

## **Talkin' Schools and Society: What should be the aim of education?**

by Trish Elliott, Feb. 5, 2013

*This short talk was part of the University of Regina Faculty of Education's 'Talkin' Schools and Society' series. Co-presenters were Dr. Ken Montgomery of the Faculty of Education, U of R, and Dr. Carrie Bourassa of the Faculty of Health Studies, First Nations University of Canada. The question was 'What should be the aim of public education.' I was asked to put forward some ideas from a parent and community perspective.*

I am here to speak from the perspective of a parent. I can tell you a parent's aim for his or her child is simple. We want our children to be happy. But education planning seldom takes happiness into account. And happiness is never measured.

We know what is measured because once a year the school principal brings to the school council meeting charts and graphs. The first time we were given these things – I think it began about five or six years ago – what drew my eye was the copyright notice at the bottom of the page for Pearson Education International.

Thus I discovered my child's achievement is owned and copyrighted by a U.S.-based multinational. I found this disturbing. But even more disturbing, the charts told us how deficient our children are. To solve this deficiency we must fork over community funds – which might otherwise have gone to happy events like dances and barbeques – to buy reading and math packages from the self-same corporations that have taken teaching out of the hands of teachers and placed it in the hands of bureaucrats and corporations that produce charts telling us we should give them more money.

So we go home with these charts in our hands, presumably to put on the fridge where art used to hang. Because about the same time the charts appeared, we noticed our children stopped bringing art home. And with a decline in art came a rise in stomachaches.

That's anecdotal – no one measures stomachaches. But they should, because children feel both happiness and unhappiness in the stomach. This is true.

So we parents fundraised and wrote grants to bring an artist into the school on a daily basis, and to put on art activities for the community, and for one magical year stomachaches were greatly reduced.

The children built and decorated a contraption called the Time Traveller, which we hauled around the neighbourhood. People from all the generations who had attended the school stood in the Time Traveller and shared their memories.

And I can tell you not one person remembered a particularly good literacy assessment. They remembered a favourite teacher, a best friend, games played and lessons learned on the playground.

School boards do not care much about playgrounds, but they should. It's the place students learn from each other, from the volunteers, parents, teachers, teacher associates and the school custodian. This is the place where it all comes together – the community.

And make no mistake, it is a *place*. As is the school – usually the most important *place* in the neighbourhood. I have been to many school closure meetings where parents labour to explain these elemental concepts to decision-makers. Community members know what a school is to their community, and what it can be. Planners talk about place-based education but they don't understand it. Parents explain it to them, but the schools close anyway.

Education planners aren't ready for this wisdom because they are already so convinced they know what is best for our children. And what is best is to put small children on buses and ship them to a distant place, where they will be given a new community and a so-called learning family that will be better than the imperfect community and families they already have.

You know, people can read the coded message of school closures. The fact that closures occur almost exclusively in low income, racially marginalized neighbourhoods hasn't gone unnoticed in United States, where such decisions are right now being challenged under Title 6 of the Civil Rights Act. It hasn't gone unnoticed in Regina, where the map of planned closures was largely indistinguishable from the map of lower-than-average income households and higher-than-average aboriginal populations. But folks in Eastview didn't need a map. They knew the score, they spoke openly of it, their school closed anyway.

So at the end of the school day, instead of hanging out on the playground and running back and forth to the corner store, having friends and neighbours looking out for them, building memories of freedom and independence like the oldtimers have, the children will be put on a bus and shipped back to a possibly empty house in their neighbourhood – a neighbourhood now in accelerated decline, having lost its school.

But, by God, the great Continuous Improvement Plan in the sky has been served.

So one day I get a robocall from a giant, distant high school, informing me that a child in our household was absent for Period 3 math.

Now math, we are told, is very, very important, almost to the exclusion of all other subjects. Math is a centerpiece in the Ministry of Education's aim to review all

curricula, in every subject, from social sciences to the arts, to ensure it supports local industry and labour force demand.

It is only in university, when math reaches a level capable of unlocking secrets of the universe and unleashing the joy of discovery, that it suddenly loses all value, and is relegated to the lone professor, the last of a dying breed, facing a lecture theater of 600 students. For universities are businesses now, too, made to deliver students to the surety of the labour market, not to the secrets of the universe.

So I ask my son where he was for Period 3. And he tells me he was lying on the grass with friends, talking and looking at the clouds.

And how can I reprimand a kid who has managed to carve out time to achieve my highest aim for him – a moment of happiness?

I would like the education system to share this aim. Kids who are relatively happy tend to do well in school and life.

I asked my son what aim education should have, and his response was, “Just to teach things and to learn things, instead of having to memorize.” Ironically, his second piece of advice was to shorten the school day – clearly the minister doesn’t consult 16-year-olds! When I asked him, ‘What about happiness?’ he was so incredulous that he couldn’t even imagine school being linked to his happiness.

It shouldn’t be that unimaginable because it’s not that difficult. You start by recognizing the whole child. You start by giving teachers the freedom to teach, as they’ve learned to do in our excellent teacher education programs. This means putting trust in our higher education system, so that the state needn’t micro-manage every minute of a teacher’s day.

You stop emulating countries where desperate parents hand bribes to teachers, and even more desperate students commit suicide in advance of tests.

You stop closing schools and shipping teachers around like cattle.

You start by accepting – deeply accepting – that the learning environment extends beyond the classroom, into the playground and into our homes and community.

The ‘lighted schoolhouse’ is not some hippy fantasy; it’s a working model with a record of success. Indeed, we have many studies showing that – all other things considered equal – walkable schools with lots of clubs, evening activities, hot lunches, community ties and parental involvement are schools where children learn well.

When you invest holistic effort instead of declaring a school and a neighbourhood failed and pulling the plug, good things happen.

A supportive learning environment can't be bought in a can from a corporation or a consultant. But you can build it with things that make kids happy, like a hot meal, a hug, a music lesson, a place across the street that you can go to with friends and family in the evening, outreach programs that bind school to home and education to place. Grass to lie on, time to watch clouds.

When we speak of such things, the response is, "That's nice but we are in the business of education."

Yet education is not a business, and my child is not your product. You need to aim higher.