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And lots more – Publications of Interest, What's New?, SQE Activities, and Letters to the Editor

From the Outgoing President **If I Knew Then...**

By Nancy Wagner

On November 19 at OQE's annual general meeting, OQE members voted to let the organization's operations lapse. For more information, please turn to page 7 or give me a call at 519-745-6037.

I have had the honour of serving as OQE president for four years, and now the time has come for me to step down. I will continue to work for education reform as secretary-treasurer of the Society for Quality Education. This change comes just in time for me to take on another, equally-important responsibility.

Like many members I was first drawn to OQE when my son was having difficulty at school. When he could still barely read a word by mid-grade 3, I started looking for help outside the system. Eighteen months (and many dollars later), he was finally starting to catch up to his peers.

Unfortunately, James, now 23, still does not read for pleasure. This is a loss that angers me even now. Had proper steps been taken early enough, reading would not continue to be a chore for him today.

In Ontario, roughly one in three students has difficulty learning to read. This is virtually unchanged from when my first child entered school some 20 years ago. Virtually unchanged is the philosophy that underlies (some might say undermines) today's methods for teaching reading — guessing, using pictures for cueing, perhaps a little sounding-out as a last resort.

When James was in school, my inclination, at least initially, was to trust the public education system. Today, thanks to my long involvement with OQE, I know better. I have learned that I cannot compel our system of public education to employ best practices when it comes to any subject or any child.

That being the case, I refuse to leave the education of those I love to chance. My family members will not be falling through the cracks. OQE has taught me to be proactive, and for that lesson alone I will be forever grateful.

With his parents' permission, I am embarking on a new venture. I plan to teach my almost-three-year-old grandson to read this winter. Even though I have no experience as a teacher, Malkin assures me I can do it and has loaned me the book that is to be my guide. This winter, my new project will be to teach Aidan to read. I'll keep you posted.

A Long and Winding Road

By Malkin Dare

I first become interested in education reform back in 1988 when my son's school failed to teach him how to read. I believed then, and I still believe today, that the biggest potential payoff — the single most needed educational improvement — is to induce the educational establishment to adopt better teaching methods.

This objective, however, has proved to be deceptively simple. I have learned that you don't seem to be able to get there from here!

I began my quest, in my naïve way, by telling my son's teachers about superior teaching methods, proven methods that had been validated by empirical research. Imagine my surprise when I learned that the teachers simply were not interested!

I then turned to the local school board, and again I got the cold shoulder. In fact, I was astonished to find that they didn't seem to care about student learning at all.

I guess I was a slow learner, because the process took several years. In the end, I was forced to conclude that the solution to inferior teaching methods was not to be found locally. The solution (if there was one) had to lie at the level of the province.

Around this time, I was fortunate to encounter a number of like-minded parents and teachers from other parts of Ontario. These individuals had had similar experiences, and they had all come to the same conclusion.

Together, we formed the Organization for Quality Education (OQE), and we began to lobby Ontario members of parliament for measures designed to force the education establishment to improve.

At that time, in the early 90's, Ontario did not participate in international testing, and there was no provincial testing, no provincial curriculum, no standardized report cards, and no mandated school councils. We thought that the introduction of these measures would nudge educators towards better teaching methods.

Due perhaps in part to our efforts, all of these measures, and others besides, had been introduced by the provincial government by the end of the century.

However, even when subsequent international, inter-provincial, and provincial testing showed that Ontario students weren't learning enough, the education establishment clung to its old, long-discredited methods. And, of course, student achievement in Ontario improved but little, as the article on page 6 demonstrates.

Naturally, education leaders have all kinds of excuses to explain the low test scores — not enough money, bad parents, special-needs students, and so forth. None of these excuses stands up to scrutiny, as the article on pages 16-18 shows.

There is no reason to believe that kids in Alberta or BC or Quebec are smarter than Ontario kids. Yet those students routinely outscore Ontario students on comparisons of student achievement, and by a large margin.

There are significant differences between the Ontario education system, and the education systems in Alberta, BC, and Quebec. Most notably, those three provinces have a much greater degree of school choice. As well, all three systems boast exit exams from high school.

The Society for Quality Education would like to learn more about relatively successful education jurisdictions like Alberta — as well as the countries that do well on international comparisons of student achievement. We are particularly interested in the impact of school choice.

To date, the Society has produced and distributed a free DVD on charter schools in Alberta; sponsored an examination of the provincial science curricula; and published a free remedial reading program. All of these materials can be ordered for free at www.societyforqualityeducation.org or by telephoning 888-856-5535 (416-231-7247).

The Society also co-sponsored a visit from Dr. James Tooley who was here for the Canadian première of the BBC film, *School's Out*. This film tells the amazing story of hundreds of low-budget and unregistered independent schools in Nigeria's slums (more on page 7).

The Society is currently running a remedial reading project in an Ontario public school and a survey of the characteristics of Ontario families who send their children to independent schools. Projects in the planning stages include a visit from the recently-retired head of Edmonton Public Schools and a survey to find out how many parents pay for tutoring.

To the parents of struggling public school students, the Society's areas of interest may seem far removed from their children's here-and-now need for better instruction. As much as we are in favour of improved teaching methods, however, we have learned that there is no point focusing on this area. Voluminous research on teaching methods overwhelmingly discredits the "child-centred" methods that dominate Ontario public schools. Yet, apparently, no one cares.

The experience in other jurisdictions strongly suggests that the best way to induce educators to improve their performance is to introduce more competition. At present, publicly-funded educators have little incentive to improve.

For one thing, school performance is shrouded in mystery and, for another, schools are guaranteed to receive the same funding no matter what. If schools no longer had a guaranteed source of income (because parents could tell which schools are doing a good job and had the option of escaping to a better school), then educators might consider switching to better methods.

We appreciate the long-haul support from OQE supporters, and we look forward to your continuing support as we press ahead with SQE.