to years of experience, the evidence seems to indicate that teachers get a little more effective in their first few years as they get up to speed in the classroom, but after this initial period teachers do not tend to get more effective with more years of experience.

<http://www.abell.org/publications/detail.asp?ID=59>

MYTH The evidence on the effectiveness of vouchers is mixed and inconclusive.

FACT Every random-assignment study of the effect of vouchers except one finds statistically-significant benefits on test scores for at least some groups of students. Even the one other study still found positive effects from vouchers; it failed only to achieve statistical significance, and only after resorting to highly-selective and questionable methods.

<http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/greene.htm>

MYTH Independent schools are less effective at promoting tolerance and civic participation.

FACT Studies consistently show that independent schools are better at conveying the democratic values of tolerance, participation, and volunteerism than public schools. Rather than undermining students’ adherence to democratic values, independent schools actually enhance it.

www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2003-08-22-SFSC-Wolfe-testimony.pdf

MYTH School choice harms public schools.

FACT Rather than draining public schools of resources and talent, school choice improves public schools’ performance. The evidence from existing voucher programs consistently shows public schools improving in response to the challenge of vouchers. Studies of charter school competition suggest that increased choice and competition lead to better public schools.

http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/688_OP35V2.pdf

Education Meta-Myth

The belief that incentives don't matter in education is toxic to the whole system.

By Jay Greene

Myths dominate education policy. Over the past 30 years, our education system came to be based more and more heavily on beliefs about education that the evidence shows to be false. These myths have distorted virtually every area of education policy.

These myths fall into four major clusters. The first and most prominent cluster of myths claim that the performance of the education system is hindered by a lack of **resources**, and that policies seeking to improve education by redirecting more resources to the classroom (through class size reduction and personnel policies) are effective.

The second cluster is a set of myths about the **outcomes** produced by the current system — about whether those outcomes have changed in the past 30 years, about how many students successfully complete K-12 education, and about how qualified those who graduate are.

The third cluster of myths claims that **policies** seeking to hold schools and students accountable for their performance will be undermined by test manipulation and lack of resources, and to the extent that they aren't thus undermined will end up pushing too many kids out of school altogether.

The fourth cluster claims that **choice** does not improve education. Independent schools appear to do better only because they have tons of money and they “cream” in admissions; allowing students to leave public schools for independent ones would only cripple the public schools; independent schools are racially-segregated and produce closed-mindedness and hate.

Surveying these myths, we can see a pattern emerging across most of them. One might call it a “meta-myth”. It is the belief that education is different from other policy areas in that the types of incentives that normally shape human behaviour do not shape educational behaviour.

In most areas of life, people respond to the presence of economic incentives and other similar kinds of incentives. Businesses know that they will lose business if they treat customers badly; so they strive to treat customers well. Parents reward their children for good behaviour and punish them for bad behaviour, with the expectation that these rewards and punishments will create incentives for better behaviour.

But when it comes to education, people seem to believe that incentives just don't apply. For example, in any other area of life, if someone is never rewarded for doing a job well and never punished for doing it badly, we would naturally expect him or her to do it badly.

Yet, this is exactly the way we run our education system — schools, teachers, and administrators get almost no reward for good performance and no penalty for bad performance — and we still believe that any failures must be the result of inadequate resources.

It would never occur to most people that schools will not make better use of the money they get until they have some incentive to do so. Reform policies that promise to harness incentives, such as accountability and school choice, are rejected as counterproductive.

It is not hard to see why people believe in this meta-myth. Because education involves the well-being of children, it naturally engages strong emotions. We want to believe that the classroom doesn't work the same way other human activities work. We want to believe that the people to whom we entrust the education of our children are not affected by incentives.

We do know that teachers are generally good people who go into teaching because they want to help children, and from this fact we think it necessarily follows that teachers will teach just as well without having to be given incentives to do so.

We want to believe that it would be wrong for incentives to affect the education system, that no one would stand for it if a teacher or a school acted in ways that were shaped by incentives. We think that it would be odd if we treated the education of children the same way we treated all the other departments of social activity.

People also believe in the meta-myth because powerful interest groups promote it. For example, teachers' unions promote the idea that teachers will teach just as well even if we don't hold them responsible for their job performance.

They promote this myth because they have an incentive to do so — it serves the interests of their membership if teachers are not held accountable for the quality of their teaching.

Ironically, people believe the meta-myth that incentives don't work in education largely because interest groups are driven by powerful incentives to promote the idea that incentives don't work in education!

