

Questions for the elected



By Nate Smelle

It's 6 a.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 11 and the temperature outside is a frightful -32°C . Logging onto my computer a bright red bar, highlighting the words "EXTREME COLD WARNING" flashes across my screen. I have already been up for an hour receiving my first dose of the early morning news.

It is too early for the day's fresh reports, so the broadcasters are just regurgitating yesterday's news. By all accounts, the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over. The Omicron variant is still hitting us hard; hospitalizations are continuing to climb across the province; 21 more people died of COVID-19 yesterday; and schools are closed.

Getting up before sunrise on Mondays and Tuesdays to keep track of our "progress" in the fight against the pandemic is now just part of the routine. It is difficult these days not to become caught up in an apathetic feeling of déjà vu. Wake up; switch on the news; make coffee and drink coffee and breakfast; see what's happening and take notes; check facts and research what has been learned; write down what needs to be shared.

For me, in many ways, the new normal looks a lot like the old routine. Still, there is no denying that over the past two years our world has fundamentally changed.

In the months leading up to the World Health Organization declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, Ontario's four major education unions - the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, and the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens - were picketing outside schools throughout the province in protest of the Ford government's proposed cuts to education.

At the time, Ontario's teachers and education workers were compelled to take action by the "conservative" premier's approach to education, because the cuts would translate into: larger class sizes; teacher/education worker job losses; mandatory e-learning; less support for students with mental health and behavioural issues, and a subsequent increase in violence in the classroom; less course options for students; and, unsafe schools, desperately in need of repair. Looking at the unions motivation from another angle, those carrying picket signs outside Ontario's schools as 2019 came to an end, and 2020 began were fighting for: smaller class sizes; more teachers and education workers; in-class learning; more support for students with mental health and behavioural issues to reduce the increasing level of violence in the classroom; more course options for students; and, safer schools.

Basically, they were demanding that the Ford government do what was/is necessary to improve the overall quality of the educational experience students in Ontario were/are receiving.

No doubt, the political and social landscape has irreversibly transformed since then. But, as far as I am concerned, their fight for education in Ontario ? the future our next generations will inevitably inherit ? is, like the COVID-19 pandemic, far from over.

While writing this piece, the news of the day has started to roll in. According to all the mainstream news outlets in Ontario it appears that the Ford government has deemed it safe for children to return to the classroom on Jan. 17. Personally ? and I get the irony of writing that word in a publication that prints and distributes nearly 10,000 copies a week ? I would like to know more about how the government made the decision to send kids back to class, when yesterday we set a new record for the number of patients in Intensive Care Units throughout the province (477; 234 of which who require a ventilator to breathe).

Respectfully, I ask those in the know ? in other words, anyone elected to represent us in North Hastings on any level ? to answer a few questions aimed at providing us with insight into our government's reasoning.

Why did our government in Ontario decide to stop collecting COVID-19 numbers from school boards, and suspend the reporting of new cases?

Why are the PCR testing kits no longer being offered to children exposed to a classmate confirmed to have COVID-19? How many HEPA filters were installed in schools in North Hastings since the start of the pandemic?

Do you personally believe that a two-week lockdown every now and then will be enough to get the pandemic under control?

Most importantly, why is our ?conservative? government in Ontario so hell-bent on upholding this delusion of grandeur that we will soon be resuming ?business as usual??

Aren't ?conservatives? supposed to be cautious, prudent, careful, and safe?

Has the definition of what it means to be ?conservative? changed?

Please send word ASAP, we need leadership now more than ever, and we can only hold our breath for so long.