

FROM THE PRESIDENT

We would like to increase our ability to help the parents of children who are struggling at school. If you know of parents like this – or teachers who would be receptive to research-based information about proven teaching methods – please forward this newsletter to them.

Another way you can help is by making a financial contribution. SQE receives no government funding. Without your support, we would not be able to continue our work. You can donate securely on-line by visiting www.canadahelps.org/DonationDetails.aspx?cookieCheck=true or you can send a cheque to Society for Quality Education, 57 Twyford Road, Toronto, ON Canada M9A 1W5. We will send you a tax receipt – and our thanks! Regards, Malkin

MAIL BAG

Stairway to Reading

I have been so very pleased with your free remedial reading program which I use to tutor struggling readers in two local schools. I had another feel-good moment with one 12-year-old yesterday when he was able to read the word “parachute”. His eyes lit up and he had the biggest grin on his face. I had him only two periods a week and then that was interrupted with me scribing for him in the EQAO weeks.

Ottawa, ON

Teachers' Hands Are Tied

My daughter who teaches high school was home last week with a terrible tale of woe with regard to the laxity with which she must treat students. She is not allowed to properly penalize students who cheat or who misbehave. There are students who should be marked with a big fat zero, but she does not have the authority to do that. My daughter went on to describe specific cases that I found simply incredible – and which she finds dispiriting and frustrating. As she puts it, we're failing them by **not** failing them.

Collingwood, ON

Extended High School

I teach math at an Ontario community college. Because the schools are now doing an even worse job, the colleges are implementing pre-college courses to get the students' skills up to the necessary levels. We are now really extending high school into college, with the attendant tuition fees. *Markham, ON*

Importance of Physical Education

Since I contracted polio at the age of seven I have been obsessed with my health. Within the Society for Quality Education, the three R's are valued highly. While these are extremely important, I would argue that **the** most important subject on the timetable is Physical Education. (continued at end of newsletter)

Waterloo, ON

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

School Boards Should Get Out of Teachers' Way

Most public school teachers care about their students and are willing to work very hard for them. Yet in most classrooms, there are at least three or four students who lag far behind their peers academically.

It is obvious to everyone, including their teachers, that the suffering of these students extends well beyond the classroom walls. School failure often defines children's lives, frequently leading to drug use, dropping out of high school, criminal activities, early pregnancy, and other pathologies.

So why don't their caring and hard-working teachers take steps to turn their students' lives around?

The answer to this question is that teachers are being undermined by a number of harmful school board policies and practices. Teachers' most significant handicaps are the following.

- Many schools lack the resources to provide meaningful preventive support to struggling students in the early grades.

- Many teachers have never received the necessary training in proven intervention strategies, nor do most school boards provide it.
- Most classrooms include several high-needs students, including students with severe behaviour disorders, who make it impossible to teach small groups effectively.
- There is limited or no assistance available in terms of teaching assistants or resource teachers, even for identified special education students.
- If teachers do even a fraction of the required paperwork, they may be looking at three to four hours daily of documentation and report generating – time taken away from interacting with students and providing out-of-class mentoring and support.
- Students' learning levels become more and more spread out as they rise through the grades, resulting in a span of up to 10 grade levels in a typical grade 8 class.
- In many cases, teachers must pay for the necessary specialized teaching materials from their own pockets, spending \$500 or more – even much more – per year.

The Ontario government currently spends approximately \$10,000 a year per student (almost \$19 billion a year for about 1,900,000 students). That's \$200,000 a year for a class of 20 students – more than enough for additional staffing, useful professional development, and suitable teaching materials.

Imagine what classroom teachers could do with this money if they were not severely handicapped by their school boards!

ASK AUNT MALKIN

A veteran of the school wars herself, with the scars to prove it, Malkin Dare has lots of advice. If you would like some been-there-done-that advice from Aunt Malkin, call her at 519-884-3166.

Question

I am very unhappy with my grade 6 daughter's public school. Nothing much is accomplished there, and teaching starts at home. I am an unemployed single parent who can't afford a private school. I have thought of sending her back to India where the private schools are affordable and academically good. I would appreciate any suggestions.

