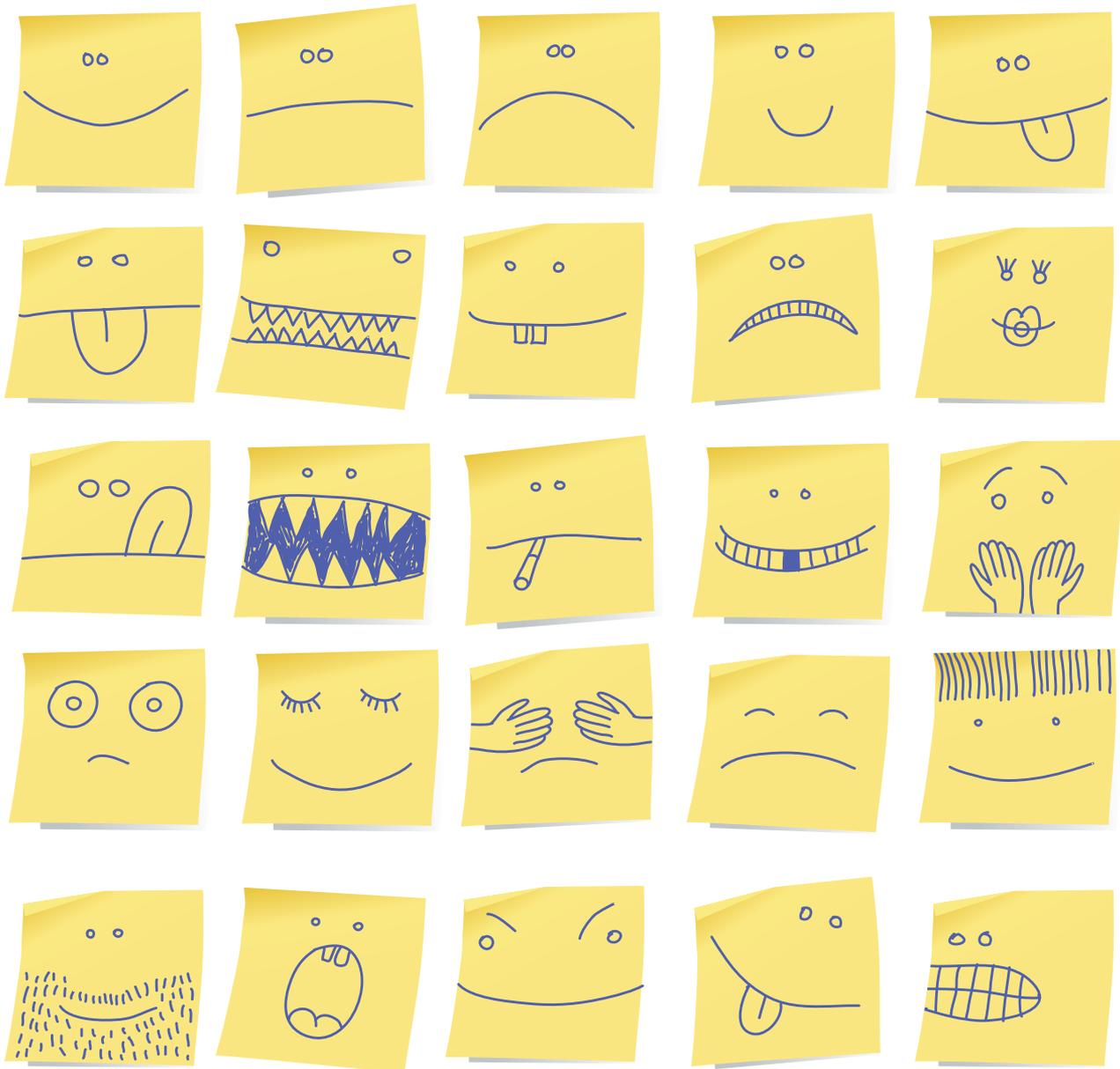


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La revue de la profession enseignante en Nouvelle-Écosse

Winter 2011



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# aviso editorial

Spring 1986 marked the publication of the first issue of *Aviso* magazine. Looking back at Volume 1, Number 1, there are two names that I would like to acknowledge. Ken Langille, who, in that edition, served as a member of the Editorial Advisory Board, and Monica Maloney as a writer for the regular column – Women in Education. Since the Spring 1986 edition, these two names have appeared in every one of the 65 editions.

I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, to thank Ken and Monica for their unwavering dedication to the magazine for Nova Scotia's teaching profession – *Aviso*. *Aviso* has always been a magazine for and by the teachers of Nova Scotia and these two individuals have strived to ensure that those founding principles have been maintained.

Ken Langille has contributed to the success of *Aviso* as advisory board member, columnist, and as Assistant Editor from 1992–2010.

Monica Maloney has fulfilled many roles with *Aviso* including advisory board member, columnist, Guest Editor and Editor from 1989–2010. Monica has been pivotal in ensuring that *Aviso* continues to be “BY, FOR, WITH and ABOUT teachers.” On a personal note, I would like to thank Monica for all of her support and wisdom as I transitioned into the role of Editor. *Aviso* will continue to be “designed to serve the needs and interests of educators.”

Best wishes to Ken and Monica in their future endeavours!

Going forward, there are a few changes that I would like to point out. I am pleased to welcome a newly appointed *Aviso* Content Editorial Team. This inaugural team has come together and worked collectively and collaboratively to put together the Winter 2011 edition – Mental Health Issues in Public Education. I look forward to working with them and continuing to produce the high quality, professional magazine *Aviso* has come to represent.

As our definition addresses, (*aviso* (a.v i.zo) [-L.] a collection of thoughtful ideas and advice), we encourage members of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union to provide feedback and article submissions for consideration in future publications of the magazine.

We are also exploring the idea of including editorial cartoons in the magazine and would entertain any submissions, suggestions or feedback from members.

I look forward to the challenges that serving as Editor of *Aviso* will bring, and hope to hear from you.

*Yours in education, Simon Wilkin*

# aviso

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# Pretty, Rich & Thin:

## The Need for Media Literacy

*Angèle d'Entremont*

In my first seven years as a teacher, I have already had many memorable moments. However, there are always a few each year that stand out. These moments remain vivid and carefully etched into my mind and one of them was the inspiration for this article.

It was in my second year as a teacher and at the time I was teaching art class, a subject that although I enjoyed teaching, I have no problem admitting was not my strong suit. There were a few minutes left at the end of the class and I was chatting with a few of the girls. We had been talking about what was happening in the celebrity world when one of the girls made the following statement: "Paris Hilton is my role model." This statement caught my attention and I was curious as to why that was who she aspired to be like. Her reasons pretty much amounted to the fact that she was pretty, rich and thin. There was no mention of career, charitable work or personality traits; it was all superficial.

This comment really stuck with me because as a child of the 90s, I obviously had experienced my fill of media and celebrities, but I never would have named a socialite as my role model – and especially not for those reasons. My friends and I were all set on going to university. My parents had always tried to stress the fact that in today's world, a woman needed to have the tools (a career, independence) to take care of herself and not

depend on a man. If, in the end, you also ended up being pretty, rich and thin, that was just a bonus.

Now, five years have passed, but not much has changed except maybe the name of the role model. Instead of Paris Hilton, we are constantly inundated with names including Lindsay Lohan, Miley Cyrus and Taylor Swift. Although many of these celebrities have made positive contributions to today's society, it still seems to come down to those same three words: pretty, rich and thin.

Women have had to fight hard during history to be seen as equal to their male counterparts. Many important battles have been won: the right to vote; the right to serve in the military and the right to be considered as a person and not as a man's property. Yet, a good many of today's young women aspire only to be pretty and thin.

