

Acceptable collateral damage?



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By Nate Smelle

Since speaking with Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Federation Local District 29 president Scott Marshall and many of the teachers from North Hastings High School at the town hall meeting last Tuesday I have been thinking a lot about how the Ford government's budget cuts will degrade the quality of education in North Hastings and throughout the province. The government claims that enlarging class sizes, forcing children to take e-learning classes, adopting a sex-ed curriculum from 1994, and reducing the amount of teachers and education workers in schools are a necessary step towards the 'modernization' of Ontario's education system.

Feeling like my personal understanding of modernization did not align with the one being used by the provincial government, I dusted off the dictionary and looked it up. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, modernization is defined as 'the transformation from a traditional, rural, agrarian society to a secular, urban, industrial society.'

As much as it fills my stomach with vomiting butterflies to admit it, the definition being employed by the PCs is accurate in terms of the outcome their cuts to education will produce. This is especially and unfortunately true for rural and northern communities throughout the province. The more I thought about how a school such as NHHS in Bancroft will be impacted by the budget cuts and where they are coming from, the more I realized that it is really not that surprising to see this government impose such an urban-centric, 'one-size-fits-all' guiding philosophy to education.

During this 'transformation' underway in Ontario it is inevitable that those of us living in smaller rural or northern communities like those in North Hastings will have to sacrifice our traditional, rural, agrarian way of life and accept the secular, urban, industrial society being manufactured for us in Toronto.

This shift will be painful for small town Ontario, since it will mean that communities like ours will lose the uniquely enriching quality of life that comes with living outside of urbanization.

Turning the soil in my vegetable garden over the weekend I stopped for a moment to take a deep breath of fresh forest air and appreciate the scenery and sounds around me. Having tried city life on more than a few occasions, the moment reminded me of how lucky I was to live in such a beautiful and natural place. Pondering how areas like ours will be negatively altered if we embrace an urban way of life, my mind jumped back to the town hall meeting last Tuesday and a conversation I had with Barb Gillis, one of the two teachers of NHHS's Northern Outdoor Studies program.

Gillis told me that because of transportation issues, as well as the high-risk activities and trips the students take as part of the NOS/NERDS programs, they require two teachers for 18 students. Because of the lower teacher to student ratio necessary for the programs to run, she said the budget cuts meant NOS/NERDS would likely be among the first of the 30 to 36 classes cut at NHHS over the next four years.

Though these programs were designed right here in Bancroft to meet the needs of the students in North Hastings, the reduction in education funding and larger class sizes make it virtually impossible for the school to keep them going.

If these programs are lost, the incredible amount of service these students provide to the community will also vanish. Equally if not more important, the knowledge and skills they learn through such locally-oriented and custom-designed programs will also disappear. The outdoor experiential education these classes provide help prepare students for their future ? a future shaped by a way of life that is now consciously being eradicated in the name of ?modernization.?

The future of our youth, the future of our community and the future of our planet are not acceptable forms of collateral damage.