

Schoolyard Views

by BROCK WEIR

A free ride when you've already paid.

Rain on your wedding day.

A traffic jam when you're already late.

Alanis Morissette had no shortage of (questionable) examples of irony in the 90s, but life, I think, served me up a prime example last week.

I had planned to quite literally take a walk down memory lane earlier this month but, as bad luck would have it, my intentions quite literally slipped my mind until it was far too late.

At the start of October, my first public school marked its 75th anniversary and alumni and faculty planned a party definitely in keeping with the milestone. Over the summer, the school posted dozens of class photos from the 1980s and 1990s, which brought back many memories, but as nice as it was to have those somewhat faded memories restored into glorious technicolour, it wasn't quite the same as roaming the halls.

I was somewhat trepidatious when I got on the bus for the very first time to take me to my very first Grade 1 class. Prior to this personal milestone, my kindergarten experience ? or, I suppose, kindergarten equivalent ? was limited to a private school that operated out of an industrial block adjacent to a bowling alley, with a little fenced in area in the back, normally reserved for shipping and receiving, substituting for a school yard.

While there wasn't a single blade of grass to be found out there, it served its purpose ? but the idea of going to a school with a real yard, baseball diamonds, playgrounds and more, helped temper any trepidation with some genuine excitement.

Going from one school environment to the other was certainly a transition. As a five-year-old, everything at the ?new? school seemed larger-than-life by comparison. While my first lasting impression was of the antiquated washrooms which were served by a large circular pedal-operated sink ? I had no idea how it worked when I first got there ? my second was of its glorious sun-lit library, with shelves groaning under the weight of volumes just waiting to be explored.

My third was the sheer expanse of the building. First opened in 1950, it was expanded and modified over the ensuing decades, with new additions cobbled onto the outer walls here and there, resulting in what seemed like a labyrinth of hallways, nooks, and even a stairway that now led to nowhere, sparking the imagination and, no doubt, a few spooky stories passed down from grade to grade.

My fourth was the people. I have to say that I didn't always see eye to eye with my peers at that time, and the teachers I had there were hit or miss, but the hits thankfully outweighed the misses.

One such teacher, even though she was not my homeroom teacher, had a sense that my own transition from one school to the other could be easier due to a little bit of bullying and some other factors simmering in the background. She took me under her wing and allocated time almost each and every day to take me aside and discuss the events of the day, how I was feeling, and helping me find my bearings.

I hope, looking back, I adequately expressed my gratitude for her taking the time to go above and beyond the call of duty, and I was curious as to what other long-lost memories would be stirred by walking those halls again.

Those memories, however, will have to sustain me as my own memory failed me so spectacularly.

I've been thinking about those influential teachers quite a bit lately.

With so much discussion happening at Queen's Park lately about our education system, how it operates, and how students and families are represented, and as back-to-school season shifts gears into a well-oiled machine, there is a lot to be said.

On Monday, for instance, Ontario Minister of Education Paul Calandra announced the Province had declared a trustee seat in Haldimand County vacant after the seat-holder in question failed to pay back \$50,000 they expensed for a Board trip to Italy. It was, he said, a move to ensure education dollars are spent correctly ? that is, on student success rather than junkets abroad ? and it's hard to argue with that sentiment.

What's a bit dicier, however, is the idea being investigated to do away with trustee positions entirely within Ontario's respective school boards.

On the one hand, it's vital, in my view, for parents and students to have effective representation on school boards which are ultimately intended to serve them, particularly if we're required ? and rightly so ? to support our school boards with our tax dollars. On the other, however, having observed many school board meetings over my near 15 years as a journalist within our communities, I have seen a number of examples where elected trustees are not particularly effective in representing the people they serve ? such as letting one's personal views and ideology get in the way not only of progress, but in how students and their families wanted to be represented.

There's a balance to be found, but I'm not quite sure where.

Student success is at the heart of all of these decisions, but what I would personally like to see enter the conversation is more talk on how we ? writ large ? can support teachers on the road to delivering that success.

Last week I had the poignant pleasure of interviewing members of a school community who stepped up in September to pay tribute to a beloved teacher who passed away over the summer. This was not a teacher who clocked in and clocked out as if it was a regular workday, but one who saw some of the needs faced by her students and, to address them, carved out a unique role for herself within the school community.

Last spring, at another area school that was working with community businesses to secure healthy snacks for their charges where they would otherwise have to go without, faculty members and parent volunteers outlined the stark reality that the role of teachers today.

Their reality was being called upon to do much more than impart the ?three Rs? and having to take on the roles of counsellor, meal planner, and so much more for their students ? often doing so out-of-pocket ? in an environment that is, sadly, becoming increasingly thankless.

Much has changed over the last few decades when it comes to the role of public school trustees, and the same can be said for those persons who find themselves day in and day out at the front of classrooms, doing far more than what teacher's college prepared them for.

Looking back over my own high school days, perhaps these teachers have always gone above and beyond to meet student needs but their efforts have all too often flown under the radar.

If we're looking at significant changes to the structure of how our school boards operate, the realities that teachers now face day to day should be part of the conversation, too.