

FROM THE PRESIDENT

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Another way you can help out is to forward this newsletter to those of your friends who would like better schools.

Regards, Malkin

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MAIL BAG

Home-schooling Advantage

We have decided to homeschool our daughter for half of the school day. The reason for this is that she is barely achieving anything in her noisy, group-work-oriented classroom. When she learning in a more traditional manner, she excels – for two years in a row, she has achieved honours standing with the Royal Conservatory of Music.

Unlike her classroom, her private music program is transparent and aligned. The evaluations are specific and provide excellent feedback for future

practice sessions. But when it comes to her classroom, we have little idea what behaviours need be demonstrated in order to achieve the various levels. I'm amazed to hear that her teachers are continuing to search for the holy grail of best practices: surely after 30 years they should have found something that works. But in Ontario, where a virtual monopoly exists, those working in the system can experiment, experiment, and experiment some more. This is the result one can expect when competition is seen as a threat to social cohesion. *Hamilton, ON*

Improving Teacher Behaviour

My wife and I have been involved in peripheral ways in the matter of changing physician behaviour in various contexts, for example referrals of patients with chronic conditions. There is a whole academic research literature on this issue, and it's well known that simply providing information is almost entirely a wasted effort. The same goes for didactic approaches and the provision of printed materials and practice guidelines.

What does seem to work is teaching aimed at identified learning needs: interactive educational activities, sequenced and multifaceted interventions, enabling tools such as patient education programs, flow charts and physician reminders, educational outreach or academic detailing, and auditing and feedback. I expect there are parallels between changing physician behaviour and changing teacher behaviour. *Mississauga, ON*

Teachers' Unions

My last two years (of seven) on the Ontario College of Teachers convinced me that a real clean-up needs to take place regarding the unions. Teachers have to join a union and pay their dues whether they want to or not. I saw good people leaving the profession because they hated the union interference – for example, being fined because they worked too hard and long with their students and did not approve of strikes. *Sudbury, ON*

SQE ACTIVITIES

Thanks to the generous support of the Donner Canadian Foundation, SQE is delighted to welcome Dr. Howard Fuller to Toronto for three days in early January. Dr. Fuller, an African American, is a dynamic and charismatic speaker, and he has a unique take on the question of black-focused schools. We recommend you attend at least one of the following events. You will be glad you did! For more information, call Doretta (416-231-7247).

Tues., Jan. 8 Breakfast Economic Club of Toronto
Tues., Jan. 8 8:00 pm TVO The Agenda
Wed., Jan. 9 Lunch Fraser Institute

ASK AUNT MALKIN

A veteran of the school wars herself, with the scars to prove it, Malkin Dare has all kinds of advice to offer. If you would like some been-there-done-that advice from Aunt Malkin, call her at 519-884-3166. This month, Aunt Malkin answers Denise's question about her son's hyperactivity.

Question

My son in grade 4 is reading at a grade 1 level. Lately, he has started acting out in school, and now his teacher wants me to start him on Ritalin. What should I do? Denise in Ottawa

Answer

It is not really surprising that your son is misbehaving, given he can't keep up with his classmates. Imagine how you would feel if you were unable to do your job and all your co-workers knew it!

It is extremely important that you son be taught to read — and right away (after grade 4, it gets a lot harder). Since it is unlikely that his school is going to do the job at this late date (or they would have done so already), it is up to you.

There are tutoring services, such as Sylvan and Oxford, which can be of some help, but they are expensive. Your best bet would probably be to teach him yourself. There are several excellent programs available, but I recommend my own free remedial reading program, Stairway to Reading, which you will find at www.societyforqualityeducation.org/stairway.html.

And as for the Ritalin, why not tell your son's teacher that you've started him on a new medication called "Stairway"?

