

Learning resilience

By Brock Weir

Are you at an age where you now look back at some of the things you got up to growing up and wonder how you survived it all?

My generation is not quite old enough to remember the apparently halcyon days of our parents' generation, who often recall playing in the great outdoors all day and nearly all night, with the streetlights coming on in the evening the only cue to head home. Nor are we quite of the generation that remembers leaving the front door unlocked day in and day out, sure in the knowledge that we would be safe and there was little danger of anything disrupting our day-to-day lives too badly.

Yet, at the same time, mine is probably the youngest generation to remember the regular use of rotary phones, a time when all the world's information was not consistently at your fingertips, before social media reached its current level of ubiquity, and the luxury of not being connected to everyone, everywhere, all at once, at all hours of the day.

Now, admittedly, I wasn't too adventuresome in my youth and don't have many harrowing tales of getting into trouble, straying too far from the straight-and-narrow, or, in short, not too many stories of how I 'survived' it all. But, for my generation of 1985 babies in Ontario, one shared element of resilience is surviving a rough few years in the education system.

For reasons which were never quite clear to me, it often seemed like we were the 'experimental' year when the Ministry of Education looked at implementing new ways of learning, evaluation, and more, ostensibly designed to either improve or streamline the system.

We were the class that got to test-drive new grading systems every couple of years, systems which were often done away with before too long, leaving many of us unclear on just what was expected of us. The constant change had the benefit of a steady stream of brand-new, up-to-date textbooks coming our way in elementary school, but, by the time we got to high school, we were brought back down to earth with textbooks that had been making the rounds for the previous 10 to 15 years, regardless of whether the books were crumbling or had a foothold in the curriculum of the day.

Then, by the time we had weathered all that, we Grade 12s faced a final hurdle: grappling for post-secondary places amid greater demand than ever as the Province eliminated OAC, resulting in the so-called 'Double Cohort.'

For those of us who landed on our feet, it was yet another exercise in resilience, which probably served us well come March of 2020, but I'm sure it was also responsible for the vast majority of premature grays that sprang up a year or two later.

Yet, we persevered. We did our best. We did what we needed to do to secure our spots, if indeed post-secondary is the path we chose and several of my friends even decided to do a 'victory lap' of Grade 12 to not only improve their grades for the university and college battle ahead but wait until the Double Cohort bottleneck had largely cleared.

And we did so because, despite all these challenges, the importance of education was instilled in us by our teachers, parents, and guardians, every step along the way.

The importance of education is still instilled in today's students by our teachers, parents, guardians and, indeed, our school boards, who typically take this summer downtime to celebrate the myriad successes of its students throughout the year that was.

At the same time, however, it often feels that the importance of education is continually being diluted in other realms.

In the United States, for instance, the current administration tasked its Secretary of Education with dismantling her entire department in a bid to turn the oversight of the Department of Education to the States, a motley collection of 50 departments that have shown

wildly varied success levels, often due to the levels of funding they have received, and with wildly different standards, including the creeping in of theology-based learning.

Canada, of course, has a similar structure with education being the purview of the Provinces rather than the Federal government, yet our own situation is not nearly as dire or disparate ? but that's not to say there aren't some elements that are fraying around the edges.

Due to several factors ranging from a cap on accepting international students and their resulting tuition, and a long-standing funding situation that now has colleges and universities across Ontario in the throes of significant layoffs, the cancellation of classes that were part and parcel of a well-rounded and varied education, and even the elimination of entire departments ? the situation is fraught and does not show much sign of letting up.

Students who are lucky enough to secure a spot will continue to thrive, but, with limited spots and an ever-decreasing array of academic and course options, there will be a price left to pay by someone ? and, spoiler alert, it's us.

The economic benefits of a well-trained, well-educated, and well-equipped workforce in Ontario are obvious, so why doesn't adequate funding follow? Yes, there is a reason the cap on international students was put in place, but the resulting hit on how places of higher learning operate couldn't have been clearer from the outset, and this should have been taken into account.

When numbers are being crunched at budget time, components of education ? such as arts programs and other areas the powers-that-be deem electives of lesser importance ? are often the first things to hit the chopping block, no matter how integral they are to the overall development of students.

The current situation is also battling against a trend we're seeing all too often around the world where so many have come to see post-secondary education, or higher education, regardless of how that's defined, as ?unnecessary? or ?elitist?, and something that should be decried.

That shouldn't come as too much of a surprise though as we're living in a time and place where far too many are eschewing the advice of scientists, doctors, and other members of academic field, in favour of self-proclaimed experts in any number of platforms who validate what you want to hear instead of dealing with cold, hard facts you need to know.

Is there any way to get the proverbial genie back in the bottle? Only time will tell.

In the meantime, however, I fear that, before too long, the quest for a place at a university or college in Ontario, or indeed Canada, will be a more stressful and cut-throat process than we survivors of the Double Cohort went through ? and this is not exactly unavoidable.

These students, like our generation, will survive ? we're a resilient bunch ? but what will be the ultimate cost to them, the education system, and everyone of us?