

Control over education is best left to the experts, not to parent activists

My 55 years as an undergraduate, teacher, co-ordinator, assistant, principal and reformer in Edmonton triggered two reactions to Paula Simons' column, "Savvy school trustees needed" (Oct. 5): First, philosopher George Santayana's warning that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it;" and second, a compulsion to inform the enthusiastic and forgetful of the 20-year progressivist plague that infected our schools when the fantastical, but contagious, "Doc Jones" became superintendent in 1968.

Progressivism, centred on student interest and discovery, switched the focus of instruction from knowledge to process. Thus correct spelling, memorisation, lectures, direct learning, testing, personal accountability and adult -imposed control "were out." Group work, open area classrooms, learning centres, ungraded schools, continuous progress, abolition of external testing, "inventive" spelling, program continuity, individualized instruction and mandatory catering to juvenile self-esteem "were in."

The inevitable decline in student achievement and discipline was so alarming that eventually a majority of trustees, retired principals and concerned citizens concluded that "Smoke, Mirrors and Mediocrity" were no longer an option. The formidable Emery Dosedall was appointed superintendent in 1994.

NEW TEST HELPED JUDGE NEW PROGRAMS, POLICIES

After dismantling the layered administrative setup and eliminating "dumb rules," Dosedall made principals "captains responsible for their own ships," insisting they report directly to him. Strategies were provided to assist in

the improvement of instruction while newly-developed HLAT (Highest Level of Achievement Tests) made possible the rapid assessment of the new programs and policies.

Dosedall increased the number of options, and alternative programs such as Cogito and Logos were established. Thus Edmonton was spared the rash of private and charter schools that broke out in Calgary, the direct result of the school board's doctrinaire "one size fits all" approach.

Tapping directly into the schools' potential had dramatic results. In May 2001, The School Administrator, journal of the American Association of School Administrators, devoted nearly its entire issue to what was happening in Edmonton, an honour never before accorded any district.

A recent book produced by the Anderson School of Management at UCLA highlights Edmonton as the best school district in North America. Last January, The Fraser Institute cited Edmonton as a model for others to follow.

The selection of Angus McBeath in 2001, crowned the board's determination to eliminate the negative effects of progressivism.

Taking control of a district where the necessary reforms and policies were already in place,

McBeath determined to make academic achievement the cornerstone of his superintendency. Rallied under his banner, Focus on Results, Edmonton made startling gains.

Over a period of three years the number of Edmonton students completing high school rose by 4.7 per cent, nearly doubling the provincial increase of 2.5 per cent. In 1999-2000 Edmonton's completion rate was 8.6 per cent below the provincial level of 72 per cent. Three years later this gap had narrowed to 6.4 percentage points.

Compared to the decades of progressive stagnation, the academic results were amazing. From 1998-99 to 2003-04, Grade 3 Language Arts went from -2.8 below the provincial average to -1.4. Grade 3 Math went from -1.2 below the provincial average to -0.6. Grade 6 Language Arts went from -3.1 below the province average to +0.4 above. Grade 6 Math went from +0.5 to + 1.9 above the province. Grade 9 Language Arts went from -2.6 to +1.1 above. Grade 9 Math went from -0.5 below the provincial average to an astonishing +5.1.

McBeath is a "hands-on" superintendent greatly concerned about students who need special attention. So in fall 2003, he identified 2,421 students from Grades 1 to 9 who were reading at one or more years below grade level and informed their principals that he would be asking about their personal progress later on.

More than half of those in the "at risk" category who were still in the district the following year had achieved at least two years' growth, reading at grade level or above. More than one-third of them had achieved one year's growth but were still reading below grade level. A very small group (5.7 per cent) showed no improvement.

CITY'S ACADEMIC RESULTS WILL CONTINUE TO IMPROVE

Effective as he has been to date, I am convinced McBeath is just hitting his stride. I am willing to bet my pension that Edmonton's academic results continue to rise over the next few years.

If the positive features of balanced literacy are successfully welded on to a solid phonics foundation, McBeath will have achieved a breakthrough in the teaching of reading that will make headlines across the English-speaking world.

The many choices afforded parents today and the extraordinary achievement of our public schools would never have materialized if the Edmonton public school board had operated on the naive assumption advanced by a prominent APPEAL candidate that "in some sense ignorance helps."

It was an idea as foolish as her expectation that APPEAL candidates will make better trustees "because we don't know the system inside and backwards."

The APPEAL candidate pushing the notion that linking district schools closely to community groups and allowing them to be partially controlled by parent activists is ignorant of the fact that this scheme proved to be disastrous when applied in Chicago.

Edmonton Public's present success is the direct result of knowledgeable experienced trustees

performing their most important functions: setting realistic attainable goals, and selecting energetic, intelligent leaders with enough sense to employ effective empirically proven methods to get there.

The sensible way to ensure the continued progress of our schools is to vote for experienced trustees such as George Nicholson, Svend Hansen, Bob Dean, Gerry Gibeault, Don Fleming, Terry Sulyma, and Don Williams.

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