

## **Creativity Begins With Discipline**

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Education, as education bureaucrats will tell you, is the road to the future. But in much of Canada today, it's a path to mediocrity. Our system is broken and demoralized. The public has lost faith in it, partly because the public has little to do with it. We put teaching in the hands of unionized teachers and calcified bureaucrats -- and the whole country suffers. The uneducated graduate becomes a drain on the economy and the culture.

The change Canada needs most is a rejuvenated educational system. We need to make it the #1 priority at all levels of government. It should be the obsession of our best politicians, professionals, business leaders and intellectuals. As Malcolm Gladwell said the other day, we could greatly improve public education "if corporations publicly and loudly lined up behind the public school system." Loudly is the key word. Education needs loud, passionate champions.

Our schools have become lax and cynical. Teachers, made to feel like babysitters, act like babysitters. They automatically push students upward, a recipe for failure and resentment. If a student goes from Grade 8 to Grade 9 without understanding what the teacher in Grade 8 was saying, that student has been cheated. The result is boredom. Many high school students seem barely able to tolerate teachers, books and learning. We should revive the old rule: Don't promote students till they earn it. Don't let students into high school who aren't ready for it.

We should insist on parental responsibility. Anyone who sends a child off to school without a sense of purpose helps degrade the school for everyone. As Harry Giles wrote in a recent report on his experience as a pioneer of independent schools, teachers should not have to tolerate "ill-mannered, ill-educated, inattentive, undisciplined children." Everyone believes that. No public school acts upon it.

We should recognize teaching by paying excellent salaries to good teachers -- and far less to the merely adequate. If the unions object, we should fight for pay flexibility in the public arena.

Give principals back the power to suspend students whose antisocial activities cripple education. Appoint in every school an ombudsman, not to defend teachers or students but to stand up for the purposes of education. (Leave the ombudsman in place only a few years, so that he or she won't become part of the establishment.) Recreate the tradition of school libraries, hire professional librarians and go back to buying books as well as computers.

We need smaller schools and smaller bureaucracies. We need to let parents set up their own schools and direct their tax money to them -- the public schools will benefit from competition. We need an end to the obsession with overly delicate speech, which now paralyzes debate. We shouldn't stop worrying about students who are harassed by teachers or other students but we should stop talking as if harassment were the central problem.

Many students coast through elementary and high school and arrive at university without knowing how to read a poem, write a sentence or explain federal-provincial relations. Teacher-dependent, they believe that education is what the schools teach; they never achieve the freedom to think and act for themselves without guidance.

A well-intentioned and perhaps good-hearted condescension has helped dilute the value of schooling. One of the greatest Canadian teachers, the late Northrop Frye, argued that only disciplined work will lead a student toward excitement, pleasure and success. A passionate amateur pianist as well as one of the world's great literary critics, Frye chose piano-playing as a metaphor representing the difficulties and rewards of learning. "It requires endless patient repetition until conscious learning is finally digested into unconscious skill."

He believed in unconstrained art and thought, "but the spontaneous comes at the end of a long discipline of practice." Education is in essence a movement toward the spontaneous. "When we practise the piano, we are setting ourselves free to play the piano. It is only the thoroughly educated who can take liberties with rules."

Good students understand precisely what Frye meant. It's both practical and visionary, like Frye himself. But something in the spirit of the age encourages the opposite view. Perhaps the desire to enhance the self-esteem of students has created the habit of honouring any work above total incompetence. More important, we have become intoxicated by the idea of originality. Knowing that our future depends on new ideas, we forget that inspiration comes only to those who have prepared their minds for its arrival. Teachers should not neglect spontaneity but maybe they should use the word "disciplined" half a dozen times for every time they say "creative."

Only a radically reformed structure can work these changes. We need a system that's nimble and clever, a gazelle to replace the hippopotamus that the 20th century bequeathed to us.