The meta-myth that incentives don't matter to education is so widespread and has corrupted so much of education policy, that tracing the things that could be done to correct it would be a whole other book in itself.

But the first step is obvious — we cannot overcome the meta-myth until we first show it to be false. Rigorously testing our educational beliefs against a full reading of the systematic evidence is the only hope for dethroning the meta-myth. The work is difficult, and will be opposed by powerful groups that have interests in protecting the prevailing methodology.

But science has triumphed over mythology against all hope in many other fields, and there is no reason it can't do so here as well.

(Adapted with permission from Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe About our Schools — And Why It Isn't So. See our review on page 3.)

Letters to the Editor

The *SQE Forum* is published on the first day of the following months: September, December, March and June. The deadline for receipt of material is one month prior to publication.

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Differences of Opinion

I loved the "Differences of Opinion" article in the September Forum. Having come to Canada from Eastern Europe, getting used to this attitude was one of the big cultural adjustments I had to make.

Almost nobody under 40 admits to making a mistake, and they are serene and self-assured no matter what they do.

It drives you crazy, because you're not sure whether you are really reaching a common understanding when you discuss something. Because if all of the alternatives are okay, how do you make sure the mistake doesn't happen again?

Along the same lines, one of the most bewildering things for me was the way people at work, especially young people, casually say, "Do you know how to spell x-word?" Or they might say, "I haven't had time to proofread my report so there may be spelling mistakes in it."

For me, spelling should be automatic. I agree English spelling is a bit more difficult than other languages; however, it can be learned and, after all, that's what kids go to school for. Don't they?

I also loved the article about beginning stages of reading instruction, in particular, "Bad habits are formed that prove very difficult, sometimes impossible, to break later on."

I know this from my own experience. In the past, I had to change from hunting and pecking to correct typing with all fingers. I have corrected the way I was pronouncing some English words. I have corrected the position of my hands when skiing.

It was very hard work even to become aware of what I was doing. And it took a loooooong time. As a result, I am obsessed with doing things right the first time, especially when it comes to learning something.

OQE is an island of sanity in an ocean of good intentions gone wrong.

Rodica Mihaita,
Toronto, Ontario

Fund-raising

I would love to stop funneling money into my child's school. I do not enjoy fund-raising. However, I want to participate in school council meetings and fund-raising is the only thing the council does.

Each year, my child's school raises between \$11,000 and \$14,000 through fund-raising. I have been told that this money goes towards sports jerseys, volunteer thank you lunches, library books, student agendas (from grade 1-8, grade 7 and 8 trips, grade 8 graduation, bus costs for field trips, etc.

The money that is raised in a given year, however, is never spent until the following year. That makes it very hard to track the money, because by the time the following year comes, the focus has switched to the current year's fund-raising and no one thinks about last year's money.

If we reduced fund-raising, would the kids go without jerseys? Would it be a problem if the grade one children didn't get student agendas?

My five-year-old attends fund-raising assemblies hosted by chocolate companies to increase their sales.

It is noteworthy that I have to sign a permission form for my child to participate in a science assembly, yet no one asked if she could attend a manipulative, propaganda-filled hour encouraging her to sell lots of chocolate bars and win prizes.

Is the approximately \$8000 per pupil that the Ontario government spends on education (\$16 billion dollars divided by 2 million students) not sufficient?

A typical class of 25 students would generate roughly \$200,000 in provincial funding. Even after you subtract the teacher's salary and benefits of, say, \$80,000, and a very generous \$80,000 to cover that class's share of overhead, it still leaves \$40,000 for things like jerseys and agendas.

Lisa Deline,
Toronto, Ontario

Accountability?

In 2001, the Ontario government provided a wonderful service for parents and taxpayers when it posted School Board Profiles to its web-site. The government's goal was to provide the public with information that would increase the accountability of the province's school boards.

The information included the board's EQAO test results, the board's statistics, and financial information. The latter allowed people to see how much money each board received from the government and how the boards chose to use the money.

For example, when critics complained that there was no money for textbooks, the variance reports showed clearly that in many cases money allocated for textbooks was spent on something else instead, such as computers or teacher salaries.

As a parent advocate and member of the Ontario Parent Council at that time, I can't tell you what a boon this was and how it empowered parents, school councils, and the public.

Unfortunately, after two years of data, the school board profiles ceased to be updated, and the site ultimately became almost five years out of date. I called periodically to ask what was going on and was always told that it would soon be updated.