Alena, Mississauga

Answer

You might want to look for a better public school not too far away from you, certainly closer than India. The C.D. Howe Institute provides very useful school rankings at www.cdhowe.org/pdf/ebrief.39scoresupdate2007.pdf. If you approach the principal of a different public school however, you must not reveal your real reason (better teaching) for seeking a transfer, as most educators hate comparisons and purport to believe that all schools are delivering an excellent service. Instead, you must find a non-educational reason to ask for a transfer. For example: the school is close to your place of work or your daughter's grandma's house; the school has a program (like French immersion or strings) that you want; or your daughter's best friend attends this school and it would improve her self-confidence. Good luck!

Aftermath

After looking at the C.D. Howe rankings, Alena found a better public school not too far away, and approached the principal about a transfer. Sadly, this principal was adamant that there was no flexibility whatsoever around school catchment areas, saying that every Peel school and teacher is good and it is the student who makes the difference. Alena then asked me for information on home schooling, which I duly provided.

WHAT'S NEW?

Tax Relief for Parents of Struggling Students

The Canadian P'Tach Society is a charitable organization that gives tax advice to the parents of children with learning and other disabilities on how to get tax credits for out-of-pocket expenses for tutoring, special schools, etc. Their service is free and all they ask in return is a tax-deductible donation of 18% of any tax savings. www.ptach.ca

Better Schools

Two recent studies from the Fraser Institute suggest that Canadian private schools are outperforming Canadian public schools.

- An analysis of the 2003 PISA tests shows that Canada is the only OECD country where private schools outperform public schools in a way that is statistically significant. www.fraserinstitute.org/COMMERCE.WEB/product_files/HowDoCanadasPrivateSchoolsStackUpInternationally.pdf

- A survey of the low-income families who won the Children's First lottery found that these families report better academic and social outcomes at their children's private schools than do comparable families who send their children to public schools. www.fraserinstitute.org/COMMERCE.WEB/product_files/LowIncomesHighStandardsChildrenFirst2008.pdf

Schools Boards – Help or Hindrance?

The Atlantic Institute for Market Studies notes that the students in the two districts without school boards (because the minister fired them) are doing much better than the students in the other seven districts.

www.aims.ca/inthemedias.asp?typeID=4&id=2230&id=0&p=1

Investing in Ontario's Teachers' Unions

Ontario's Ministry of Education has included among its fourth quarter investments a grant of \$250,000 to the Ontario Teachers' Federation and \$900,000 to the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.

www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/about/investments.html

Teachers Matter

According to a recent analysis, differences in teacher effectiveness have larger effects on young children's outcomes in reading and math than do differences in teachers' background factors such as level of education and type of certification held. The teacher quality effects were substantially greater than the effects for children's family backgrounds.

<http://teacheffectively.com/2008/06/18/some-factors-affecting-effectiveness/>

Ontario School Boards Ranked

This C.D. Howe ranking shows that some Ontario school boards are adding much more value to their children's education than others.

www.cdhowe.org/pdf/ebrief_61.pdf

BOOK REVIEWS

The Dumbest Generation

How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future – Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30

Mark Bauerlein

The author, a professor of English at Emory University, tackles the notion that the digital age will yield a generation of sharper, more aware, and intellectually-sophisticated children. Terms like "information superhighway" imply that young people will use

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their understanding of technology to become better educated. The author, citing voluminous reports concerning the latest generation's staggering ignorance, argues that the new technology has actually had the opposite effect.

Excerpt (p. 95)

"Years of exposure to screens prime young Americans at a deep cognitive level to multitasking and inter-activity. Perhaps we should call this a certain kind of intelligence, a novel screen literacy. It improves their visual acuity, their mental readiness for rushing images and updated information. At the same time, however, screen intelligence doesn't transfer well to non-screen experiences, especially the kinds that build knowledge and verbal skills. It conditions minds against quiet, concerted study, against imagination unassisted by visuals, against linear, sequential analysis of texts, against an idle afternoon with a detective story and nothing else. This explains why teenagers and 20-year-olds appear at the same time so mentally agile and culturally ignorant. Visual culture improves the abstract spatialization and problem solving, but it doesn't complement other intelligence-building activities. Smartness there parallels dumbness elsewhere."