In her book, *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf clearly illustrates how far women have come throughout history:

*"A century ago, normal female activity, especially the kind that would lead women into power, was classified as ugly and sick. If a woman read too much, her uterus would 'atrophy'. If she kept on reading, her reproductive system would collapse and, according to the medical commentary of the day 'we should have before us a repulsive and useless hybrid'... Participation*



**"Paris Hilton is my role model."**

*If, as an adult woman, I feel the pressure to try and mold myself to society's ideal, how is a teenage girl going to deal with it?*

*in modernity, education and employment was portrayed as making Victorian women ill...Victorians protested women's higher education by fervidly imagining the damage it would do to their reproductive organs... and it was taken for granted that 'the education of women would sterilize them' and make them sexually unattractive."*

The most obvious culprit for this way of thinking is the media. Children are constantly bombarded with messages from television shows, movies, advertisements, video games and websites depicting women as sexual objects. Unfortunately, the qualities of the ideal woman are simply unattainable for most and this leads to self-esteem issues. The Canadian Women's Health Network conducted a study and found that as many as 90 per cent of Canadian women and girls are dissatisfied with their physical appearance. I will be the first one to admit that I am not immune to the images and I can readily believe that statistic to be true. If, as an adult woman, I feel the pressure to try to mold myself to society's ideal, how is a teenage girl going to deal with it?

As a teacher, this trend obviously affects and troubles me. It also brings up a wonderful teachable moment. I am now a junior high English and PDR teacher. In both of these curricula, there are a variety of learning objectives that can address media literacy. I am assuming the same types of learning objectives exist in a variety of other curricula as well. Most students are not aware of the power the media holds over them and how it affects their thinking and their actions. How can we, as teachers, help them become better aware of it?

In my past couple of years teaching PDR, I have often made use of the Dove website. In 2004, the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* was launched worldwide. This campaign included advertisements using real women rather than models, self-esteem building seminars for young women, and a website full of helpful information. On this website, Dove posted a variety of

videos that truly exemplified the unrealistic standards that are set for women. One particularly effective video showed a model getting ready for a photo shoot. At the beginning of the shoot, the model looked like a normal, pretty girl. Then make-up was added and her hair was professionally styled. Once the photo was taken, the video proceeded to show how a computer program was used to make her appear thinner and taller. This was a very helpful tool to show students that even the models in advertisements do not actually look like that in reality. The Dove website also has a section for educators with activities that can be done with students.

In addition to media's influence over our young women, lack of self-esteem is also a problem. Giving girls examples of good role models is another possible tool. There are so many women that have contributed so much to today's society, despite not necessarily fitting into society's ideals about physical appearance. Women like Oprah Winfrey, Adrienne Clarkson, Margaret Atwood, Michaëlle Jean and Hillary Rodham Clinton have all used their minds and their actions to make themselves known. Exposing our female students to these women and showing them how their actions and words will have a continued impact on the world may open their eyes towards which they should be striving.

The bottom line is that media and its effects are here to stay. As teachers, we do not have the means to get rid of its influence on our students. However, all is not lost! We have the occasion to turn this issue into a teachable moment and make our students aware of its influence. We can help them become independent and critical thinkers through our teaching. This way, hopefully, they will become the future role models for the following generations because of their words and actions, and not their dress size.

---

Angèle d'Entremont teaches at École secondaire de Pas-en-Bas, conseil scolaire acadien provincial.

# “We Just Throw Boots at Her”

A brief reflection of a teaching career, highlighting the moments where lessons have been learned

*Diane Plourde Brennick*



**W**henever we reach milestones in our lives, we often reminisce about the period of time that preceded them. As I look forward to retirement I have been thinking about the pivotal moments in my teaching life that have impacted on my practice, or on me personally, as well as the lessons learned from some of those magical and not so magical moments.

I have decided not to record moments in a chronological manner, but rather in order of how they popped back into my head.

We sometimes wonder why the student in our class behaves the way he or she does, but often a phone call home can explain so much. I remember a sweet, but very hyper student. She could not sit still and was very disruptive. I phoned home seeking some information or advice on how to support her. Much to my chagrin and I have to admit consternation, her mother said, and I quote, “Whenever she acts up at home, we just throw boots at her.” How does one appropriately respond to a statement like that? It did explain a lot about my student and also made me very sad to think about what some of our students experience when they are not with us. That is why we need to make school an inviting, safe place.

The most frightening moment I can recall was my very first parent-teacher session. Imagine a very small room in which you are seated with your back to the end wall. A very large, very angry parent enters, pounds the table in front of you and says, “You better stop teaching my child that #@%&\* talk.” He was referring to the French program that had recently begun at the school.

I was terrified. To this day, I dread parent-teacher sessions. I have never had another similar experience and the second term when that same parent returned, he told me how much his daughter was enjoying my class, but I never got over the fear that my first experience could or would happen again. Unfortunately, I never really allowed myself to appreciate the great opportunity I had to share student learning with parents, because I was always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The next incident reminds me of how important it is to take a breath and count to ten before responding to student behaviour. A student arrived in my classroom one day and proceeded to knock over desks, throw books and use profanity. My first instinct was to take him to the office and begin to rail at him for his actions. Fortunately, something made me pause, look at him and ask him why he was acting this way. He immediately started to cry and said, “My dad just threw my mother out the door and onto the lawn and she ran away.” We often never know what goes on in the lives of students, and their actions may just be a way to cope. I had to tell him that this behaviour would not resolve things and we talked about people with whom he could further discuss this. I am so happy I didn’t add fuel to the fire and I tried to keep that incident in mind whenever a student showed anger or frustration. It is amazing how often pause and question diffuse a potentially worse situation.

My next memory was about the best lesson I ever taught that came from a non-teachable moment. I was trying to teach Shakespeare to a class that was not engaged and I was becoming frustrated when all of a

*It is amazing how often pause and question diffuse a potentially worse situation.*

sudden I had an idea. I asked the students to think about a scene that was perhaps missing from the play. In this case, it was Julius Caesar and the possible scene would be the one where Brutus tells Portia about their plans to assassinate Caesar. I then asked them to write a script and present it in a variety of ways or genres. Some students wrote the scene as if they were babies, lawyers, doctors, aliens, robots and so on, which they then presented to the class. It was fun and engaging and they showed me that they really understood who Brutus and Portia were and, in addition, that they understood that vocabulary changes greatly depending upon who is using it and in what context. We need to trust ourselves enough to change things when they are not working and also to not be afraid to think outside the box.

A sad moment that haunts me still is finding out that a student, who had written my exam one day, had taken his life the next. I noted that he had seemed frustrated while writing the exam and I was worried that the frustration may have been responsible for his actions. I was assured that there were many other bigger issues going on, but I still wonder if that did not contribute to what happened. We sometimes add to the burdens and issues in students' lives and we need to be mindful of the possible outcomes. We cannot control everything, but we can seek to alleviate the pressure sometimes.

On a happy note, we all have those moments that make us realize our career choice was the right one. I had been working hard with a group of students who were not fond of English and were less fond of research papers even though I tried my best to support them and provide them with everything they needed to be successful. On the last day of school, I returned to my classroom and one of those students had covered the board with a note thanking me for my efforts. She wrote many wonderful and kind comments about me personally, my teaching and love for what I do. It helped me through a number of the days when things were not

going so well and I wondered why I chose teaching. I also had a class of mainly boys and boys who had neither love for school nor English. We worked hard and I tried to meet them where they were and cut them as much "slack" as one could. At the end of the semester they presented me with a card signed by all of them and a figurine from a dollar store. It was not the most expensive gift I ever received, but it was the most valuable to me. It reinforced the fact that we have to adapt to the faces in front of us and do what works best for them. They appreciate the effort.

Another "aha" moment happened when talking to some students in May about an upcoming Honour's Night. One of the girls asked what I was going to wear. I thought about it for a moment and said, "I have this floral suit, perhaps I will wear that." The student then responded with, "Do you mean that really pretty peach one that you wore the first day in September?" I could not believe she remembered what I had worn the first day and I thought about how important it is to dress for the job; not only do they notice, but they remember. Some teachers may feel how they dress does not matter, but I can also recall the time I started to teach at a small school that had only had male staff for a few years. I wore skirts and dresses and the other staff noticed that the girls who had been wearing pants had started to wear dresses.

