

By Bob Rae

Education: Refocusing the Debate



Learning is at the centre of the new economy, and at the centre of our society. How can we demonstrate its importance more effectively than we do?

It is better to start with the premise that the glass is half full. It is very hard to motivate people if we convince ourselves that everything is broken and all must be started anew. The premises of revolutionaries are dangerously self-serving. They start by arguing that the status quo is a disaster and that the world must be changed to conform with a particular theory. Whatever pain and suffering follows from the revolutionary plan is described as a 'necessary adjustment', and completely justified by what is described as the appalling nature of the existing situation. In the course of things, much harm is done, and much of what is good and constructive in human life and human relations is damaged.

Parents confronted with poor test results should start demanding more from all of us — from government, from teachers, from the leaders of schools. This is entirely to the good. The last thing we want to encourage is complacency or a sense that nothing can be done. Some parents will express their dissatisfaction by moving their kids out of the public system. But they have to take the more fundamental step of demanding more of themselves and their children.

This will place the burden of leadership back onto the principals of the individual public schools. It is a heavy burden, especially in a time of confusion about their roles and expectations. Yet this is entirely as it should be. The

school will remain the central focus of parents' and students' lives and concerns, and so the principal of each school must emerge as a stronger figure, more accountable, and in turn more capable of expecting accountability from the individual teacher and student.

The key to more successful schools is effective, fairly compensated, well-motivated teachers. Over twenty years of political life, I was increasingly struck with the fact that the professional representatives of teachers have been remarkably under-represented in the debate about the quality and performance of the public school system. Issues of compensation, governance as it relates to job tenure, and broad political issues with the government of the day — these issues have been the focus of teacher-union activity. Dealing with poor results, curriculum reform, young kids' performance in science and math, the central questions of how to improve education — here the debate has been filled by parents, by academics, by some politicians, but not so much by the organizations whose job is to advance the point of view of teachers. This is a missed opportunity, to say the least, but with the pressures of the today's political agenda, there is little sign that this will change unless teachers themselves demand that it do so.

At the same time, governments must stop teacher bashing. Angry teachers can defeat governments, but ultimately this threat is less important than their ability to short-circuit change in the classroom and in the school if they are persuaded that this is the only way their voices can be heard. Our schools will improve only with the full support of the teaching profession. Teachers are the key, and shifting the debate within the profession is crucial for change to occur.

The radical right has an agenda on public education as it does on everything else. Its central premise is to hate the status quo, and to make it look and sound much worse than it is. If successful, they will lead the way to a demand for vouchers, for charter schools, for the obliteration of teachers' federations. These arguments, which were on the fringe in the sixties and seventies, are now part of the central ideological agenda of government. Ironically, this radicalism will set back the cause of more modest improvement and reform. A generation of embittered and resentful teachers is no prescription for improving the quality of education.

If we agreed to make education the key priority, the key investment, we could accomplish much. Every child could have a computer, with access to the Internet. Every aspiring educator could have the joy of the job. Parents could know they were part of a deeply supported community endeavour. Every worker could have access to better training. A steelworker's sabbatical could be as normal as a college professor's. Learning and innovation could produce their own investment and wealth. Do we really have any other choice? 

Bob Rae served as Premier of Ontario from 1990 to 1995, and was elected eight times to federal and provincial parliaments before his retirement from politics in 1996. He led the New Democratic Party of Ontario from 1982 to 1996, and served as Leader of the Official Opposition before becoming Premier. He is currently a partner at the Canadian international law firm of Goodman Phillips & Vineberg. His books *From Protest to Power* and *The Three Questions* have been published by Penguin Viking of Canada. He is a regular columnist in *The Globe and Mail*. raeb@tor.gpv.com