

Poisoning a Community: What Forces Teachers to Leave

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Friday, March 30, 2007

<https://politicsrespun.org/2007/03/poisoning-a-community-what-forces-teachers-to-leave/>

Jeepers. [This piece](#) [see below] was terrifying, mostly because of the angry abuse making up many of the comments at the website.

"It's just a job." That's a scary phrase. But I can relate to it. I quit just before I got to that place, and that was after 12 years teaching in first a pretty good climate leading to a steadily soul-destroying climate.

I still deal with the regret of spending almost a decade wanting to become a teacher, doing the training and getting a job, then building professional competence, only to see it assaulted by political forces. Reforming from within is something so many are capable of doing without becoming too bitter. I have immense respect for them. The price became too high for me.

Now I have stepped out of the classroom to find more politically powerful tools to address the underlying hyper-individualistic ideological and neoliberal economics motivations for destroying the public, universal, communitarian, society-building education system in exchange for one that worships the inherent god of free-market economics.

But I still resent having my vocation stolen from me by a poisoned climate. Yet, I am still optimistic. Optimistic and unwavering in my belief that when my children turn 5, they will have a rewarding public school experience despite others' attempts to defund and undermine it for their own material greed, misanthropy and hatred of "the inferior".

Oh, yes, the soul-destroying climate:

- parents who blindly stand behind their students who are caught cheating, insisting that the teachers are lying, despite evidence, perhaps because they feel being a good parent means always believing your child
- arbitrary statistical school "performance" goals that encourage fudging enrollment in provincial government exam courses
- the institutional mentality that increasingly needs to pound square peg students into round holes
- "customer" satisfaction surveys
- corporate "food" companies building food fairs in cafeterias
- parents claiming I am discriminating against their students because I didn't catch all the other cheaters on the test, therefore their students shouldn't be "consequenced"
- labour flexibility = servitude
- functionally illiterate administrators who believe they are inspiring
- administrators soliciting parents to complain to them about teachers instead of following district policy asking them to show enough respect for the teachers to speak to them first
- administrators trying to subvert any due process to get teachers to quit
- administrators soliciting students to complain about unfavoured teachers
- high stakes testing

- the ignorance-championing view that what cannot be measured with "objective," "verifiable" statistics is not worth teaching
- new teachers having to justify their grade distribution to their administrators as a statistical whole, rather than an aggregate of actual individual students' achievement
- staff meetings split into 4 different groups in different rooms to keep the staff from discussing contentious issues affecting the entire learning community
- the Fraser Institute--with its website and publications riddled with spelling errors--promoting myopic, research-rejecting educational values
- teachers who welcome and even champion government violations of their labour and human rights
- Ministry staff and government functionaries who believe consulting stakeholders means refusing to speak with BCTF representatives because they are a special interest group, different from all the other special interests
- legislating used car salespeople to have a self-regulating professional body, but removing teachers' ability to have the same
- students who feel it is a human rights violation to be asked to handwrite or not write formal essays w/ txt msg abbrev's and shit, u no?
- Emery Dossall
- Christy Clark
- Gordon Campbell

<http://theyee.ca/Views/Teacherdiaries/2007/03/28/GoodbyeClass/>

Why I Left the Classroom

Teaching changed, so I changed my life.

By Shaun Cunningham

Published: March 28, 2007

TheTyee.ca

One in five teachers leaves the profession within the first five years of teaching. Or is it one in thirteen, as the Ontario government claims? Whatever the stats, they don't reveal how many vanishing teachers were young and restless, old and exhausted, or, like myself, somewhere in between.

Based on what I've overheard in the public school staff rooms of British Columbia, about 98 per cent of teachers say they seriously consider getting out about once a day. The other two per cent are, of course, either Buddhists or medicated. I am one of these. Gone, that is, not medicated.