FEATURE ARTICLE

State of Unreadiness

By Sandy Farran

In September 2005, 25 students from Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., and 25 students from Zhejiang University in China began the first year of a new joint computer science degree program between the two universities. In news releases, Simon Fraser president Michael Stevenson hailed it as "an important step" in the university's international efforts. "This program will create graduates who combine a strong command of their discipline with a deep cross-cultural understanding and a well-developed command of a foreign language." It would be a unique opportunity for exceptional Simon Fraser students.

But once the program started, it quickly became apparent that the Canadians in it were struggling. The First World students were simply not as educationally advanced as their developing world colleagues. The Chinese students were much more comfortable in English than the Simon Fraser students were in Chinese—perhaps not a surprise given that English is the global language. But the real shocker was in math and science. The Canadians were way behind. "They arrive there, are joined with Chinese students, and their experience has been, I think for 90 per cent, their math-science background is significantly behind their Chinese peers," according to Stevenson. "It's very challenging to them, let's put it that way."

The original program required students to take an intense first year of language instruction—Mandarin for SFU students, English for Zhejiang students—at their home university. In second and third year, both cohorts would study a variety of courses including math, science, and second language at Zhejiang in China. This would be followed by a fourth and fifth year at SFU.

"It's kind of a challenge to a joint program when the students start at different levels," says Stevenson. "Canadian students start behind." Chinese faculty helpfully offered Stevenson that they would be "happy to give extra office hours" and extra help to their less-educated Canadian charges.

As a result of these disparities, the Simon Fraser program has been changed. Canadian students will still do a language year in Mandarin at SFU, as well as courses in math and science to upgrade their

skills. For the Canadians, this is a five-year degree. But for the Chinese students, the first year of the program has been dropped. For them, it's now a four-year degree.

Canada has never had more young people enrolled in higher education; in fact, as a proportion of its youth population, Canada has more people in college and university than any other country. The trouble is that many university-bound students—sometimes even allegedly good students—have no idea how unprepared they are for university. Universities quietly acknowledge that they are welcoming a large number of kids who aren't entirely ready for university, but who arrive on campus, after a high-school experience marked by high grades and insufficient learning, blissfully unaware of the disparity between their skills and a degree's demands.

Some high school teachers think that their institutions are a big part of the problem. Last June, five seasoned teachers from Owen Sound, Ont., did a very uncharacteristic thing: they sent a letter to the editor of the local newspaper criticizing their employer—the Bluewater District School Board—for stifling teachers' concerns about students advancing and graduating without basic skills. "We feel students are ill-prepared to meet the expectations at the next level and that no meaningful input is garnered or accepted from students, parents, trustees or teachers, beyond that which already matches the Board's position," the teachers wrote. "We hope by raising awareness we can all participate in making our educational system better both in our district and at the provincial level."

In an interview with *Maclean's*, Norah Phillips, one of the five teachers who signed the letter, blames an educational system that is "more fixated on meeting graduation rates and raising the marks on provincial test scores" than with real achievement and learning. Phillips, a teacher for more than 20 years, describes a high-school system where teachers are not permitted to deduct marks for late work or missed classes; are required to give students multiple opportunities to make up for incomplete work; cannot impose consequences for high numbers of absences; and are under pressure from parents and administrators to raise failing marks. Phillips says that her colleagues are reporting that more and more students are "disengaged and unwilling to work towards their education."

Yet nearly 30 per cent of those who graduate from Ontario high schools head off to university, with comparable numbers in the rest of the country. As a result, universities from coast to coast are having to ramp up their academic support services and expand their remedial programs in an effort to help students before they fall so far behind that they drop or are failed out.

(Reprinted with permission from Maclean's Magazine, Nov. 15, 2007)

WHAT'S NEW?

Don't be fooled by the hype!