In writing this, there were so many other scenes that floated through my mind and it was hard to take just a few to share, but I chose mainly ones that taught me lessons and or changed my views or practice.

Enjoy teaching. It is hard work, especially so now, but it leaves you with the satisfaction of a job well done and the knowledge that you made a difference.

---

Diane Plourde Brennick is an English Language Arts Consultant (Secondary) with the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board.

# Alternate Delivery

*Deborah McVeigh*

**O**dette Merchant is the Manager of Alternate Delivery for the Nova Scotia Community College. She is part of Academic Services in Central Office located at the Institute of Technology Campus in Halifax. Odette informs us of the many avenues that are available to learners to help them achieve their goals at NSCC and in lifelong learning.

## What is alternate delivery and how is the Nova Scotia Community College involved?

**NSCC Odette:** Alternate Delivery means flexible delivery. NSCC offers programming on a part-time basis, in the evenings, on weekends, online, and in blended formats that combine both technology and in-person classes. I work specifically with our part-time programming, but there are many flexible delivery formats in our full-time programs as well.

## Who is involved in this delivery format?

**NSCC Odette:** All across the College, there is an innovative community involved in supporting flexible delivery. The role of the instructor is pivotal and alternate delivery is supported by campus teams, curriculum development, training coordinators, instructional designers, student success teams, tech support, facilities, and so on. Of course it takes a whole team of people working together to introduce new delivery formats to programs and then support them.

## When did the NSCC begin to offer alternate delivery of programs/courses?

**NSCC Odette:** We have offered part-time classes for many years, but recently we have been increasing the number of full programs that are offered part-time through online and blended delivery. Because NSCC offers both credit and non-credit courses part-time, we have many learners who are working toward a full College credential on a part-time basis, and we have others who are taking individual courses for professional development or personal interest. With campuses across the province, and improvement in collaborative classroom and video-conferencing technology, classes are becoming even more accessible.

## What type of student signs up for this kind of learning?

**NSCC Odette:** Part-time offerings usually appeal to people who have other commitments, such as family or work, and they cannot attend full-time classes during the day. Evenings and weekends are convenient as they fit their courses into their busy schedules. Our part-time students finish their College credential by taking some courses each semester and often combine in-person and online classes. They know this part-time route will take longer than full-time, but it fits in with their schedules and circumstances. Other part-time students are taking individual courses for professional development, career advancement, or because they want to learn more about a particular topic or hobby. They may not have a long-term goal to graduate from a NSCC program, but their lifelong learning is very important.

## Flexibility in programming is a great option for many students. Is there any particular type of student who excels outside the “average classroom?”

**NSCC Odette:** Flexibility in programming certainly appeals to many people. There is not a specific profile of a student who will do better in alternate delivery, but success may depend on motivation and self-direction. Because part-time students will not be attending classes every day, they will need to complete more assignments outside of class. Instructors work with students to help set expectations and enable them to plan for success early in the course. With online classes, there is a virtual classroom and a community of learners, so students can connect with the instructor and classmates at a distance.

*Students can connect with the instructor  
and classmates at a distance.*

**What time of the year is the alternate delivery model most popular?**

**NSCC Odette:** Alternate delivery is popular all the time and becoming more popular. Enrolment in fall and winter semesters is always busy. We offer fewer classes in spring and summer, but our course offerings and enrolments are growing there as well. At the moment, we mostly follow the three semester cycle, but there are some classes that have continuous intake and others that start off-cycle.

**When do students graduate from their program of study?**

**NSCC Odette:** Graduation dates for students depend on which credit program they are completing. We have some students working on very flexible part-time schedules in programs such as Business Administration. The scheduling in Health and Human Services programs and Trades and Technology includes more labs, workshops and clinical elements, so pathways are more defined, but they are still part-time.

**Are the class sizes regulated and, if so, what is the minimum and maximum number of students that can enrol in a particular course/program?**

**NSCC Odette:** Class size is a consideration in all alternate delivery, and class size limits are set depending on the course or program. Often there are 20 to 25 students, but certainly some classes are smaller and some are larger. It really does depend on the full course requirements.

**How are class schedules arranged for students/faculty members?**

**NSCC Odette:** Flexible delivery is really flexible! We have many, many different meeting patterns, schedules

and delivery modes. Some classes are one night a week, some are more, and others include online elements. We have courses that are delivered online with workshops, labs and clinics held in the evenings and on weekends. We have a number of options available and some are more suited to certain courses than others. Again, the team involved in alternate delivery makes decisions regarding the best approach for the course and the learners.

**Please give an example of a program/course that is offered online and also one that has a blended approach.**

**NSCC Odette:** A program that is offered entirely online is the Library and Information Technology diploma program. Courses are offered every semester and students take them on a part-time basis. A blended program would be the Automotive and Service Repair certificate where students complete some classes online and regularly complete workshop assignments at the campus during evenings and on weekends.

**To date, what would you say is the biggest success with alternate delivery?**

**NSCC Odette:** For me, personally, our biggest success has been making NSCC programming more accessible to Nova Scotians. I often meet our learners who say that by having part-time options available, or by taking online classes, they can fit formal education into their lives and they can access the courses they want. It is very satisfying to be part of that and share in their excitement.

**Does the College plan on increasing enrolment and expanding this delivery?**

**NSCC Odette:** The College has committed to supporting flexibility in our programming, so we continue to develop alternate delivery formats and flex-

*Our biggest success has been making NSCC programming more accessible to Nova Scotians.*

ible pathways. Supporting our learners is key to their success.

**How can we obtain more information on the programs/courses offered with flexible delivery by NSCC?**

**NSCC Odette:** We produce a calendar of part-time classes each semester and publish those on our website,

[www.coned.nsc.ca](http://www.coned.nsc.ca), so the general public can call us (phone 902-491-4911 and 1-866-679-6722) to register. For full College credit programs, prospective students apply through Admissions and, once admitted, are advised regarding course selection and registration.

**Deborah McVeigh is a Faculty member at Marconi Campus, Nova Scotia Community College.**

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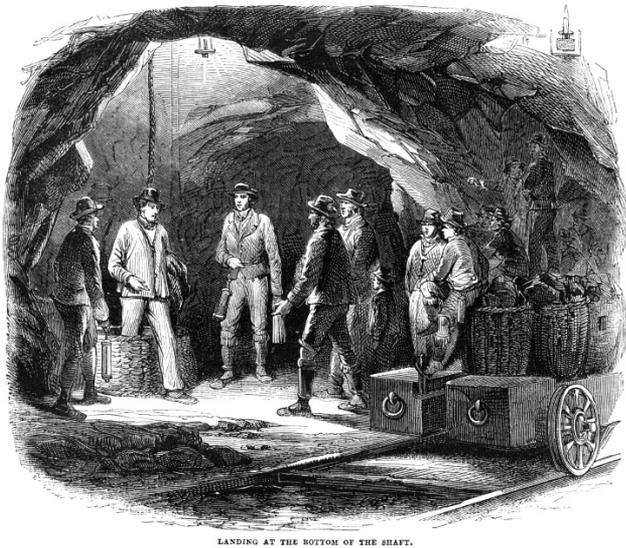
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# Teacher Value: “Go Ahead, Make Our Day”

Terry Doucette



LANDING AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SHAFT.

**D**ad is 82-years-old now. He is challenged with remembering the events of today, while being able to vividly recall details of yester years. He provided for his family by shoveling coal six days a week. When asked if he liked his job, it is without hesitation and lots of pride that he responded, “I enjoyed my job because I loved the guys I worked with. We depended upon each other. We shared an honour code and looked after each other.”

