

# EDUCATION CHANGES ARE MORE AND LESS THAN THEY SEEM

If you were among those who felt anxiety about the Ford government's education reforms, you probably heaved a sigh of relief when they were finally rolled out.

The government made noises about changing or even killing all-day kindergarten, but ultimately ended up supporting it, at least so far. It didn't mandate larger class sizes for early year students.

After vilifying and killing the previous government's sex education curriculum, the government ended up restoring virtually all of the elements from the curriculum it professed to hate. The new-not-new curriculum covers most of the same ground, which is bound to make social conservatives angry, since they threw their support behind Ford's PC party leadership in part because he pledged to kill sex-ed. But while that segment of Ford's base must feel betrayed, students will be better served, and parents - most of whom supported the modern curriculum - will be happy with the outcome.

A "back to basics" math curriculum is also in the reforms. There are mixed opinions on that, but the fact is math scores were trending downward, so some changes are appropriate.

Although maintaining current class size caps from kindergarten to Grade 3, Education Minister Lisa Thompson announced that an average of one student will be added to classes in Grades 4 to 8, which average high school class sizes increasing from 22 to 28. That sounds reasonable.

Not so fast. While Thompson said "Not one teacher - not one - will lose their job because of our class size strategy," many education experts disagree. The government says any teacher reductions will be realized through retirement and attrition, but the fact remains that at the end of the rollout, there will be thousands fewer teachers in the system than there are today.

In fact, a Toronto District School Board document reveals the class sizes will mean the loss of approximately 800 high school teaching positions, along with 216 in Grades 4 through 8. The same report states that with the government's earlier round of cuts - \$25 million for special programs - 82 high school positions will disappear. Estimates are that total job losses through attrition will be between 16,000 and 18,000.

Then there's the fact that class sizes aren't what the seem. While the government funds for an average of 22 students, the reality is that classes often reach 30 or more to accommodate smaller specialized classes. Union officials are predicting these changes will mean class sizes of 40 in some cases.

Then there's this. Arbitrarily increasing class sizes will lead to collective bargaining with teacher unions and boards getting off to a terrible start before negotiations even begin. In many cases local agreements include class size provisions, so unions will be fighting the provincial-controlled changes from the start.

These reforms may not be all bad, but they're certainly not all good, and they open the door to stormy weather in our education system.

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## SPRING IS YOUR CHANCE AT RENEWAL ...

### APRIL BRINGS HOPE, WRITES STEPHEN ILOTT



STEPHEN ILOTT  
Column

Spring in the northern latitudes is filled with a sudden pleasantness. It's heralded by a collective unpuckering, when, all at once, people sense that the last bit of brrrr has been unceremoniously ushered out the door. A sweet mildness descends, and it's followed by an awareness that the equinoctial days are as long as the tepid nights.

While March is filled with more tricks than a clown's pocket, April, ah, April, has hope. It may toss a slush ball in our face, just to be pesky, but at least we have hope. We know the odds are on our side. Weeks earlier, we cranked the clocks forward like impatient time

travellers praying we could also rush the thaw. When spring shows up in earnest, we set aside any dirty suspicions of winter's trickery, depopulate the car of war-weary ice scrapers, bag the snow tires, unclench our arthritic grips from our laps, and preen for the sun like ambulatory solar panels.

Unfettered by head wrappings and snotcicles, we are aware of 360-degree vistas. When the alarm clock stutters us awake each morning, we linger horizontal that wee bit longer just to listen to the sweet clatter of birdsong. Signs of reawakening abound. Neighbours appear like squinting moles to tiptoe squelch into their backyards, to pluck errant newspapers from bushes or unshroud the patio furniture and the sleeping barbecue. They squeak open windows, desperate to let their daughter's aching choice in music out or replenish the air supply in the mouldy vacuum that is their son's room. More

than anything else, thoughts of renewal and reinvention invade our spring craniums. The expression "spring forward" fills the air with possibility that a new, better journey is about to begin or that projects stalled may yet become projects achieved.

Now is the rare moment when hope and action collide. To feel lighter, freer and more positive, declutter something underfoot, something you'll never get around to reading, something holding back your life, something that no longer serves you, something that removes any impediment to reinvention.

Declutter this spring, it'll bring possibility to your home life. Call me, I can help.

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This newspaper, published every Thursday, is a division of the Metroland Media Group Ltd., a wholly-owned subsidiary of Torstar Corporation. The Metroland family of newspapers is comprised of more than 80 community publications across Ontario.

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