

Stouffville Tribune

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Publisher - Ian Proudfoot
General Manager - Alvin Brouwer

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EDITORIAL

Workfare needs tuneup to be a success in York

Work for welfare
It was the hottest of the hot-button issues that helped elect Mike Harris in 1995. Every able-bodied welfare recipient in Ontario would be required to perform necessary community work or would find their benefits in jeopardy, the Tories' Common Sense Revolution document promised.

Today, the government is claiming the program is a success.

On Monday, York Mackenzie MPP Frank Klees met with satisfied Ontario Works participants at Epilepsy Ontario's Thornhill offices.

Epilepsy Ontario has placed six welfare recipients in the past year. That's six of the 5,120 people listed as receiving social assistance in York Region in July.

York Region's Ontario Works program set a goal of placing 300 of those people in permanent jobs this year. It has placed about 30 of them.

Another component of the program, to place 450 welfare recipients in volunteer positions, is also running well behind schedule.

Keep in mind that back in 1996, when Markham MPP Dave Tsubouchi was Community and Social Services minister, he promoted York Region as a prime location for workfare. And yet, the Harris government insists Ontario Works is working.

According to the government, more than 425,000 people across the province have participated in the program.

Welfare caseloads in York Region have dropped by almost 50 per cent since the Tories were elected in June 1995, representing a savings of \$42 million last year alone, according to a government news release.

This is great news, but it can't be attributed directly to work for welfare. The economy has improved tremendously since 1995 and thousands of new jobs have been created.

COSTI, one of the three York Region agencies running the program, reports that many clients have been finding jobs on their own.

Those who haven't found work and are left to fill the Ontario Works positions can't, in many cases, go directly to job placements. More than half of those assessed needed retraining.

The agencies have lots of jobs available and lots of people who need jobs.

But they don't have many people who can do the jobs without retraining and/or counselling. And they don't have money to provide these services.

York Region's training budget has run out and the province might reduce its funding, if the goal of 300 placements isn't met.

There's a temptation to declare the program a boondoggle and give up. But that would be a mistake, since it may be on the brink of success.

After two years of Ontario Works, we know there are factors other than laziness that keep people from finding gainful employment. And the program provides funding for training and support to overcome these factors.

It just doesn't provide enough.

York Region is proposing a simple solution: It wants to take money from the parts of the program that aren't being used and redirect it to training. That's against the province's rules, but clearly those rules have to change.

With a little flexibility, York's Ontario Works program could take people who might otherwise be stuck on welfare for life and prepare them for real employment — exactly what it's supposed to do.

If the Tories refuse to bend the rules, their signature program is doomed in York Region.

OPINION



Doug Devine

Conflicting facts stall progress in teacher talks

From the outset, strike talk by elementary teachers never seemed to make much sense. Unlike their high-school counterparts, meeting the requirements of Bill 160 never seemed too onerous for elementary teachers.

By reducing in-school prep time, high school teachers are being asked to add another full class of students to their day — which effectively increases their workload by about 16 per cent and reduces, not increases, the amount of time they have for each student.

By comparison, the impact of the Harris cuts on elementary teachers should be a cakewalk. All they're being asked to do is reduce their prep time from 160 minutes a week to 120 — a loss of eight minutes a day.

Most teachers calling our office or speaking to our reporters admit they can, reluctantly, accept that reduction.

So if most public elementary teachers are willing to give up a small portion of their prep time to avoid a strike, parents are understandably confused by the stalled negotiations.

Now, with just 10 days to go before the strike vote, the truth behind the stalled talks appears to be emerging.

According to several teachers who attended union information meetings earlier this week, the big sticking points are the board's demands that it have the right to alter their salary grids at any time and that it have the right to terminate teachers at any time.

But wait. Board officials and trustees insist the union's information is a misrepresentation of two far more reasonable proposals.

They insist the only change they have proposed for the salary grid is adding a new level at the bottom, allowing the board to pay new teachers less than they do now — a move they claim will not only allow the board to maintain the salaries of all current teachers but also maintain their full 160 minutes of prep time.

As for the idea of terminating teachers at will, the board insists it only requested a restriction on when teachers could decide to quit — on either Dec. 31 or June 30 — to make life easier for officials staffing the schools.

So who's lying — the union leaders or the board? Either way, there clearly remains room to negotiate. If the board isn't adamant about changing the salary grid and the teachers aren't adamant about losing a bit of prep time, a deal appears to be within reach.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Witnessing Terry Fox marathon an inspiration

One June day in 1980, I set out in my newly purchased car from Vancouver, destination Toronto, following a year of studies at the University of British Columbia.

I drove leisurely for days, drinking in the sights and sounds of Canada. As I rounded Lake Superior, I ran into bad weather.

Nearing the Sault one grey, wet day, I saw ahead of me a rain-soaked figure with an unusual gait. I pulled to the side of the road as he passed on the other side, followed by flashing lights atop a police car.

It was Terry Fox.

Every protective instinct came to the fore. I felt the pain of a stump encased in a prosthesis, raw and sore from the thumping against unyielding asphalt. I felt the pain of the whole leg.

My next reaction was anger — anger with the young man who wouldn't come out of the rain, anger with the people in the warm camper following behind who didn't insist. And anger at myself for caring what happened.

Later that day, in a warm motel room, I read the local paper about the Terry Fox run and his goal to raise a million dollars for cancer research. I reflected on how much my own life had been touched by the loss of loved ones from cancer.

Empathy displaced my earlier anger. How hard it must have been for family and friends to watch that dogged deter-

mination of Terry Fox to reach his goal. How hard for so many to still the voice of concern and protective instincts. How hard to allow what to many seemed an "impossible dream" run its course.

Later, I saw the documentary of that journey, commissioned by the Canadian Cancer Society. I relived my earlier experience of the Marathon of Hope.

I also saw the personal growth of a young man throughout the film. Most of all, I saw the human spirit triumphing over adversity.

I hope that Sunday morning's Terry Fox Run will be successful once again.

And if the inspiration is a tousled-haired 22-year-old with an impish grin and a peculiar gait who wouldn't come out of the rain, so much the better.

JANET MAY
MARKHAM

Student has had enough

An open letter to the York Region Catholic school board:

I am a Grade 3 student at St. Mark school in Stouffville.

I don't understand why you can't sit down with the teachers and make a deal. I think that the teachers are the most important people, because they are in the classroom teaching, not you.

They deserve to have a good deal. I have had enough. I want to go back to school.

ALANNA J. SMITH
STOUFFVILLE

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Phone: (905) 640-2100 • Classified: 1-800-743-3353 • Distribution: (905) 640-2100 • E-mail: thetrib@istar.ca
Fax: (905) 640-5477

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