The “esprit de corps” amongst our mining forefathers was strong and essential. It is also something I wish for our teaching professionals, especially at this time when we are facing the potential of an education crisis.

Definitions of morale are somewhat similar from dictionary to dictionary: terms such as sense of purpose; pride in accomplishments of the organization; faith in leadership; sense of value; commitment to other members of the organization. Teacher morale is basically regarded as a psychological state, inclusive of a sense of contribution and positive outlook.

Teacher morale is a complex topic because of the major variables that affect us. There needs to be acknowledgement that our morale is impacted by provincial, regional, and local school issues and decisions. Truth be known, we have limited control over provincial and regional matters, however we can have major impact at the school level.

Parker J. Palmer noted: “We become teachers for reasons of the heart. But many of us lose heart as time goes by.” I believe this to be the result of a steady erosion of teacher morale by both external and internal forces.

The atmospheric pressure on teacher morale in Nova Scotia today clearly indicates a storm pending. Senior administrators in boards across the province must determine how to make cuts in a system that is already stretched by doing more with less.

The Romper Room mirror projects reductions in resources, materials, technology, professional development, management, administration, program support, course offerings, school-based services, school and property management, busing and the number of schools.

Recognizing that over 80 per cent of the provincial education budget is used for salaries, the ugly reality for our professional staff is fewer teaching positions. The cuts to public education funding include a reduction of upwards of 350 teachers through attrition this year, with no replacements. The boards already take into account a reduction of teachers for declining enrolments so this will mean larger class sizes and more combined classrooms.

The challenge for our current government is to protect what we have. Our focus must be on the potential impact on students. Our province cannot afford to initiate an educational recession.

The erosion of teacher morale and positive school energy is well underway by external forces. On a daily basis, staff room discussions reflect the potential harm to students. Term, probationary and permanent contract teachers who are low on the seniority list are fearful. This anxiety is impacting instructional delivery and teacher morale negatively. Never mind workload issues! The uncertainty of decisions and the lack of a clear vision for public education in Nova Scotia has us all feeling like we are flying by the seat of our pants.

Teachers in our province need and deserve provincial educational and political leaders who are able to cre-

ate and maintain a positive vision, not one of doom and gloom. The challenge is to charter a course that all shareholders can embrace. The end result would be belief in the future, and faith in our leadership; critical ingredients for solid teacher morale.

To say that discussions and ponderings over the past four months by political leaders have been unacceptable and demoralizing would be an understatement.

What can we do? Where do we turn?

We, as teachers, need to stand together and support each other to ensure our collective voice is heard. We need to:

- attend local and regional meetings;
- participate in local union discussions;
- support our provincial NSTU leadership;
- take advantage of opportunities for input;
- address our concerns with local MLAs;
- seek support of other shareholders in education (NSSBA, SAA, ANSEA);
- recognize the needs and fears of teachers.

Good communication is essential and must be an expectation. Updates and communications bulletins on developments, directions, actions and reactions are essential. A series of meetings needs to be scheduled involving department, government and educational leaders to address acceptable directions. We must take strength and positive focus from a collective and unified position.

At the school level, each of us has the capacity to positively impact morale. Perhaps we should consider it a professional obligation. Positive and effective schools must lock the door on negativity.

In order for teachers to be at their performing best, we need to feel: a sense of value and worth; a sense of trust and of support and understanding; a sense of purpose, of duty and dedication; a sense of contribution to a collectively responsible team; a sense of encouragement from colleagues and administration; a sense of safety and security; a sense of professionalism; a sense of quality in communication and school leadership; a sense of student respect and community support; a sense of energy and enthusiasm; a sense of equity and fairness; a sense of family; a sense of control and a sense of the future.

Let us not underestimate the critical role of each school administrator in nurturing the growth of positive teacher morale. It is critical for administrators to know their staff and listen to them closely. Visit each classroom daily. Ask your teachers, “How is your day going? Is there anything you need?” Be aware of their day-to-day struggles. Teachers work best in a climate of collaboration and trust. Empower teachers to try new strategies and methods. Nurture a safe environment for communication.

Persons in positions where supervision reports are required need to be sensitive to individual needs. Criticism should always be constructive. We must always respect the dignity of others. Choose your words carefully. Always take the high road. When you show professional respect, it is generally returned.

Professional development for teacher growth must be carefully planned with staff input considered. In my experiences, the most effective in-services have been school staff planned and delivered. Too often, teachers approach in-services with a degree of cynicism and negativity based upon past experiences. Good professional development opportunities need to be well planned, actively engage teachers, timed appropriately and have follow-up. Professional development at the end of a teacher’s work day has limited value and may even be counterproductive.

Administrators must recognize the need for equity in creating assignments for staff. Staff members compare assignments, class sizes and composition. Workloads need to be assessed carefully. School principals need to consider the number of Individual Program Plans (IPP), Individual Behaviour Plans (IBP) and the numbers of Learning Disabilities (LD) in each class. Teachers who perceive their assignments as unreasonable or unfair compared to others have an impact on the school morale. For positive morale to foster, we must feel good about what we do.

Are you able to recognize collective staff and individual teacher fatigue; when “enough is enough?” Seasoned school principals and those administrators with good insight into both their school and teachers seldom miss it. Teachers at the ground level certainly recognize it. Staff members can easily feel demoralized.

Most teacher plates are full with daily planning, preparations and lesson delivery, never mind the extra-curricular activities. As a rule, most teachers over-com-

*Positive and effective schools must lock the door on negativity.*

mit. Tired teachers are more susceptible to stress and negativity. Let your teachers know you recognize their stresses. Encourage them to take advantage of a particular PD program. Have “open pit” sessions where staff can share reflections and express how they feel. Teacher morale should be an open topic at staff meetings.

To ensure that all teachers within the school are part of the team, watch out for what I refer to as “professional loneliness.” At times, teachers and teacher specialists can feel outside the inner teaching ring. I have seen guidance counsellors, program support teachers, behavioural specialists and vice-principals on the outside. Principals need to empower all voices on staff. Input must be sought from everyone. We all need to feel part of the team and to feel valued if morale is to be positive.

I believe teachers have a professional obligation to ensure the energy of a staff is positive. Whenever you hear negativity, correct it. Negativity never diminishes when you let it stand. You can make a difference.

- Let’s take better care of each other.
- Let’s recognize the positive efforts of each other.
- Let’s eliminate unhealthy conversations.
- Let’s ensure that all staff members are included in special functions and events.
- Let’s eliminate staff intimidation and bullying.
- Let’s obliterate entrenched behaviours and sour attitudes.
- Let’s exude professionalism.
- Let’s not criticize the method of others.
- Let’s value the time and commitments of each other.
- Let’s ensure our professional development needs are being effectively addressed.
- Let’s be sensitive to the stresses of our profession.
- Let’s ensure a buddy/colleague is in place for younger teachers, new administrators and teachers with struggles.

- Let’s invest in our social committees.
- Let’s insist that team-building skills are part of administrator training programs.
- Let’s use language carefully so as not to offend.
- Let’s recognize that it is okay to disagree. Disagreement does not mean disrespect.
- Let’s ensure schools are safe zones for teachers.
- Let’s share what works in our classroom, both instructionally and with student management.
- Let’s reach out and do something nice for each other.

School administrators must recognize curricular and extra-curricular efforts of staff. This can be accomplished by letters of appreciation, letters of congratulations and letters of praise for professional efforts. Be sure to copy these to the teacher’s personal file. You can acknowledge teacher efforts at staff meetings by asking for a round of applause for something special. You can and should make a difference in a teacher’s day. Go ahead, make our day!

Administrators need to take strength from their teachers and give it back. Principals need to have the confidence to say what needs to be said at administrator meetings. We need teacher advocates. We need confident principals. Schools are much happier places when teachers believe in their leaders.