Proust and the Squid

The Story and Science of the Reading Brain
Maryanne Wolf

The author is a cognitive neuroscientist and the director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University. Her book offers an eloquent and impassioned look at the effect of reading on our brains, with particular attention to the problems experienced by dyslexics. She explains that the process of learning to read can go wrong for any number of reasons and that there is no one form of dyslexia, but rather a continuum of deficits of various kinds. In English, most children begin with decoding problems.

Excerpt (p. 168)

"The tangled tale begins as it should – in our evolutionary past. Its backdrop is best captured by the British neuropsychologist Andrew Ellis who declared that whatever dyslexia turns out to be, 'it is not a reading disorder'. Ellis was referring to the fact that in terms of human evolution, the brain was never meant to read; as we've seen, there are neither genes nor biological structures specific only to reading. Instead, in order to read, each brain must learn to make

new circuits by connecting older regions originally designed and genetically programmed for other things, such as recognizing objects and retrieving their names. Dyslexia cannot be anything as simple as a flaw in the brain's 'reading center', for no such thing exists. To find the causes of dyslexia, we must look to older structures of the brain and their multiple levels of processes, structures, neurons, and genes, all of which have to come together in rapid synchrony to form the reading circuit."

So Much Reform, So Little Change ***The persistence of Failure in Urban Schools*** **Charles M. Payne**

Although this book is about the rootedness of failure in urban schools, it applies equally to all public schools. Reform efforts have been going on for at least 30 years, with little or nothing to show for all the money and effort. The author, although he identifies himself as "progressive" (as opposed to "conservative") is equally critical of both points of view. Unfortunately, the author has little to offer in terms of concrete policy solutions. He closes with the following: "It is our job to not let public discussion reduce people to their negatives, to insist always on seeing the larger context, to continue looking to augment the strengths and possibilities that low-income parents and their children bring with them." The excerpt explains why people actually like failure.

Excerpt (pp. 76-77)

"Workers can have both a psychological and a material investment in failure. It is not that teachers want to fail but that they don't see much likelihood of succeeding, and in such a context, it is natural that people try to get what they can from a bad situation... If trying isn't going to make a difference, we can just relax a little. The low standards that work to the detriment of the collectivity over time can get mighty comfortable for the individual in the short term.... Students, for their part, are doing exactly the same thing, developing various kinds of investments in failure and the freedom it allows them."

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

Here's a six-minute Youtube video on school choice that is very funny, if a bit close to the bone.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLDb2V86Ei0

Continuation of Letter on Physical Education

As someone with a B.Ed. (Hons) and Master of Arts in Physical Education, I am greatly concerned that physical education has become a "bird" course at university and that sustained, regular and structured physical activity is virtually ignored in school, no longer being compulsory for certain grades.

Lack of Physical Education in our schools is one of the primary factors driving obesity in over 50 per cent of Canadians.

There are tremendous physiological, sociological, and psychological benefits to be derived from regular participation in physical activity. They include stronger neuro-musculo/skeletal and cardiovascular systems, awareness of the rules and laws of various sports, and learning to work as a team member or leader/coach/captain.

Participating in regular, sustained physical activity can also reduce stress and improve self-image, as new friends, techniques and skills are developed. Knowledge and understanding of numerous health issues can enhance a health lifestyle, prevent illness, and save lives. Participation also develops life skills such as decision-making; communication; problem-solving; and social skills such as co-operation, collaboration, and respect and trust for others.

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in Canada and accounted for at least 33% of all deaths in 2002. For the fiscal year 2002-03, there were about 411,000 acute care hospitalizations, or more than 300,000 Canadians hospitalized

According to the 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey conducted among persons aged 12 years or more, five million Canadians say they are affected by heart disease, hypertension, and stroke. Cardiovascular disease is the most costly disease affecting Canadians. In 1998, it was responsible for \$18.5 billion in expenditures, or 11.6% of the total cost of all illnesses in Canada. Of this, \$6.8 billion was in direct costs, particularly for hospital care, and \$11.7 billion was in indirect costs, most due to premature death. (The Canadian Institutes of Health Research)

Nobody can argue that taking part in physical activity, even just a simple walk, is not good for our well-being. As we strive to become well-rounded individuals, physical activity can help to achieve a more balanced lifestyle of physical emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health.