

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

Your special issue, *Innovation: Challenging the Status Quo*, rejects the oft-heard claim that public education is incapable of serious reform; teachers instinctively resist reform, parents and politicians fear it. What is now in play for the first time in my 60 years as observer and friendly critic of public education is a growing public apprehension that the Egerton Ryerson model of schooling simply doesn't work any more. The 19th century model in which I participated into the latter half of the 20th century – central control of curriculum, textbooks, certification, and funding – is incompatible with digital learning, which is now the norm both inside and outside the schoolhouse.

By digital learning, I refer to the new situation where nearly all children beyond Grade 1 are more or less in command of vast amounts of information simply by exercising their brains through their fingertips on a keyboard or a joystick. This is both exciting and scary. Exciting because they are using imagination to construct answers to their own questions and, at the same time, worrisome because this can lead to social detachment and isolation. This, then, is both the benefit and the profound threat of the digital age.

One major effect of digital learning is the dethronement of the teacher as the commander of all learning. This is illustrated at the Seven Oaks Met School in Winnipeg (page 22), where the teachers are called advisors, a subtle but very significant change. Not only is the teacher dethroned at Seven Oaks, but so is the Minister of Education, whereby the students spend two full days a week on community internships. In that scenario, the centralized curriculum is largely put aside. The pity is that the Seven Oaks experiment in citizenship education cannot be universalized, as it could be if public education were more open to the winds of democracy and less hag-ridden by the funding formula and vote-seeking politicians.

Three Alberta schools committed to inquiry learning are described on pages 10-15. They appear to have a lot of potential for influencing the whole provincial system, one of the most innovative in Canada. The Galileo Educational Network, an Alberta educational think tank, is a chief driving force behind change in that province. To give credit where it's due, the province not only permits, but actively encourages experimental schools. The Calgary Girls' School is part of the provincial system, but the teachers are not members of the teachers' association. As if that were not sacrilegious enough from my Ontario perch, they may also qualify for merit pay. Saints preserve us!

A comment on the Greystone School west of Edmonton: The principal said that the only mismatch in her opinion is how the provincial achievement tests fail to measure the rich, deep learning that takes place in the inquiry classroom. That remark presages the ultimate death of standardized testing of all students, but a death that will be agonizingly slow. Hoping to live long enough to see that happy day, I must take my Geritol more faithfully.

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