Mom used to call Dad’s workplace the black hole. Issues affecting teachers across the province are creating a different type of black hole. This hole is generated from fear of the unknown and a strong sense that the future may negatively affect our students and teachers.

Like our mining fathers, we need to come together. We need to work together, to trust each other and have a strong voice. In times of potential crisis it is even more important that we look after one another.

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Terry Doucette teaches at Liverpool Regional High, South Shore Regional School Board.



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# Mental Health Versus Mental Illness



David Ritchie

The human mind, body and spirit form an amazingly complex entity.

Eat right + sleep right + exercise physically and mentally + recognize triggers and solutions = better physical and mental health.

It is amazing how the world can change if you adjust your perceptions of it. As a dyslectic, I have always had a variety of very unique micro and macro views of the world. In some ways, this may have made me a better writer, teacher and artist. In others ways, it has presented significant challenges that may have forced me to become a better learner, facilitator and advocate.

I am suggesting we look at things inside out, back to front, and right to left. If we apply this approach to understanding mental illness in the classroom, we end up conversely examining approaches to mental health.

Ultimately, we have a responsibility to acknowledge and develop creative, manageable and individual ways to help students recognize, learn to cope and achieve success with their individual set of challenges. In other words, we, as professionals, need to learn what challenges our students face and what we can do to assist them in coping with or overcoming them.

Who would have ever dreamed 30 years ago, when we initiated the first tentative steps towards integration, that we would make such progress? Current studies predict that in a 20-student classroom, we will encounter, on average, four students with learning challenges and six students who have/will have some form of mental wellness issue. Often, but not always, these issues are tied directly to social, academic and emotional school performance.

In order to optimize student performance, we must know what individual coping challenges the student experiences. This means early detection, continuous observation, and recognition and sharing information in a professional, efficient, responsible and caring way. A very cursory investigation reveals anywhere from 15 to

20 identifiable syndromes or conditions which impact upon the mental wellness of our students, presenting very demanding hurdles to their success in learning. First, we must know where students are experiencing difficulties and challenges and ultimately assist them in their journeys. This says nothing about their unique home situations and/or levels of poverty and deprivation. This is also an institutional expectation when we consider outcomes-based education.

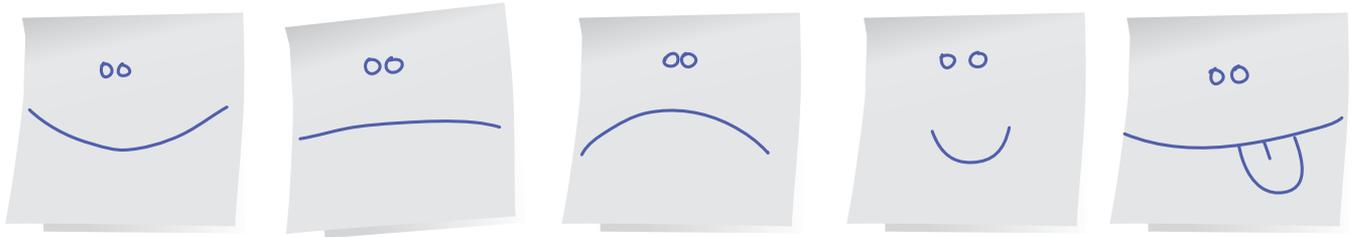
Early detection is the key. From an institutional view, we must make available the core information of observable signs for teachers and specialists.

A Manitoba educational site suggests that mental wellness:

*“gives a student a sense of self-worth, dignity, belonging, problem-solving, self-examination, tolerance and acceptance and respect for others and that students can realize their own full potential, understand and feel good about themselves, relate to others and expand their social support networks, experience pleasure and enjoyment, handle stress, assess challenges and problems, set goals and follow interests, explore choices and make decisions, have power and control over themselves, develop good problem-solving and coping skills and bounce back from negative experiences that everyone encounters.”*

Take that last statement and turn it inside out by making each element negative and you will see the problems many students experience. There are also strong indications that post-secondary job success is based on good mental health. If we are to successfully prepare students for life, our role in recognizing and assisting in the development of coping mechanisms, and promoting good mental wellness is paramount.

Years ago, portfolios were all the rage as the last word in assessment and evaluation. Recently, I have realized with the complexity of the health care system that we



all need to keep our own medical records. If you combine those two ideas with a third, the daily agenda, interesting ideas emerge – the individual agenda, journal and educational handbook. We know there is an interconnection among a huge assortment of variants that create an outcome, be it positive or negative. Recording, examining and assessing these variants, using both artistic and scientific methods, may lead to the application and understanding of solutions.

Before this becomes too “way out there” in your own mind, remind yourself of how successful a food diary can be in controlling weight or at least at providing you with concrete information about what you have consumed and how you can control your consumption. It is also believed that physical exercise is central to good physical health and there is a growing awareness that physical exercise also promotes good mental health. If we combine the data of a food diary and exercise diary, we see vital information develop. If a personal system of a journal of physical and mental health can be initiated, the individual and those who assist that individual will be able help develop plans to improve his/her health.

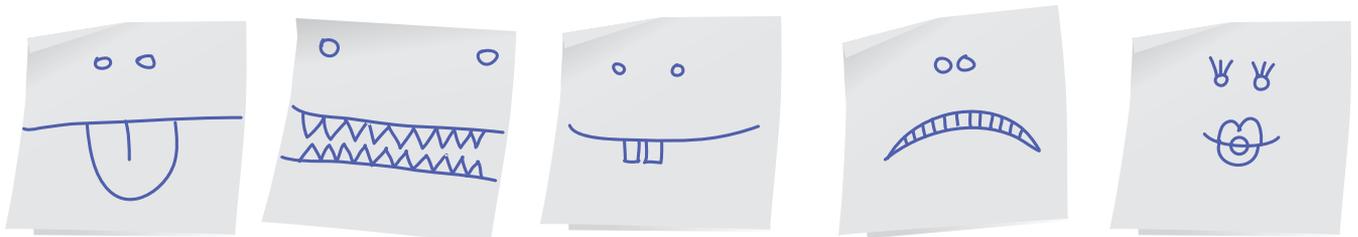
As an art teacher, I feel it is important that the record be graphic as well as prose. I believe all people can draw. At about the age of nine or ten, we develop a concept of ourselves as either good or not good at drawing. This is often intrinsic as well as an externally imposed evaluation. Experts talk about the changing reality of the paper we draw on by changing from space to place. Younger children see paper as a space to draw rather than a place to be judged either by themselves or

others. Applying the space concept to a personal health journal would make sense.

If we encourage the individual to draw as well as write when they record their participation, their interactions, their state of mind and their attempts at improving, they will end up with material to be mined for ways to alter their physical and mental health. There is a known cathartic response when we represent our ideas and realities in a graphic manner.

Coupled with exercise, both physical and artistic, and good nutrition, the other factor that seems to be central to good physical and mental health is sleep. Recent research indicates a very definite correlation between the amount of good sleep we get and our mental health. Maintaining a sleep record along with the other data will reinforce the benefits of correct healthy sleep. This personal acquisition of data builds the foundation for the practice of wellness.

I firmly believe the practice of wellness is an individual journey and we need to equip our students with all the tools to ensure they are better able to manage their own health journey. We have a serious responsibility as professionals to help them. I would contend every teacher should be consulting a good up-to-date online handbook on mental and physical wellness. Notes should be maintained to help teachers and students recognize where their practices are deficient. Assistance in finding individual solutions is paramount. Yes, yet another task to add to the list of already too many responsibilities. However, there are institutional respon-



## FEATURE



sibilities to reduce the expensive complications that develop from poor physical and mental health. We know the expenses of poor physical health are mushrooming at a dangerous rate. There are equally demanding costs to poor mental health.

