

Opinion

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Teachers need to get preparation time back

There is no convincing reason why, in a wealthy region whose leaders boast of taking on the world, that citizens should be satisfied with anything sub-standard in their public schools.

But that is what the York Region Board of Education is insisting its elementary teachers, and therefore parents and children, must accept — an amount of preparation time that is far below the provincial average.

The board's non-negotiated, and possibly illegal, slashing of this teachers' resource from 200 to 100 minutes a week hurt students this year in small but significant ways. The board's final offer of 120 minutes is driving teachers to strike for the first time.



A
Reporter's
View

Mike
Adler

The board tried a similar move against high school teachers last April, and it turned into an embarrassment as the province threw out the changes in July.

Later, a factfinder monitoring the stalled contract talks reported board officials suggested the board had not researched the possible effects of the plan.

He castigated it as "totally driven by short-term economics."

Factfinder Richard Jackson

also noted average prep time for the 79 elementary boards in his file was 160 minutes a week.

York's elementary teachers have appealed the preparation time order by a different route, and a decision has not yet come.

The board, meanwhile, has reduced the number of teachers at elementary schools and saved \$11 million.

This was done, said board chair Bill Crothers, because a deep cut in provincial grants and the "economic climate" demanded it.

But while Crothers never said the prep time cut was going to help children, he argued recently, "We never said it's going to harm them either."

But teachers say it has, and they have less time to plan special lessons for pupils.

Because half the time was

moved to after school, teachers have fewer chances to offer extra help and parents see sports opportunities for their children disappear.

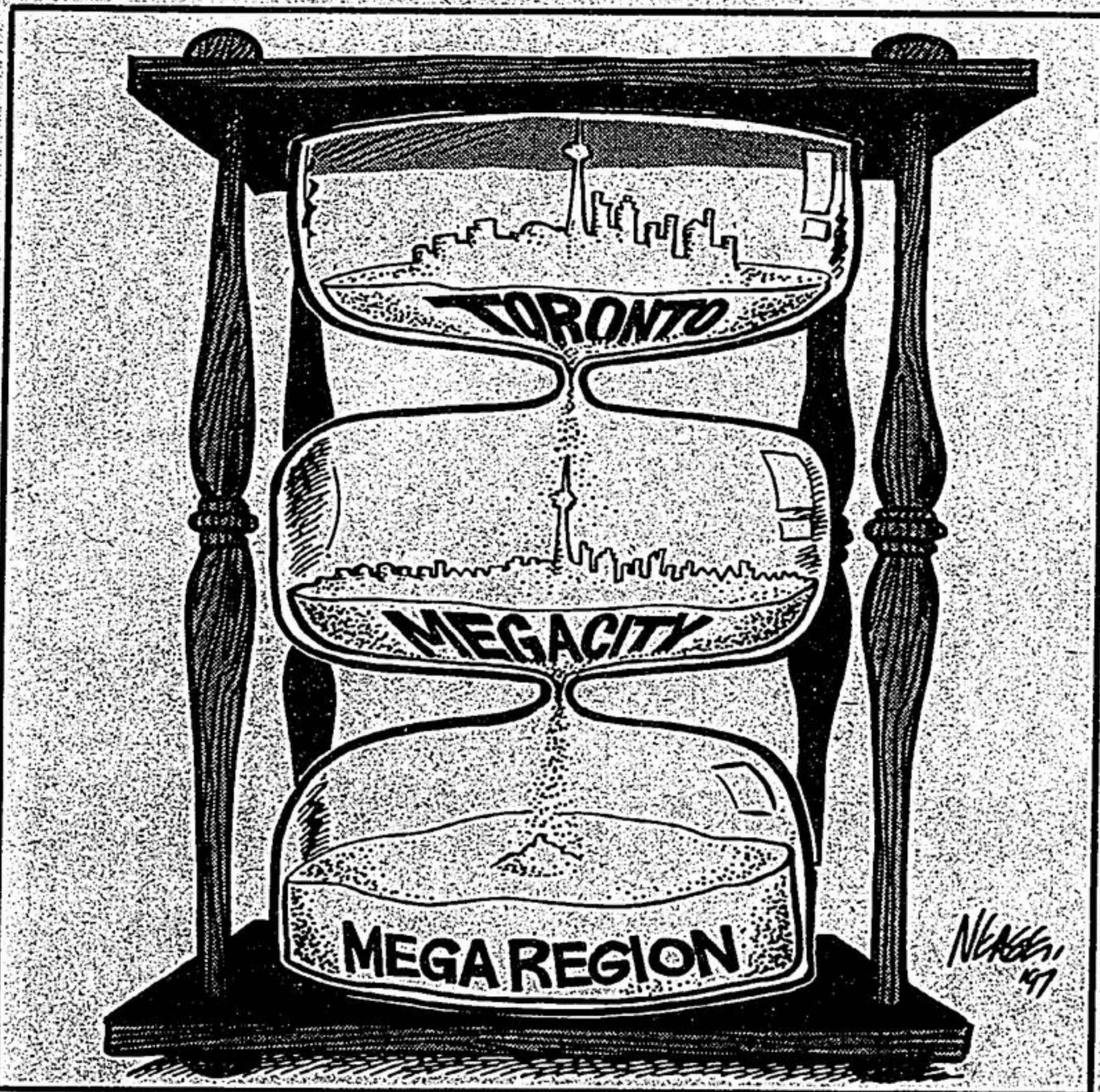
"Teachers can't keep up with the pace because we're not being given the time to keep up," one teacher said at the board headquarters after trustees rejected her union's offer.

