

OPINION

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EDITORIAL

Education system must set students up for success

When we're young we make a lot of mistakes - big ones, little ones, and some that can be life altering. Unprotected sex can lead to unwanted pregnancy or disease. Drug and alcohol abuse can do permanent harm to a growing body and lead to life-long addiction.

These are human mistakes, and as much as we might wish, they are impossible to guard against, particularly for young people whose judgement may not yet be refined.

Surely, we should not design a school system that also provides risks of permanent harm to still-unwise young people who make a bad choice in setting their academic course.

The curriculum change in 2003 - which followed the end of the Ontario Academic Credit - was intended to end student streaming with the addition of applied and academic learning, but as one education advocate says, this change has effectively laid a trap for students.

The elimination of a fifth year of high school, along with a cap on credits the province will fund (34 is the maximum unless the board approves it), essentially ties the hands of a student trying to get ahead. If a student decides early on to eschew academic courses for the apparently easier applied courses, upgrading later on may be hindered by bureaucracy.

As Annie Kidder, founder and executive director of advocacy group People for Education, said in Metroland Media's feature article on this issue "we need to allow for the vast amount of change that happens to young people".

The group's report 'Applied or Academic: High Impact Decisions for Ontario Students' surveyed Ontario schools and found only 20 per cent of schools with grades 7 and 8 reported having a guidance counsellor on staff, and most of those positions were part-time.

If a student in Grade 8 doesn't have the maturity to envision their life after four years, then provisions need to be put in place to give these young minds the right support, at the right time.

The Ministry of Education has heard from several boards wanting the applied and academic streams to be scrapped in Grade 9, to give kids a level playing field in their first year, then they can decide how to move forward.

It would be a mistake to take options and opportunity away from students just as they're getting started.



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Reasons behind school bus driver shortages

I recently retired from school bus driving after a nine-year career and I thought I would add my two cents about the recent school bus driver shortages.

Bus companies start the year off short-handed — some with as few as five to six open routes — and in this year it's up to 60, which is not normal. There are three main reasons companies remain short staffed:

1. Obviously pay, or lack thereof, comes into play. Some districts pay quite a bit less, such as Toronto and Durham, and much better in York or Peel. Some only pay when the wheels are rolling and don't pay deadhead time. Others have a three-hour minimum pay and pay some or most deadhead time. There are also different pay schedules for charters and extra route work, which is often less than route pay.
2. The five-year contract. I have

seen in the past companies wipe out other companies and yards by low-balling bids and aggressively going after more than they can handle. When this happens and the company you are with loses a lot, or all, of its routes and you want to keep working, you have to go with the new company. That means you go back to zero for seniority and possibly your safe driving records go back to zero, which happened to us in 2010, and, of course, you'll get lower pay. It took six years to make back the pay we lost by having to switch companies. Also, you may not get your old route back.

3. Lack of support from your yard office and or the school. Every bus has one or two kids that just don't follow the rules, but many have 15 to 20 hard-to-handle children, like I had. We are taught to use write-up slips and submit to the schools when behavior problems arise, but the school rarely does anything. The child may be told to write a note to the bus driver or miss a recess, but rarely are problem children removed from the bus



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and you spend too much time pulling over to deal with problems. School bus fleet magazine in the USA shows this as the No. 1 reason companies have trouble holding on to drivers. This is also the main reason I left after nine years.

Don't get me wrong, bus driving is a great part-time gig, a good way to make extra money and still keep most of your day free to do things, but if you need to threaten to quit every time you need help, something has to give.

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York Region Media
Group community
newspapers

The Sun-Tribune,
published every
Thursday, is a
division of the Metroland
Media Group Ltd., a wholly-
owned subsidiary of Torstar
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Delivery issues?
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