We must applaud the teachers, student assistants, administrators and support staff members who sustain us and our students in our classrooms, studios and shops. Without them, many students would not be able to function in our schools. Look around you and recognize that school has changed, the student population has changed, and we must continue to change if we are going to help maintain a successful socially responsible society. We must find winning strategies to make educational outcomes realistic. These must include the

promotion of and advocacy for physical and mental wellness. To do this, we need help to educate ourselves and our students.

I believe I should be starting a personal health journal and, in doing so, be able to help others to do the same. Sections in the journal will detail my exercise regime, my nutritional consumption, sleep record and practices that will strengthen my mental wellness. Think about ways to promote physical and mental wellness. View it as wellness rather than an illness. Balance is central to the health of any individual.

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David Ritchie teaches Visual Arts at Avon View School, Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.

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## Mind over Martyr



### A story of self care

Shawna Shiers

#### Running on Empty

...And there I was, under my cozy duvet, in my favorite flannel pj's, staring at the ceiling of my bedroom. The silence of the house on those weekday mornings in November 2008, was both peaceful and disconcerting. I yawned, stretched and suddenly felt a pang of anxiety, followed by a heavy thud that landed in my solar plexus. Reality check: "We're not in Kansas anymore, Shawna!" I was "burnt" and on medical leave for an indeterminate period of time. This was not an average morning. How did I get here? What now? I was without both a "lesson plan" and a safety net of certainty. Suddenly, I felt like I was in bed with a complete stranger.

Although my physical body reflected a peaceful state, my senses bombarded my consciousness with visions of work. I recognized 8:30 a.m. on the clock every day for the first week of my absence. I was conditioned by the routines of the school day and I sensed: the morning cacophony of students in the foyer, the tone of the 8:50 a.m. bell, and the cadence of the principal's voice as he finished the morning announcements. Then I reprimanded myself, "I should be at work." I slowly returned to the present moment and noticed a feeling of discomfort come over me: Guilt.

*"In the middle of the path through life, I suddenly found myself in dark woods." — Dante*

#### The Tipping Point

At the time of my medical leave, I was almost ready to terminate my 15-year career as a teacher/counselor. The more exhausted I became, the more often I thought, "I would love to flip burgers, just for a little while!" I could no longer make decisions easily at my workplace. I couldn't remember the little details, and my ability to plan, implement and follow through diminished. So, without the "chi" to perform my professional duties, I questioned my career choice and allowed systemic issues to dissolve my ambition. I wished my days away and could no longer offer presence to my students. Sunday nights were filled with anxiety and Thursday nights were filled with peace...TGIF! The once oozing bottle of empathy dried up. All objectivity was lost and much cynicism gained. The "uncertainty" of the future felt like waves of claustrophobia suffocating my essence. My small but busy mind retaliated with an old recording: "Stress and anxiety in teaching is normal. Everyone feels it so suck it up and get over it." Then a voice from within snapped: "It is one thing to suck it up, but quite another to be sucked up by IT." We hear all the time that stress seems to be the norm in our profession but no one said that living the norm was the route to *my* contentment.

Choosing health meant abandoning negativity and adopting optimism. So instead of using the term "sick leave." I decided that I was on "retreat." It was time to recede from further stress and reflect on how I would change when detached from the role of teacher, saviour.



My synapses were on fire! First I needed silence and open space, but above all ...SLEEP.

So, the journey to healing began... one thought at time.

Thought #1:

*“Why do I feel guilty for being on medical leave?”*

## **Leggo My Ego!**

The loudest most critical voices, like the internal judges and dictators, co-habitate in the ceaseless chatter of our minds. I call them Ego and Martyr. They team up to keep us in a false sense of self; an illusion. Ego always seems to be sending us on the hunt for attention and appreciation to tell us we’re different or special. “You’re the only one that can help him/her. Your colleagues need you; you’re the best.” It teaches us to get ideas of who we are from others.

Martyr tells us to suffer needlessly for others; to volunteer long hours, to do all the work ourselves and to take on more than we can handle. It demands that we sacrifice our own needs but that we take responsibility for everyone else’s. This is the voice that finally projected me face first into the “wall.”

Somewhere in my development, I became defined by my ability and/or desire to connect to and care for others; to never take a step back from productivity; to always achieve; to prove something to someone. Early in my career, I let people know that I was proud to have “collected” the maximum number of sick days. I was hoping to someday receive the imaginary “golden martyr” award for toughing it out during those days of ill health.

## **Unplugged**

To help me change my self-defeating thoughts, I initiated the service of a counsellor/mentor who offered objective presence while I processed. Thank you. For healing to occur, I had to become an active listener to my own inner advisor. To do this, I stopped the “production line.” I halted any goal setting, academic advancement, pilot projects, and stopped googling for facts. I decreased computer time, television, radio, textbook and newspaper reading. The question I asked myself was: “Am I reading for interest or simply for the ego’s

need to retain a hierarchy in the world?” How much input did I really need to prove that I knew something? Finding the silence within was no easy task.

After much quietude and reflection, I have learned to let go of the “sick leave” guilt which was born from Ego. I have also learned that we are all replaceable, that life goes on without us and that people are not as preoccupied with us as we may want to believe! With the regular practice of what I call “emotional bushwhacking,” we can learn to get over ourselves so we can move into our lives.

## **Be the change you want to see**

To begin the process of change, we have the choice to acknowledge the existence of what isn’t working for us. In order to lessen the anxiety of life, each of us has to be responsible for the return to our true nature; to return to the reservoir of tranquility that exists deep within each of us. This is Joy!

Believe in yourself! You have the innate ability to overcome challenges and develop resiliency. You are worth taking care of your health. You are worth taking time just for you, without concern for what comes next. What comes next will arrive soon enough, and you’ll want to have the energy to embrace all that it brings.

*“Your treasure – your perfection – is within you already. But to claim it, you must leave the commotion of the mind and abandon the desires of the ego and enter into the silence of the heart.”*

*Elizabeth Gilbert, Eat, Pray, Love*

## **An affirmation for the teacher:**

On this path of change, I am free to consciously carve out balance. I do not have to completely sacrifice myself for the cause to be a good teacher or human as so many of us do in this profession to our detriment. I can learn, grow and develop in my own time, in my own way. I can choose Peace.

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Shawna Shiers is a school counsellor at Avon View High School, Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.



## The Sheelagh Nolan Award for Excellence in Teaching

*Steve Wohlmuth and Valerie Wohlmuth*

### *About the Award*

The Sheelagh Nolan Award is awarded by the Nova Scotia Provincial Autism Centre to an individual, school or group to recognize their efforts to foster the growth and maximize the potential of a child or children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in a collaborative and positive manner. The late Sheelagh Nolan was a strong and passionate advocate for autism awareness.

The criteria for this award is:

- seeks to foster growth and maximizes potential of the child;
- recognizes that educational process involves collaboration between parents/guardians, the child, educators and other significant partners involved;
- builds self-esteem and peer relations for the child with Autism;
- seeks accurate information about Autism.

### *The 2010 Recipient*

The award was presented to Port Williams Elementary School at the Nova Scotia Provincial Autism Centre's Open House on Wednesday, December 1, 2010. The following Port Williams Elementary School staff received certificates: Cathy Woodford, Principal; Lee Ann Baird P/1 Teacher; Kim Christie, Educational Assistant; Holly Sheffield, Educational Assistant; Heather Crouse, Resource Teacher; and Cathy Reimer, 2/3 Teacher.

### *Story of Gratitude from the Parents*

We cannot begin to emphasize the importance Port Williams Elementary staff has made in the life of our daughter, Heidi, and in our family. We have always wanted a way to say thank you to the Port Williams Elementary Staff, and when we saw this email nomination form, we instantly began to fill out the form. It will be hard to keep this nomination brief because there is so much PWES staff has done these last two plus years.

