

## **A Nations Most Valuable Resource**

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**By Beverley O'Neil**

For the first time since I could ever remember, students are striking to stay in school. Who could have dreamed that students would do such a thing? It used to be they couldn't wait to get or find a way to sneak out of class. It's easier to imagine them insisting on a shorter school week, or boycotting for more extra-curricular time, or demanding better food in the cafeteria, then voicing their opposition to being kept away from school. Could we live in stranger times?

Actually, what the students are protesting is a very reasonable expectation... the right to an education, and a quality education at that. An education that provides future opportunity and the choices that every Canadian citizen is supposed to have the right to. It is a shame the youth who have access to continuous, consistent, quality education are only the ones being schooled in private. What does this mean? Does it mean that if your parents have the resources to pay for a private school or tutor, or the ability to home school, then you have a chance for a better future than those youth in a public school or from a low income family?

School days are what sets the stage for the rest of their life determining whether they will continue onto post secondary studies, and if so, to what program and institution. Without a good education and grades, their options are limited.

For the student who counts the days until school ends, their school days may soon be over... especially if what kept them attending is soon to be eliminated through teacher strikes or budget cuts. I think back to my high school days and recall those students who cherished sports, music, art, theatre, fashion design, metal or wood shop, and car care courses. These programs were likely what kept many of them from dropping out, ensured they received the credits needed to graduate and provided them with the experience that became the foundation to their future job and livelihood. These are the programs now being labelled extra-curricular and on the cutting block.

As for the teachers, I understand their struggle. Every once in a while, I have the opportunity to help shape and influence the minds of a nations most valuable resource, people, by teaching in a classroom or workshop. It's hard work. Perhaps one of the hardest tasks I've ever taken on; teaching is more difficult than studying economics, or working all night to complete a project or repairing a car. Capturing and maintaining the attention of a group of people is a challenge in itself, it requires a master teacher who is also an entertainer. Teaching is not something that just anyone can do. It requires skills learned through education and experience, and an attitude built upon dedication, commitment and compassion.

As with nursing, teaching is a profession where more needs to be done to attract quality people. Fewer and fewer people are studying this profession, and those that are good are being lured away to better paying environments where they feel respected and valued; qualities that have been absent from the BC and Canada education scene for some time. Perhaps the teachers should be offered the multi-million dollar contracts for signing up. Having had experience teaching and being someone who enjoys playing sports, I'd rather be smashed into the boards by a 250 pound hockey player named "Killer" than have to face the wrath of a classroom of 20 to 30 teenagers... and then add

five-days a week to that equation for an entire school year. Hell would probably be easier to manage. Teaching has its rewards, but there must be more to attract people than the love of the sport... whoops, than the love of teaching.

Also at risk are maximum class sizes. The BC Liberal government last week approved transferring the responsibility for determining student to teacher ratios to local school boards. What this buck passing shenanigan does is place a greater burden on school boards where operating budgets are directly related to regional populations... where the regional population is small. Ultimately the fear is that class sizes will increase thereby paralyzing the teacher's ability to effectively meet the learning needs of each student, and blocking the student's right to a quality education.

Sure this Liberal government can justify their actions by blaming it on the NDP, and to some degree they're right. But during that decade of NDP rule, the opposition was the Liberal Party, and in the last four years of the NDP, there was only a couple of votes-seats difference between them... very much a part of the decision making process.

Change is needed. Bravo for the Liberal government for recognizing this. However, the decisions made today must be made with consideration of the impact on future generations not just the economy. Youth are these future generations, and they are the ones that will be making the decisions that impact how resources will be used, and how the economy will be managed in the future. Youth are the most valuable resource a nation has, well deserving of an investment today.

This triangle has for too long been void of the voice of those most affected by changes to education, the student. It's refreshing to see them speak up. After all, this is the rest of their life they're studying for in what is supposed to be a society where everyone has equal rights. Let's put things into balance.

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