BEFORE THE BOILING POINT
ANATOMY OF THE NOVA SCOTIA TEACHERS' STRIKE

BY GRANT FROST

The 2016-2017 school year here in Nova Scotia will undoubtedly go down in history. This is the year that, after 122 years of relative passivity, the teachers of Nova Scotia took to the streets to express their collective outrage. In what may have been the largest public demonstration in the province's history, thousands of teachers and their supporters marched in various locations around Nova Scotia to show their anger at the government for considering legislating an end to their long labour dispute.

Although teachers had shown a willingness to continue bargaining, the government was staunch in its insistence on tight budgetary constraints. There would be no money for raises, the longstanding service award would be stripped, and only limited funding would be made available for addressing teachers' concerns around student learning conditions.

And on February 17, 2017, thousands of Nova Scotians took to the streets. Yet even in the face of the massive outcry, the government passed Bill 75, now known as the Teachers Professional Agreement and Classroom Improvements (2017) Act.

Now, seeing as I am a school teacher, there is a bias here. Having marched in the streets myself any number of times and having rallied others to do so as well, I freely admit to having come out on a variety of fronts against this legislation. However, laying politics aside for a moment, even the most casual observer had to be drawn in by the passion being expressed by teachers. Even before the legislation was enacted, teachers had taken to the newspapers, the airwaves and to cyberspace like never before to express their outrage at a system and political leadership that they felt was not hearing their concerns. Education Minister Karen Casey's insistence that she was "...listening to teachers" became such a parody for the realities experienced by classroom teachers that she was held every bit as responsible as the Premier himself for the deplorable state of affairs.

A BIT OF BACKGROUND

As someone who has spent a good deal of his free time over the past five years blogging about educational issues in this province, I must admit that, for this particular moment in our history, the writing has been on the wall for quite some time. Teachers are angry, and it is very, very difficult to pinpoint a single, isolated cause for that anger. In my view, 2017 was a culmination of a long, steady buildup in teacher frustration, and when the Liberal government unveiled their somewhat "take it...or else" approach to bargaining, the cork finally blew.

If one wants to trace that resentment back to its roots, there are a great many authors much more qualified that I am to tell the entire tale. One interesting place to start is with a book that came out almost 25 years ago entitled *Class Warfare: The Assault on Canada's Schools* co-authored by Maude Barlow and Heather-jane Robertson. The book exposed a rather disturbing trend that existed at the time: regardless of where one turned for an opinion, there was a general consensus that public schools were failing.

The problem wasn't so much with the opinion as it was with the source. According to Barlow and Robertson, the vast majority of those speaking out on public education at the time were not public educators. In fact, many had very little direct involvement in the education system, other than having been educated themselves. These were not the voices of teachers decrying the system, but rather the voices of politicians, columnists and business interests that were crowding the airways. Despite little evidence, the idea that schools were not doing a good job of educating the next generation was preeminent among commentators, particularly those who were not, themselves, educators.

I could point to 25 years of Canadian innovation and excellence to show that schools must have been doing something right, but one should not be too harsh with these ancestors of modern educational reform. After all, this tendency towards a negative view of public education was "a thing" at the time, arguably the result of another, earlier text out of the United States. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* was a report about the state of American education released under the Reagan administration which painted a fairly bleak picture of how the education system was serving the needs of the nation. This report is considered one of the pivotal documents of the current educational era, and it set off wave after wave of reform, even though it has in retrospect been fairly widely criticized for having been based on more supposition than fact.

2017 WAS A CULMINATION OF A LONG, STEADY BUILDUP IN TEACHER FRUSTRATION, AND WHEN THE LIBERAL GOVERNMENT UNVEILED THEIR SOMEWHAT "TAKE IT...OR ELSE" APPROACH TO BARGAINING, THE CORK FINALLY BLEW.

Regardless of where they originated or how they became so widespread, the ideas of that Reagan-esque era remain stubbornly entrenched in the arsenal of those who continue to criticize public education today and, by association, public educators. Ideas such as 'schools are not preparing our young people to compete in the global marketplace' and 'schools are failing because they are monopolies' were then, and remain now, commonplace critiques.

Taken at face value, one could perhaps presume that such criticisms are part of the general thrust of holding any public entity accountable in a sort of "common sense" way. As a public institution, education, much like healthcare or the postal service, should be open to critiques and concerns expressed by taxpayers in the interests of making improvements to the system. However, it seems that when society is focused on identifying problems (or perceived problems) in the education system and coming up with solutions to those problems, "expert" voices outside the education system are the ones that are prioritized over those from within the system itself.

And therein lies the crux of the issue. Given enough daylight, consensus can develop rather quickly that a perceived problem exists, often in the absence of evidence that it does (and sometimes even in the face of evidence that it doesn't). Public pressure is then brought to bear on elected officials to find solutions. Once the politicians get involved, they will, generally speaking, look for answers that may not necessarily be the most effective but, rather, the most popular. If responding to popular opinion is the priority, legislation or policy may be enacted to address the perceived problem so that the public is placated.

Alliteration aside, (see what I did there?), it is in these policies that the true angst of a teacher's life exists. Within the education

system, policy has very little actual power over any group of stakeholders outside of the classroom teacher. When policy becomes practice, often the only group of people who are required to do something (and be held accountable for doing it) are frontline educators.