The year before our daughter was to begin school, we went through many anxieties and believed there was no way our daughter would be able to cope with a full day of school and was prepared to send her for only half days. We got in contact with the principal, Cathy Woodford, the year prior to Heidi starting school and Mrs. Woodford welcomed us with open arms and worked with us in preparing Heidi for her first year of school. The staff welcomed Heidi's Early Intensive Behaviour Intervention (EIBI) team and her occupational therapist into their busy and crowded classroom. The team was open to and implemented the many suggestions that the EIBI team had to offer, such as Pivotal Response Training (PRT) and Writing Without Tears, before and after her first day. The first day of school came, and boy, did she have a tantrum when she arrived at school. The staff worked with us and used their resources (The Annapolis Valley Regional School Board's Autism Department headed by Kym Hume), and never gave us an impression that Heidi was a disturbance. Her educational assistants went to many in-services on autism including learning the Strategies for Teaching Based on Autism Research (STAR) program.

Our child went from needing to be prompted to use a single word request, such as "fish" for a goldfish cracker, to being spontaneous in her requests after her first year of school, and yes, even spontaneous in saying "Good morning Mrs. Baird." Mrs. Baird had rearranged her schedule to accommodate Heidi. For example, knowing Heidi's love for music, she incorporated song time after lunch and recess to help Heidi transition from outdoor lunch/recess play to classroom. It worked wonderfully. Her educational assistants and teachers still can't wait to say "Guess what she did today!" with the excitement that we feel whenever Heidi amazes us with her accomplishments. One of her assistants even told us one day, "I enjoying coming to work everyday knowing I get to work with Heidi."



One day, Heidi had a tantrum in the hall outside of the library where her older brother's class was attending. Edmund's teacher, Mr. Long, noticed the discomfort Edmund was feeling when one of his classmates commented, "Edmund, your sister is screaming outside." The school contacted us, arranged to have the guidance counsellor, Mrs. Campbell, speak with us and Edmund to help him cope. The team spoke with Edmund's class and Heidi's sister Kaitlyn's class to teach the students about autism.

We never thought Heidi would have any "friends," so you can only imagine how we felt when she received her first birthday party invitation, and after speaking with the parent to ask, "You do know she is autistic?" and they responded, "Yes, our daughter speaks of her all the time." We were so touched when Mrs. Woodford informed us that three girls from the previous year requested to have Heidi in their class for this year.

After an extremely successful two years, our anxieties returned knowing she would have a new teacher and room for her Grade 2 year. Transition was not possible at the end of her P/1 year due to retiring staff. Her educational assistants volunteered to come to the school

to prepare the new classroom with her schedule strips prior to Heidi visiting the new room and teacher at the end of summer before the school year started. We are so happy that her transition could not have gone any smoother. She has a new teacher, Ms. Cathy Reimer, and Heidi has not had one tantrum yet this year. Heidi went from not participating in some class activities in her P/1 years to participating in almost all class activities this year. Heidi has many classmates "helping" her and is spontaneously asking for help when she needs it. We only listed six names above, but we believe that every member of the PWES staff should be recognized.

After forwarding a touching email to my husband from Mrs. Baird when her two years with Heidi was nearing an end, he replied, "You know, sometimes you wonder if we were cursed or if we were blessed to meet so many wonderful people over the years all because of our autistic daughter."

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**Steve Wohlmuth teaches at Central Kings Rural High and Valerie Wohlmuth is secretary at Central Kings Rural High, Annapolis Valley Regional School Board.**



*Left to Right: Holly Sheffield, Educational Assistant, Kim Christie, Educational Assistant, Heather Crouse, Resource Teacher, Cathy Reimer, 2/3 Teacher, holding the certificate is Joan Craig, founder of the Provincial Autism Centre, Lee Ann Baird, P/1 Teacher, Cathy Woodford, Principal, (sisters of the Sheelagh Nolan) Colleen Nolan and Maura Nolan*



## Mental Health Identification and Navigation

### A School-Based Integrated Pathway to Care Model for Youth Mental Health Promotion, Prevention/ Early Identification, and Continuing Care

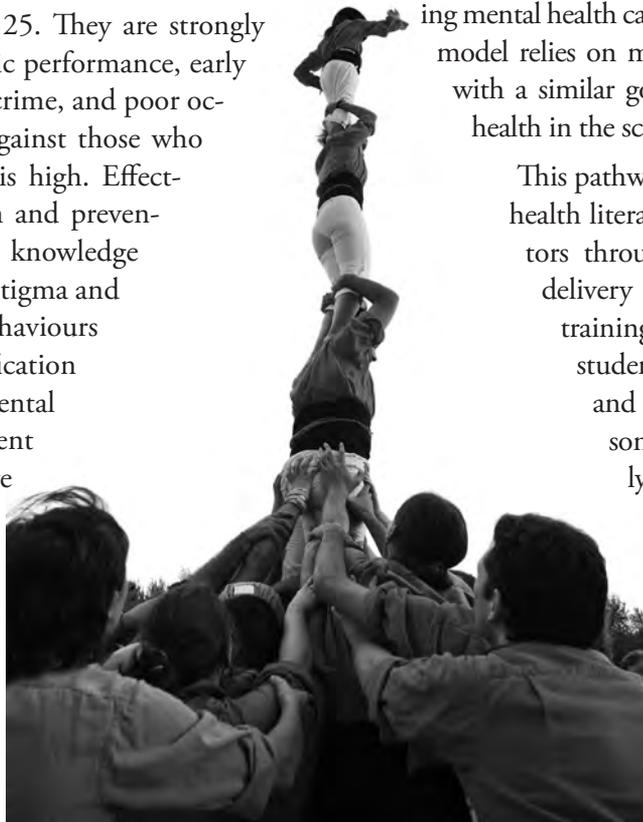
*Yifeng Wei and Dr. Stan Kutcher*

According to the World Health Organization, mental disorders comprise the greatest single burden of illness among youth globally. In Canada, it is estimated that one in five young people suffer from a mental disorder that requires professional intervention. Translated into the average secondary school classroom, this means four or five students per class may require a mental health intervention.

Mental disorders primarily begin early in the life span, with about 70 per cent of all mental disorders beginning before the age of 25. They are strongly associated with poor academic performance, early school leaving, violence and crime, and poor occupational success. Stigma against those who live with a mental disorder is high. Effective mental health promotion and prevention programs may enhance knowledge about mental health, reduce stigma and encourage help seeking behaviours among youth. Early identification and effective treatment of mental disorders and the enhancement of mental health may improve both population and personal well-being, may be effective in prevention of both mental and physical illnesses or disability and may substantially improve health, economic and learning outcomes in a cost-effective manner.

Educators, health providers and education/health administrators alike have identified the need to effectively and proactively address youth mental health in the school setting. In response to this, the Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health Team at the IWK/Dalhousie has created a school-based integrated pathway to care model – Mental Health Identification and Navigation (MH-IN). It addresses youth mental health needs through promotion, early identification and prevention, evidence driven interventions and community-based continuing mental health care in a coordinated manner. The model relies on many partners working together with a similar goal of improving youth mental health in the school setting and beyond.

This pathway begins by addressing mental health literacy among students and educators through mental health curriculum delivery in the classroom and teacher training. It then enhances capacity in student service providers, teachers and other appropriate school personnel (called “go-to” staff) for early identification and appropriate referral of students with mental disorders or substantive mental health problems by providing additional training for this group as identified within each school. These trained “gatekeepers” are then better linked to appropriate health care providers to assist in





*Students' knowledge about mental health and mental disorders increased significantly following the program.*

a more effective identification, triage and referral process. In addition, a youth mental health diagnosis and treatment training program is provided for primary care physicians and clinical nurse specialists, thus enhancing primary health care capacity for addressing mental health care needs of young people. Through a variety of educational materials and community events, this process attempts to engage parents/guardians and other related stakeholders to communicate with the school and health system. Finally, the model provides a method to enable communication back to the school from health care providers about the needs of students in treatment. Thus, a pathway to care (traversing from mental health promotion to ongoing collaborative mental health care) is established, meeting the needs of students, schools, health providers and the community.