Consequently, at the beginning of November, I was happy to find that in fact the profiles had been updated. That's the good news.

The bad news is that not only are the updated profiles now buried deep in the website, the financial information is no longer available. No per-student funding information, no variance reports, nothing that allows the public to see how its money is being spent.

The updated profiles raise more questions in my mind. Keeping such valuable information hidden away works to create a culture of suspicion and undermines talk of accountability.

Cathy Cove,
Goderich, Ontario

Fighting City Hall

This parent did her best to challenge a very dubious new school policy.

By Mary Easter

I didn't need a review of the research to tell me that sleep needs change when children become teenagers. I had living proof.

Until he turned 13, my youngest child had always hit the ground running. Despite my pleas to sleep in until 7:30 am, even on weekends he always wanted to get up at 6:00 am and get the day started.

Then....hormones....changes..... he began to grow — and grow! Part of this new teen package was a change in his sleep patterns.

Even though he went to bed at the same time, he would lie there and stare at the ceiling, unable to sleep. Getting up for school began to be a problem. On weekends, he began to sleep until 9:00 am, and then a month later 10:00 am.

I turned to the Internet and found ample information on the changes to sleep patterns that occur when children reach puberty. I learned that early morning is the sleepest time for teens due to the phase delay of their circadian rhythms.

Right around that same time, I heard rumblings that all high schools in our area were going to start classes an hour earlier. My son was already having an awful time getting up at 7:45 am to make it to school for the 8:45 am start time.

It blew my mind to think about his rising at 6:45 am. Shockingly, he would be one of the luckier ones. Some teens would have to be at their bus stops at 6:14 am!

In my naïve way, I believed that the school board trustees must be unaware of all the research on teenagers' sleep patterns. Even if the trustees were prepared to ignore teens' sleepiness and discomfort as a phase or simple laziness, I thought surely they would care about the decreased academic learning.

Initially, it seemed to me that all I needed to do was inform the trustees

of the research. They would immediately see the light and cancel the plan for earlier high school start times. It wasn't that simple, however.

I, along with many others, took the research information to both local school boards. We sponsored presentations from two Canadian researchers, and letters from American researchers, all suggesting that early high school start times were not in the best interest of the students.

We presented the boards with study after study. We brought them petitions signed by hundreds of other parents. We garnered media support and attention.

When the day came for the vote, the trustees actually turned down the motion to change to earlier start times. We had won! Our children had been spared this educational disaster.

Or so we thought. Six weeks later another vote was held. This time around, several trustees reversed themselves and voted in favour of the earlier start time.

With public outrage at its peak, we went to our local member of provincial parliament. Although he told us he sympathized with us, he said he was unable to be of any real help.

Still determined, I asked Frank Klees, the Conservative education critic, to present a 5000-signature petition to the Minister of Education in the legislature.

In his response, the Minister ignored the procedural unfairness and the educational considerations, and instead focused on how much money had been given to the two boards.

In subsequent discussions with the Minister's legislative representative, we were told that all the Minister could do was facilitate communication between the boards' administrations and the community.

Facilitate communication? We had already tried by every means possible to communicate with the admini-

strations of the two school boards. They had discounted our concerns as unimportant and tried to discredit the research. The communication between the two sides was already well-established and clear as a bell.

Now, two years later, we are dealing with the fallout. The community's extra curricular activities continue to be held at their usual times; as a result, some kids' activities go on until 10 or even 11 pm. The children still have to be up early for school, however.

My 15-year-old son is a zombie for his first class and sometimes has little memory of it. This "A" student has even forgotten his locker combination upon arrival at school.

Other areas of life have been impacted as well. Kids skip breakfast to grab some extra sleep and then can't handle a burger for "lunch" at 10:30 am. At 2:30 pm when they get home from school, they gorge themselves for an hour and then aren't hungry for family dinner.

The number of bus cancellation days is sharply up, because that decision has to be made an hour earlier, often too early to properly assess how bad the weather will be. My son's class missed an entire unit of science due to the number of missed days.

Possibly worst of all, I and many others, including our children, have lost our faith in the system. We have learned that school boards are neither democratic nor accountable, not even to the minister of education. Our trust in government at any level has been shattered. I no longer go to board meetings or participate in my school council.

After taking a risk, and stepping outside my comfort zone to pursue this action, all I am left with is a profound sense of sadness and disillusionment.

(Mrs. Easter is a parent in Chatham, Ontario.)