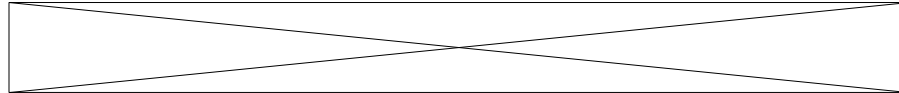


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The Business Of Learning

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By JOHN SNOBELEN

If there was ever an argument for allowing as many people who applied into the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) but not allowing anyone out, it has to be the letter to the editor this week from faculty member John Myers.

Myers allowed that reading, writing and arithmetic are important but insufficient to produce responsible citizens in a complex world. Okay, I'll bite. What is sufficient to produce responsible citizens? Heck, let's go a little further and ask what a responsible citizen is.

It's all just a little vague for me, Mr. Myers. I do share your notion that schools can't turn out "responsible citizens" on their own. Perhaps they can turn out numeric and literate students. Perhaps we should test the students and see if they are numeric and literate. Perhaps you should read the last royal commission on education. Perhaps there is a copy of it somewhere around OISE.

Your notion that ranking schools based on test results is unfair to students from poor backgrounds is elitist and absurd. For the record, it wasn't students who resisted the implementation of province-wide tests and it sure wasn't parents. It was teachers who didn't want their students' performance evaluated and made public. I wonder why?

The bottom line here is parents expect their kids to learn reading, writing and arithmetic skills in school and they want to know how their child and their child's school are doing. The old argument about unquantifiable things being important in education does not negate the responsibility of educators to report fully the state of the quantifiable to the people who are paying the bills.

Of course Myers letter was not the only indication the inmates are running the education asylum. Sometimes it seems the people who administer our school system have no idea what business they are in and don't care who the customer is.

When I was the minister of education, teachers complained when I referred to education as a business. I told them a business was an organization for a professional or commercial purpose. I asked if they objected to being organized or professional. They didn't like me very much.

The first rule in business is to know what your purpose is -- and equally important, what it is not. Any organization that does not understand its purpose can be pulled in dozens of different directions and end up in all sorts of activities for which it has no accountability. Sounds like the school system to me.

Consider that for over a decade the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has known that its enrolment has been declining. It has empty buildings and more than a few half-empty buildings. But for more than a decade the TDSB has resisted selling these valuable properties. They have gone into the property management business.

There is no evidence the TDSB is particularly good at property management and no one asked them to get into the business. In fact, they have a public responsibility to dispose of redundant properties at the highest price possible. I would argue that given their extraordinarily high maintenance costs, the TDSB should get out of building maintenance and ownership and lease schools from people who understand that business.

CITY RESPONSIBILITY

Another great example of not knowing your business is the inability of the TDSB to get the message on pools. TDSB is not in the recreation business. That would be the responsibility of the city.

Twelve years ago I told the TDSB to get the city to maintain and operate the pools or to close them. Twelve years of complaining about "education" funding later the trustees of the TDSB are still resisting doing the obvious.

The TDSB is not the worst example of not knowing your business. That prize goes to the Peel Public Board. They own a farm in the middle of Mississauga. I told them to sell it. They wanted to build a golf "education" course. Twelve years later they want to develop most of it and preserve some for parks.

The golf business. The parks business. The development business. I guess anything is better than sticking to the school business. Heck you might have to focus on mundane stuff like reading, writing and arithmetic.