Recent cheerleading by Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office would have you believe that our students are doing better and better. This is not the case. The EQAO's own reports show clearly that Canadian students actually lost ground between 2000 and 2006 on the PISA test (due mostly to decreases in Alberta's scores). On the PIRLS assessment, Ontario's slight improvement was driven primarily by improved scores on the part of the Franco-phone students.

www.eqao.com/categories/home.aspx?Lang=E

Statistical Dissatisfaction

A survey by the Canadian Education Association finds that only 6% of Canadians give their local schools a grade of A (down from 19% in 1979), and only 19% of respondents expressed confidence in their provincial governments' education policies. It seems likely that these statistics capture the opinions of parents who send their kids off to school each morning.

www.cea-ace.ca/home.cfm

Everything you ever wanted to know about Canadian education

Statistics Canada has released a wide-ranging report on Education Indicators in Canada. For example, did you know that Canadian governments are spending 11% more (in constant dollars) on all levels of education than they did in 1997-1998? www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/071212/d071212d.htm

BOOK REVIEWS

The Great Reading Disaster: Reclaiming our educational Birthright By Mona McNeen and Alice Coleman

This book chronicles the devastation wrought by what the authors call “Progressivism” in England. The story should be of particular interest to Canadians, since progressive ideas took hold in England about a decade before they became dominant in Canada – meaning that we can now look at England and see where we will be ten years from now. Which is to say, like the English government, Canadian governments will still be trying – pretty much unsuccessfully – to impose their will on their educational establishment. As the authors write, “its agents infiltrated every watchdog meant to safeguard standards and enticed them to lick the hands of the intruder instead”. The excerpt expands on this process.

Excerpt (page 125)

“The officials were the civil servants with permanent tenure, who could accumulate expertise and climb the career ladder, knowing that they would outlast the term of office of any Minister or Government. This attracted the power-hungry, who created a watchdog for Progressivism instead of for excellence. They ceased to be public servants and became covert public masters.

“An attempt to expose this conspiracy was to ridicule it on television in *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*. These revealed officials’ dismay when the Minister’s policy ran counter to their own and also their secret conferring on how to manipulate him back on to the ‘correct’ rails. The Minister always yielded, unaware that the overt reasons masked more devious aims.

“Alas! The series’ verisimilitude was so farcical that viewers did not take it seriously. Some Ministers, however, were keenly aware and when William Waldegrave signed a prize copy of *Yes, Minister*, he also wrote, ‘It is all true’.”

Inside the Secret Garden: The progressive decay of liberal education By Tom Burkard

Another book from Britain, saying pretty much the same thing as the previous book. Written in a take-no-prisoners style, this book documents the effect of progressive teaching methods on English students. Despite unprecedented increases in educa-

tion spending, standards are plummeting, and at least 30% of English children can’t even read. Mr. Burkard shows how an intellectually-misguided élite (claiming to be experts in child development and psychology) have subverted the will of the people and used English children as guinea pigs in a grand experiment that has gone horribly wrong. Through the book, the author highlights the central paradox of progressive education – despite the professed aim of creating a democratic society, it would in fact be almost impossible to design a system better suited to perpetuating both class divisions and the gulf between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. The excerpt goes some way toward explaining why it is so difficult to make schools better.

Excerpt (pages 166-167)

“The privatization of schools and the dismantling of the vast apparatus of state control are not, at present, realistic political objectives. The myths that support the present system are too well established in the public mind. Parents hang on to ‘nurse’ for fear of something worse; when it comes to your own children, the most conservative instincts prevail. At The Promethean Trust, we never cease to marvel at how parents of children who have been traumatized by reading failure can still maintain that their teachers are ‘wonderful’.

“In England, attempts at educational reform began in earnest in 1986, but so far the progressives in the educational establishment have proved remarkably adept at reformulating the body of mythology that informs the way our children are taught (or not taught).

“The progressive mythology can never be successfully challenged until politicians understand the futility of trying to impose reforms as though they were Soviet five-year-plans. Experience has proved that attempts to reform have strengthened the hand of bureaucracy at the expense of the majority of teachers who, despite their training, still genuinely want to instill knowledge and understanding.”

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

Here’s a fun activity that will provide a bit of practice for you and your kids with adding and subtracting and just may give you a bit of a start in the process. The principle behind its seeming magic is an interesting bit of arithmetic.

www.milaadesign.com/wizardy.html