My own stand-up performance lasted 15 years, thus outlasting by ten years all those who leap from the ship within the first five years. It's not so much that I'm a slow learner, but rather that this is how long it took me to achieve the spectacular kind of burn-out which hasn't been seen since one of my Junior High math teachers declared in the middle of class, "This doesn't add up", left the room, and was never seen again.

Teaching was my identity and I miss it. So the answer to why I left isn't simple. The answer, "to look after my children" brings sighs, nods of knowing commiseration, and the occasional hug from young mothers who barely know me. But in truth, I have a kind of laundry list of items which, taken together,

may or may not constitute the dirt on why I and so many teachers leave the best profession on earth.

Numbers that add up

Those who believe that the 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. school bells constitute the parameters of teachers' working hours subscribe to one or more illusions. One of these is perhaps based on recollections of the kind of schooling that depended primarily on textbooks, workbooks and on matching words to pictures. A second might be the vision of a teacher standing before a group of "average students" who are all able to learn at roughly the same rate and in roughly the same way.

Teachers now stand before a group of individuals. Each of their learning styles, their needs, their contexts, abilities and disabilities needs identification, respect, modification and thought. In one split class of 29 students, I was faced with 19 different "labels," nine of which required completely individualized education plans. After countless meetings and forms, at June's end that particular year, I waved good-bye to a group who seemed not to be significantly hampered by my inability to meet their needs. I, on the other hand, was mute with both exhaustion and a sense of personal failure.

Given the expectation of individualization, textbooks (where updated versions exist in sufficient numbers) have become only semi-useful tools of instruction. Many teachers run, by necessity, a "resource-based classroom." This involves locating, evaluating, modifying and adapting material wherever you can find it. When two parents asked for homework in advance so as to pack it along on a trip to Disneyland, I suggested that they would need to make room for me. "I'm the program," I said. "What time do we leave?"

Discussing this often inspires lectures from experts on education, most of whom work at jobs outside the field -- like my Uncle Bob, for example. He had 40 or 50 kids in his room and his teacher carried a stick and wasn't afraid to use it. He refers to these times as "the good old days," which is why no one wants Uncle Bob at Thanksgiving dinner.

Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll

When did I get so conservative that I wanted to skip the class debating session and work on negative integers instead? Well, the day I intervened to stop a vote on who was hotter, Hillary Duff or Britney Spears, that's when.

The voice in my head says, "I can't believe I'm talking about this with 30 twelve-year-olds and I REALLY can't believe that kid just asked that question in public. Is this something to discuss openly? In a classroom? Is my face red? Is this really in the curriculum?"

Yes, it is. Everything is: reading, writing, arithmetic, sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

The hat rack

Teacher training programs provide hats, which are trendy in style, to suit the basic tasks of daily organization, instruction and assessment. There are many of them, but they're quickly outdated. Then

teachers add their own new hats in the day-to-day dealings with 30 students, which we wear proudly into staff rooms: "Hey! Check out my new counsellor cap!" Each new one makes us feel as though we have responded, made a difference in young lives.

We collect more hats in our service to school-based managers, formerly known as principals. The boards themselves, who often speak as though CEOs of a publicly traded company, remind our captains never to remove their "fiduciary duty" fedoras. Where budgets rule, the quality of leadership is determined by numbers.

By year three, my headgear had expanded from the day-wear of a classroom teacher into the evening-wear of other roles: Attender of Many Meetings (some of which are called to cancel the initiatives announced at the last), Neurologist, Pharmacist, Public Speaker, Filer of Documentation, Punching Bag, Conscientious Objector. . . .

As I sat at home one night ignoring my own kids while polishing my union helmet before another evening meeting, it finally hit me. "Hey! This is just another hat!"

Flip flopping

In theory, schooling is about "the basics," and in reality, at report card time at least, it returns to those roots. Between this tri-annual grounding, however, schooling has become very much about the societal ill du jour and about ideology. What's on the talk show tonight may well be in your classroom in the form of a draft document by the end of the week. Then cancelled shortly after. I recall gulping down supper before heading off to do an evening workshop on "How to read your Year 2000 report card." My fork froze halfway to my mouth when I heard Mike Harcourt announce on the TV news that the Year 2000 program was dead.

