

Bill Rea ? Can still teach if it's snowing

I think most of us can remember at least one teacher who left a positive and lasting impression; and sometimes more than one. That is certainly the case with me.

But there are also the teachers who can do damage, and I had my share of them when I was going through the public education system. The worst one was my first male teacher, who literally enjoyed beating up children, as I learned the hard way (in the days when teachers were allowed to do such things). He's probably long since retired, assuming he's still with us. The truth is I neither know nor care.

This is as good a time as any to put my possible biases up front. Two of my cousins are teachers, as is my sister-in-law. And all three of them are very high on my list of favourite people, as is the teacher I referred to earlier (I think she reads these columns online, so she knows to whom I'm referring).

Despite the good and bad experiences I had (and I know very well that I'm not unique in that regard), teachers perform an important role in our society. I got a good lesson about that when I was in Grade 12. Toronto's high school teachers went on strike that year. As a little kid, I dreamed of such things happening. After it happened, I realized what a disaster it was.

There was a time, during my little kid period, when I thought of being a teacher, attracted by the prospect of getting summers off. Little did I know that I would end up being a workaholic.

The fact is I don't think I would have made a good teacher. While I think I have reasonably decent people skills, I'm not a terribly patient man. I don't think I would have a lot of patience with the type of kid I was 40 years ago. That's why I'm not inclined to shrug off good teachers.

I know most teachers work hard, although like every occupation, I'm sure the teaching profession has a certain number of slackers. I got into a heated debate on this topic about 20 years ago with my late mother, who had a habit of letting her conservatism get the better of her. This was during the days of the Mike Harris spending cuts in Ontario, when teachers were feeling the pain and starting to say 'ouch.'

Mom was arguing the teachers should quit their complaining and get back to work; a position for which I had some sympathy. I was a lot more conservative myself in those days. But owing to my job, I was also inclined to be as objective as possible, so I played something of the proverbial 'devil's advocate.'

I put forth the argument that most teachers work hard and deserve to be compensated accordingly.

I'll never forget my mother's reply to me; 'I've never heard of a teacher who works as hard as you do,' she said to me.

The fact is, any counter argument I might have offered would have amounted to little more than verbal cherry-picking. I could have cited one or two examples (one has already been alluded to, and even I regard that person as exceptional).

Now we have entered into a new dynamic.

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, at their recent annual meeting, voted to back a call to have schools closed on days when school buses have to be called off the road. The issue, apparently, involves safety.

It is a fact that weather sometimes forces school boards to cancel their school bus service. It happened several times during the winter of recent unhappy memory. I frankly thought a number of those cancellations weren't justified because the road conditions just were not that bad. On the other hand, a lot of those calls (especially involving the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board) involved conditions in Dufferin County to the north, which we in Caledon might not have been aware of. And while I might have questioned the necessity of cancelling the buses, it is a fact that it's very easy to call plays from the stands. Some responsible and well-paid official would have had to haul his or her carcass out of the sack before the crack of dawn, done the required research and made the decision, bearing in mind the safety of children were involved. Let one kid be injured while standing on the side of a road waiting for the school bus by a car skidding out of control on a slick, icy road, and there would be absolute hell to pay.

There are times I'm willing to backseat drive, and other times when I'm not. I'm prepared to let the board official responsible for calling those shots do his or her job.

But we have to remember we're dealing with a particular dynamic involving the safety of children, and a couple of dozen young people could be hurt if a school bus wipes out in bad weather. And that doesn't address the matter I already alluded to, about kids standing on the side of the road waiting for a bus.

It's a big difference for a teacher, who also happens to be a licensed driver, to traverse roads in adverse conditions.

Hey Teach! Here's a helping of reality. We in the private sector are still expected to be on the job when the weather is bad. Granted, a certain amount of slack is (and should be) cut when conditions are particularly dreadful. But in these parts, that happens maybe once a year. In most other cases, the roads are passable enough to get through, at least for people who have somehow merited

licences to drive. We're now talking of a different dynamic ? the one that says if you're drawing a salary, you're expected to earn it. Let us consider, for a moment, the youngsters who don't rely on buses to get the school. We're talking about the kids who live within walking distance of school. What are they supposed to do? More to the point, what are their parents supposed to do?

There are a couple of reasons people send their children to school, forgetting for the moment that it's required by law. They send them to learn how to read and write and mess about with numbers. But they also send them to school so they know their kids will be cared for while they're out trying to earn a living and making the world of commerce go forward. And why do they expect teachers to be on deck to provide those services? Simple. The services have been bought and paid for. The concept is known as taxation.

Let us put the matter into dialogue form to illustrate the point, with me as the speaker.

While it might not have always been the case, teachers in this society are very well paid, and for good reason. That means they also have obligations, like to be on deck when required. If I can get to work through a couple of inches of snow, then so can they.

And if that's a problem, maybe they should seek another line of work. But first, let them turn in their licences. If they can't handle those conditions, I don't want to share the road with them