THE MYTH IN THE MESSAGE

The devil in all this is that despite the hue and cry, public schools across North America are decidedly not failing. Authors like Pasi Salberg (*Finnish Lessons*, 2011) and Diane Ravitch (*Reign of Error,* 2013) deal quite articulately with the idea that not only is public education not floundering, it is flourishing. The notion that our schools are failing is, according to Ravitch at least, a deliberate effort to replace our schools with a market-based system.

Here on our East Coast shores, massive international education restructuring movements are easy to dismiss as happening in someone else's back yard. However, even though we may not face the full onslaught of the privatization movement that some jurisdictions are forced to endure, the pressures of the modern Global Education Reform Movement, (or GERM, as Salberg writes) are not lost on us. Even here in our up-til-now educationally quiet corner of the world, the practice of undermining public confidence in public education seems fairly well entrenched.

IF WE TRULY WANT TO IMPROVE THE CLIMATE UNDER WHICH OUR STUDENTS LEARN, WE NEED TO IMPROVE THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH OUR TEACHERS TEACH.

Consider the last few years of standardized testing results (or, more specifically, how they have been reported).

In October of 2014, the Pan-Canadian Assessment Programme (PCAP) 2013 results were released to the general public. PCAP is a test that is delivered nationally every three years and tests students' ability in reading, science and math. In 2013, the major domain was science. There were sections of the test that measured English and math, but they were considered "minor domains" this time round. In the words of the test-makers themselves "Caution must be used when analyzing the data for minor domains".

Turns out, when it came to science, Nova Scotia had actually done reasonably well. The PCAP people had set the Canadian average at a score of 500, and we had scored 492. Not surprisingly, considering their size, Alberta and Ontario had "outscored" us by a healthy margin, but the race for bronze had been close. BC beat us by nine percentage points, and Newfoundland and Labrador by eight. PEI was only one point behind us, so in a close race, we finished 5th in the country.

Furthermore, the PCAP is scored on a four-point scale, and the test creators have determined that to be meeting national standards, "students should be at level 2 or above". Ninety one percent of Nova Scotia students reached that benchmark on the 2013 test. For comparison sake, Alberta, with all their money and a population of four million, saw 93% of their students do the same thing. Ontario hit 94%, and BC was tied with us at 91%.

Not bad for a small, have-not province.

A similar story unfolded even more recently. As the labour dispute between Nova Scotia teachers and the government entered some of its darkest days in late 2016, results of the 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test were released. This was again a year for science to be measured, and again, Nova Scotia students did exceptionally well.

When it came to an overall ranking, Nova Scotia students ranked 15th internationally. Our little province beat out 57 other countries, including Korea, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. If you only include OECD member countries, which the organization often does to make comparisons, Nova Scotia was outscored by only three.

Within Canada, which surpassed most other nations and featured powerful showings by educational juggernauts Alberta (2nd in the world) and British Columbia (3rd), Nova Scotia again placed well. We ended up 5th nationally — a mere seven points behind Ontario — and led all of the smaller provinces including (in order of appearance) PEI, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

As seems to be the norm, however, accolades for public education were hard to come by: our showing in PISA 2015 went ignored by many local media outlets. PCAP coverage included gloomy headlines such as: "Latest education assessment shows Nova Scotia students heading to 'new, lower plateau.'" and "Middling results for Nova Scotia Grade 8 students on Canada-wide test." These headlines were generated almost exclusively by our showing in the portion of the test which measured students' ability in math.

So much for using caution when analyzing data from minor domains.

BOILING POINT

This all may be very interesting, perhaps, and might seem to suggest a lack of quality journalism rather than a disturbing educational trend. However, if one wishes to see how the misguided mantra of "Our Schools are Failing" impacts the classroom, Nova Scotia again makes a fairly decent case study.

In 2015, Nova Scotia's Department of Early Education and Childhood Development (DoEECD), released an Action Plan to fix our education system. The plan was full of all sorts of recommendations, many calling for new policies and procedures to be enacted. However, the entire basis for the plan was a public opinion survey responded to by less than 2% of the population. No matter. The rhetoric of failure — and the ensuing burden placed on teachers — was all too familiar, evidenced by the Minister of Education's words in the opening comments of the document: "Time and again, test results show our students are falling behind…" and "It is an

unfortunate, accepted truth that we have fallen behind in educating our children… and they have fallen behind their peers…On national and international tests…"

I did mention 15th in the world, right?

So you see, teachers are angry. The anger that boiled over into the streets of Nova Scotia this past winter was due, in many ways, to this constant cacophony of insistence of system failure, calls for reform, and the policies that result. Yes, the teachers were angry at the government for how they were treated, and yes they were none too happy about the wage package or the loss of their service award or lack of resources for their students.

But for my money, that is not solely what drove them into the streets.

What drove them into the streets is that for years they have suffered from a litany of educational initiatives and policy changes based on a false premise of failure. Those changes have chipped away to such an extent at the very fabric of professional autonomy that classroom teachers often feel threatened and isolated. All in the name of improving schools that are, in many ways, already doing a bang-up job teaching our kids.

I am not here to argue that public education is a flawless system, but it might be time to come at the issue from another angle. Although it may be true in some ways that our schools are failing our students, it may be time to ask how are they failing our teachers.

If we truly want to improve the climate under which our students learn, we need to improve the conditions under which our teachers teach.

And, from my perspective, placing the appropriate amount of weight on the voice and expertise of the frontline educator is something that is at least 25 years overdue. ●

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