Though not funny at all really, it became a form of entertainment for my teacher wife and I. "Wait for it!" we would say, while listening to a talk or call-in show. Sure enough, someone would say, "Schools need to do more about this."

Of course, schools need to address the ills of a society. It's just that some of these ills are diagnosed awfully quickly and the prescription tends often to be a program apparently hashed out in the back of a cab on the way to a booksellers' convention.

If the governments used the same method to plan public health as they do for education, medical treatments would be determined by the callers to yesterday's phone-in show.

'Flexibility'

My son, at seven years of age, got mad at me for referring to my students as "my kids." "They're not your kids, Dad," he said. "I am."

I tried to keep that fact in front of me afterward when trying to manage how much of my life became occupied with the dilemmas of the troubled little souls I dealt with. It didn't work. "My students" came to inhabit my thoughts, my planning and my approach to what was needed as surely as my own kids did.

Sometimes, in those cases where students were in serious trouble or seriously troubled by their own circumstances, where I was not getting through, they took up even more space in my head. What was I to do -- adopt them? No room in the house.

I took to phoning those radio talk shows instead. "Listen," I said. "If you're going to ask teachers to deal with all the complex issues and dynamics of the day (in between the regular public bashings, that is), you're going to need smaller classes. There's a reason that people don't have 30 kids when they decide to raise a family."

The answer to this demand, sadly, was a new 2002 contract that replaced class size limits with "flexibility."

Feeding the students

By at least one measure, B.C. tops the provinces with the highest rate of child poverty. Those who dispute the numbers might visit what now constitutes a typical classroom. Depending on the locale, you will find an alarming number of children coming to elementary school without proper wear on cold days, without nutritious -- or any -- lunch, without sleep, without acquaintance with books and quite likely, without the slightest conviction that their schooling might change anything about their contexts and choices. The children of poverty require you to work at the level of need for which a degree in social work might have been better preparation. And when you have a choice between finding a warm spot for a kid to eat the school-provided, clandestine lunch or finding a replacement bulb for the overhead projector you need for the afternoon lesson on addition, it's the math that goes by the wayside.

Until, that is, the quiet and loud demands for care become overwhelming and you realize you don't feel you are making the kind of difference that needs to be made. You can too easily relate to the prejudice promoted by conservative governments and think-tanks. You begin sounding like someone else, speaking resentfully of "all these needs."

Getting revenge

When I was a student, my own experience of schooling was mostly abysmal. Part of the rationale for becoming a teacher, I have always claimed, was "revenge." I thought the best way to overcome the bitterness I felt was to join the ranks and do the job better, make schools better. Ten years into the profession, I recognized in myself an exhaustion akin to that which my Grade 11 social studies teacher must have been feeling when he had us spend the year copying notes from a textbook while he sat reading the newspaper at his desk.

Though I spent very little time at my desk -- and no part of my day on "personal reading," I asked a friend for a favour when I saw the potential for burn-out coming on. "When you see me starting to fizzle, when you see that look that says, 'Please kill me' on my students' faces, tell me," I said. I didn't want to stick around and torture kids more than the general experience of life in school already burdens some of them.

Unfortunately, my friend left town too soon. It became my own responsibility to spot the signs and, sure enough, they accumulated. Meeting-by-meeting, form-by-form, minister-by-minister, and kid-by-kid. So I left.

I have great admiration for those who remain to fight with the kind of wide-ranging involvement energy, time and conviction required. As for me, I volunteer in my children's own schools now and I write thank-you notes to their teachers at the slightest provocation. Perhaps I'll give it another try someday, but only after practicing the mantra it seems to require: "It's just a job. It's just a job. It's just a job."

Shaun Cunningham was a B.C. elementary school teacher for 15 years, who recently moved to New Brunswick. This week, he started substitute teaching in his daughter's school.