Now, only reasonable negotiators, those who remember the first duty of teachers and school boards is to protect the quality of education, can stop a strike.

Teachers say money is not the issue in this strike. They are not seeking a wage increase.

They and the children deserve to get back at least some, if not all, of the preparation time taken away.

—Mike Adler covers *The Weekender* education beat.



Morse Code is over and out

Do you have any idea what I mean when I write Dot-Dot-Dot, Dash-Dash-Dash, Dot-Dot-Dot?

If you do, chances are you're a little longer in the tooth than your average Generation X-er. Those dots and dashes spell out Help! Mayday! Aidez-moi!

Specifically they spell out the letters S, O and S — the internationally recognized distress signal. The telegrapher on the Titanic frantically typed out that message just before his ship went to its watery doom. Same thing happened on the Lusitania, the Andrea Doria and the Edmund Fitzgerald.

SOS...SOS...My pop told me it stands for Save Our Ship, Save Our Souls. If that's not

true, it ought to be.

There's no telling how many thousands of lives Morse Code has saved — at sea and on land — since it was invented by one Samuel Finley Breese Morse, 159 years ago.

Morse, a Massachusetts artist and sometime inventor was fooling around with an electromagnet when it occurred to him that he could use short-duration electric current to print a pretty well infinite series of marks on a moving strip of paper. By pressing a key, he could make those marks long (a dash) or, with a light touch, short (a dot). Morse poked around for several years, refining his idea. Finally he was ready to go public with it.

His first message traveled by overhead wire from Baltimore to Washington in 1844. Decoded, it read What Hath God Wrought.

Sam Morse didn't know it, but he, (not God) had wrought a system of codified conversation that was destined to dominate long distance communication around the world for the next century and a half.

The beauty of Morse Code is its universal adaptability. You don't need a telegraph key to use it. Morse Code can be sent by whistles, buzzers, flags, even by alternating clenched and open fists. At night, you can "speak Morse" with anything from a lighthouse beacon to a Bic lighter. Prisoners have used Morse Code to communicate between cells, rapping on their bars or water pipes.

In the hands of an expert, Morse Code approached an



Basic
Black

Arthur Black

art form. Operators with sensitive fingertips could tap out messages with blistering speed. They called it "making the wires sing."

"It's a little like music" says one Morse operator.

It's been an altogether wonderful and life-enhancing invention, old Sam Morse's brainwave.

Too bad it's about to die.

French maritime radio authorities have already officially given up sending messages in Morse. The rest of the world is expected to follow suit. Two years from now, use of Morse by maritime authorities is scheduled to be a thing of the past, worldwide.

What did Morse Code in? Advancing technology, for the most part. The experts say it's too horse-and-buggy to survive in an age of ultra-slick, hyper-quick radio and satellite communication.

Well, perhaps. But I like to think that there will always be room for a system of non-vocal communication that doesn't have to rely on interstellar satellites and fancy display monitors in order to work.

All I can do is lament the passing — and maybe tap out a tribute on my keyboard. Dot-Dot-Dot-Dash-Dot-Dash.

I'm sure that's Morse Code for 'over and out'.

Editor's mail

Grade 3 testing package will help create 'education crisis'

Dear Editor,

As a mother and a Grade 3 teacher, I felt the need to vent.

Today I had the dubious pleasure of unpacking one of the \$7-million testing packages recently distributed to all Grade 3 classrooms.

It was with disgust that I discovered I have actually wasted my time teaching my students their multiplication and division facts since there are exactly three questions on the 10-day test which require those skills.

Oddly enough, I thought they might actually need to know those things at some point in the future, but apparently it is deemed more relevant by our education ministry that our students should be able to calculate the area of a zucchini leaf!

I can also look forward to days of "what does this word say again?..." since the majority of eight year olds don't eat zucchini with the same zest that they might nibble cheese strings.

I then filled out the required two-sided forms for each child, only to realize that just 10 of my 29 students have been in the country for more than four years, and of the remaining 10, three of my students were classified as special needs. The remaining seven may have varied success with this test.

No doubt my peers and myself will be widely criticized for our inability to produce rocket scientists.

Thank you Minister of Education John Snobelen for creating your education crisis.

T. Coulter