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From the President

The Domino Effect

By Malkin Dare

Some people are surprised by my emphasis on teaching methods. They point to all the other problems in schools — behaviour problems, boys' poor results, low test scores, high drop-out rates, soaring special education enrolments, crumbling buildings, low teacher morale, class size issues, militant teachers' unions, apathetic parents....

Why do I keep the spotlight on one often-overlooked issue? In my opinion, ineffective teaching methods are actually the root cause of many of the higher-profile problems. Take, for example, discipline problems in schools. Much misbehaviour is the inevitable result of the unstructured, permissive atmosphere in modern classrooms which provides an excellent breeding ground for student antics.

As well, modern methods are associated with extreme variations in student achievement. As a rule of thumb, contemporary classrooms spread out student achievement by the same number of grades as the grade number. Thus, in grade 2, students might be achieving anywhere from the grade 1 level to the grade 3 level (a spread of two grades.) By grade 8, they might range from grade 3 to grade 11 (a spread of eight grades).

Because progressive methods are especially unsuitable for boys, boys are disproportionately represented in the lowest quartile. These students, unable to keep up, often express their boredom and frustration physically. The many under-achieving students do poorly on standardized testing, dragging down test scores. Poor students tend to leave school before graduating, raising drop-out rates. Frequently assigned to special-education classes, they swamp support services.

Because special-education students are so expensive to educate, there is less money to go around generally — contributing to a perception that schools are under-funded. Relatively little money filters down to the classroom level, contributing to low teacher morale — especially given the large numbers of under-achieving, poorly-behaved students.

Harassed teachers yearn for smaller classes so they can give more individual attention to their many under-achieving and/or poorly-behaved students. Discontented teachers complain to their unions, and the unions become even less co-operative. Parents tend to pull back from involvement in their children's education — not surprising in light of all these problems. Progressive methods are directly alienating as well, since they often bewilder parents with their odd methods and the associated jargon.

The use of ineffective methods pushes over the first domino, which is student achievement, and then, one by one, many more dominoes fall over. A focus on good teaching methods is the best way to keep the dominoes standing.