

THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO CHAPTER

THE TREASURE THAT IS - PUBLIC EDUCATION SERIES

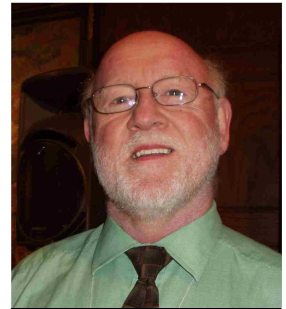
2006 - 2007

As we get closer to a provincial election, the issue of public funding for private schools will again surface. Its supporters will offer the following reasons for this

- the public system has failed
- monopolies are by definition bad and we need competition to shape up public schools just like business or in sports
- parents should be given choice; it's only fair
- religion and identity are important parts of a person's life and if the public school can't support these, then we need independent schools to do so

To these I offer the following arguments against school "choice":

First of all, the public system "ain't broke". Even though we are about the most diverse system in the world ("systems" when you include other 10 provinces and three territories); we score well—better than the UK and the US in the major indicators. And of course, the international tests do not score for such important goals as honesty, tolerance, creativity, critical thinking, responsible citizenship, altruism, reliability, initiative, teamwork, or other important competencies for successful living in a pluralistic democracy.



John Myers

The business model of competition does not apply to education since

- Kids are not widgets. There are just too many variables affecting students' achievement to be taken into account. Standardized tests as indicators of success have severe limits. As a result of the limits on testing we can't really know the results of schooling for years after graduation. Responsible citizenship, careful consumers, nurturing parents, and respectful neighbours may be influenced by quality education but tests are pretty crude measures of this.
- We can't spend \$100 million plus on a classroom like the New York Yankees can do for their roster of 25. Nor can we trade and draft the best and the brightest. Even if funding counts we are far from knowing exactly how.
- Competition is not the ethos of schools. If we are lucky schools will adapt and copying what works elsewhere. Merit pay based on test results was first tried in Britain 150 years ago. It has yet to work.

The choice argument is simply false. It is false for rural schools and for schools that are further than walking or easy transportation. The argument also poses dangers when reduced to choices based on faith and religious tradition alone. Why?

- Religion is but one aspect of culture and in Canada. Historically we have given language primacy with the exception of the deal Catholics and Protestants made in Ontario and Québec when our country was founded. Even within those exceptions other faiths can be and are accommodated.
- Amartya Sen, the Nobel laureate in economics has observed the tensions among groups in Europe and while praising Canada's stress on cultural freedom within our multicultural framework has warned against "cultural conservatism". He argues that much of this is coercive and separatist and, in the end, anti-pluralism. He argues that such confusions about the nature of multiculturalism, especially when combined with poor treatment and genuine inequality within the larger society have damaged European societies.

I would hope we would promote the treasure that is public education in the light of the challenges and clear need for improvement. We should not follow the push towards vouchers and self segregation south of the border and heed the words of US Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.

I wish I could say that racism and prejudice were only distant memories and that liberty and equality were just around the bend. I wish I could say that America has come to appreciate diversity and to see and accept similarity. But as I look around I see not a nation of unity but of division—Afro and white, indigenous and immigrant, rich and poor, educated and illiterate.

These comments were made in 1992. We can see what has happened there since. We ought not to follow that path. The public good requires a public education system. Where else can we train the next generation to participate, shape, and run the pluralistic democratic society we call Canada?

THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO CHAPTER THE TREASURE THAT IS - PUBLIC EDUCATION SERIES SESSION 3 – JANUARY 18, 2007

The third session in our Public Education series was double-barreled. We began with on-the-ground work by the staff at Firgrove P.S. with Principal Vicky Branco and Lead Teacher Harpreet Ghuman illustrating the many facets of school leadership for promoting a school community working to improve teaching and student learning. Firgrove is a busy yet positive place for all with the challenges of new staff. With support from the community and by working with both York University and OISE, as well as the school district they see progress and hope in serving the needs of their students with a strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy.

The second part of the evening had Professor Joe Flessa from OISE offer a big picture for exploring the question, "Can 'leadership' solve all school problems?" His overview of the factors influencing school improvement was a wonderful short course for anyone interested in promoting school reform with personal stories and hard data that showed how complex the issues are, yet offered hope and a direction for all of us. Leaders, regardless of their official titles, can do much with help from the community and beyond. The discussion following the presentations was spirited yet of high quality.

Plan to attend the National Inner City Conference in Toronto in April (www.tdsb.on.ca/innercityconference) for more on the Model Schools Project.



Presenter Joe Flessa chats with Susan Seidman. John Myers and Tina DiDiDomenico converse behind.



Model School Lead Teacher, Harpreet Ghuman, and Principal Vicky Branco

THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO CHAPTER THE TREASURE THAT IS - PUBLIC EDUCATION SERIES SESSION 4 – FEBRUARY 22, 2007

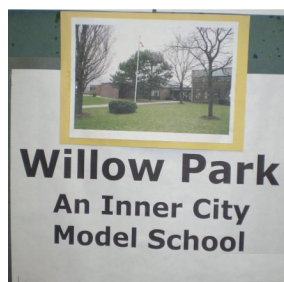
The final session in our series, The Treasure That Is Public Education, packed a lot into it. Diana Kordic from Willow Park gave a poster presentation. Willow Park is the third Inner City Model Project Schools supported by the Toronto District School Board to enhance the educational opportunities of our neediest communities, Mike Hawes, vice principal of Eastdale Collegiate gave a presentation of their work in challenging circumstances from the high school perspective.

His remarks reminded us that most students do not go on to university study and that we need to better support the "working majority". This is something the current government has picked up on with its "School Success" initiative. High schools still resemble in many ways the university preparation mission that spawned them in the first place more than a century ago.

The focus of the evening was a preview of the 16th Survey on attitudes towards Public Education from Dr. Doug Hart of OISE/UT. While we await the full published study (this time including Canada wide data) it is clear that the public supports public education. The power and limits of survey research were also explored and it reminded us to be thoughtful the next time we are bombarded with some poll purporting to tell us what we think. Remember the old saying about "lies, damned lies, and statistics".



Diana Kordic and Mike Hawes stand in front of the Willow Park display.



John Myers and presenter Dr. Doug Hart.