The MH-IN model was first piloted at Forest Heights Community School (FHCS) in the South Shore region, Nova Scotia. The pilot involved a number of partners including: South Shore Regional School Board; Mental Health Program of South Shore Health; Primary Care, South Shore Health; the Department of Education (Student Services, Curriculum Services and School Plus); and the Department of Health. All Grade 10 students at the pilot school received seven sessions of mental health literacy education, taught by all Grade 10 teachers who had received teacher training by Dr. Stan Kutcher, using the "High School and Mental Health Curriculum Guide" that had previously been developed by the Sun Life Chair Team in collaboration with the Canadian Mental Health Association.

Additional training of "go-to" staff was also provided. "Go-to" staff members are teachers and other school personnel who students frequently go to for help and advice. The training for these staff ("gatekeepers") is aimed at helping to increase their capacities to identify and refer students who they think may be demonstrating signs and symptoms of a mental disorder or who are showing substantial mental distress. Primary care

providers (doctors and clinical nurse specialists) were also recruited for training in the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders in youth, and mental health care providers were invited to the school to communicate with the educators regarding referral mechanisms. Evaluation of knowledge acquisition and use of referral and follow-up processes was included in the pilot.

Preliminary data analysis shows that the students' knowledge about mental health and mental disorders increased significantly following the program. Furthermore, both classroom teachers and school support staff improved their knowledge immediately after the training and this improvement was maintained at the three-month follow up. The pilot project was also able to facilitate a conversation between educators and health care providers to identify and discuss issues pertaining to confidentiality and consent in order to build a more appropriate referral mechanism for students in need of help. A report about the pilot was developed and is available at the Chair's website [www.teenmentalhealth.org](http://www.teenmentalhealth.org).

The MH-IN model will be the first of its kind in Canada to provide a framework for educators, health care providers, families and the wider community to address youth mental health in schools in a cohesive and collaborative manner. Its development and initial implementation in Nova Scotia will place local educators, health care providers and researchers as innovators and pioneers in school mental health research and practice endeavors, and will benefit youth in Nova Scotia and beyond.

Teachers, educators and others who want to learn more about the work of the Chair Team and who wish to access a variety of resources pertaining to youth mental health may visit: [www.teenmentalhealth.org](http://www.teenmentalhealth.org).

**Yifeng Wei is a Research Coordinator with the Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health Team and Dr. Stan Kutcher holds the Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health at IWK/Dalhousie.**



## The Blue Couch



### Mental Health Supports for Students

*Susan Noiles*

Just outside my office in Student Services, there's a blue couch. During the course of the school day, young people wait on that couch for an available time to see me. Most have appointments for course-related questions. But some are brought in by administrators or teachers who have noticed that something is wrong; that the student is in distress and needs someone with whom to talk. "Tom" has become withdrawn over the past three months, rarely bathing or wearing clean clothes. "Janice" has been finding it more and more difficult to get out of bed in the morning to come to school and hides a pattern of marks she has made on her leg with a razor. "Josh" gets stoned on a daily basis; he wants to stop, but doesn't think he can do it on his own. Although the names are different, I have had the experience of working with each of these students over the course of my career, both as a classroom teacher and as a guidance counsellor. A test mark is not a priority when you are coping with an addiction or wrestling with depression. For these students, school takes a backseat to their personal struggles.

Mental health issues have been identified as one of the primary factors interfering with academic achievement. Because of the daily contact the school situation provides, teachers have the opportunity to observe changes in a student's behaviour over an extended period of time. It is not unusual for students to confide information to us about their life struggles. While many might argue that it is a parent's responsibility to look after their

children when a possible mental health issue exists, they often are unsure of where to turn. Having mental health supports in place in schools translates into a healthier working environment for students and for teachers.

Where can our students receive help? The Student Services office is often the first point of contact. If a student is having difficulty functioning in the school setting, the guidance counsellor has the training necessary to provide support. We also play a role in helping to determine whether an outside agency would be better equipped to provide what is needed. Whether a teacher or a parent brings forward a concern or whether a student self-identifies, the initial meeting between the counsellor and student is the starting point. Parents often have access to private therapy and may choose to provide this for their child. In rural areas where private therapy may be unavailable and where students do not have easy access to hospital support programs, the guidance counsellor is often the only available support besides the family doctor. Although my school is located in a suburban area outside Halifax, there have been situations where students could not participate in support programs in the city because they could not get transportation there. This is even more heartbreaking when you consider that waiting lists for programs are lengthy. When students' names rise to the top of the list, we need for them to be able to take advantage of any help available.

A critical role for the school counsellor is serving as a liaison between the school and outside agencies such



*The important role teachers play in observing their students and reporting any concerns, no matter how small, cannot be stressed enough.*

as psychologists, hospital programs or drug treatment programs. Students make greater progress toward recovery when they can stay on track with school work and transition back to the classroom as seamlessly as possible. A student receiving treatment through a program such as the IWK Adolescent Day Treatment Program will still need to stay current with schoolwork, so the guidance counsellor works with the student to ensure that this happens. We provide teachers with any information they might need in order to support the student, both emotionally and through the provision of work accommodated to the student's particular situation. We also keep health professionals informed about progress in the school setting. When the student is back in school full-time, support may still be needed. Since many mental health issues will be ongoing, having a safe place to discuss concerns and to express anger and frustration is vital. School counsellors check in with the student on a regular basis, providing that critical support.

One of the key supports for students in my school is our Youth Health Centre. The centre is staffed with a nurse who meets with students by appointment and makes referrals for mental health services. A social worker is available once a week for several hours to assist students coping with personal issues and housing concerns. A nurse practitioner meets with students twice a month to address sexual health concerns. As part of the Centre's goal of promoting a healthy lifestyle, youth volunteers prepare and serve a healthy breakfast at no cost to the student body on a monthly basis, with funding from grants and donations.

In addition to providing support, the Youth Health Centre serves an important educational role. The range of programming at our Youth Health Centre is truly impressive. The centre operates with a team of peer health educators; student volunteers who prepare and deliver programming to the junior high schools. These presentations help educate younger students on such topics as bullying, sexual health, drug use and relation-

ship issues. The Gay Straight Alliance, an organization for youth which supports and promotes gender acceptance, organizes social and educational events. For example, at a recent staff meeting, members of the GSA made a presentation on ways that we as teachers can support gender inclusive classrooms through our practices – a particularly powerful message because it was delivered to us by our students. The Youth Health Centre is a program sponsored by Capital Health.

The important role teachers play in observing their students and reporting any concerns, no matter how small, cannot be stressed enough. They are an integral part of identifying and supporting youth with mental health issues. One particular example of how effective this can be stands out for me. A teacher brought me a student's creative writing piece that alluded to suicide. Through a conversation the teacher had had with her student, she learned that her best friend from another school had committed suicide some months earlier. The teacher "had a feeling" that I should look at the writing piece. Because we know that youth are at greater risk to attempt suicidal actions when a close friend or relative has committed suicide, this teacher's identification meant that the student was able to receive the help and support she needed.

As a guidance counsellor in a large high school, I have the privilege of hearing concerns as varied as the 500 students on my caseload. I see both the successes and the continued struggles. Tom and Janice received treatment and successfully graduated from high school. For Josh, the struggle continues. Success in supporting youth definitely requires a team approach with each one of us having a part to play. But with a school team of the calibre I am privileged to work with, we continue to strive towards our goal – having fewer people waiting on the blue couch!

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Susan Noiles is a guidance counsellor at Lockview High School, Halifax Regional School Board.



## Is Anybody There? Does Anybody Care?

### Mental Health Issues and Educators

*Peter Mullally*

**D**uring Christmas our two-month-old granddaughter, Hannah visited us with her parents. With admiration we observed the gentle constant care Hannah's parents lovingly provided.

Hannah arrived in this world with two questions written on her heart: "Is anybody there? Does anybody care?"

We all arrive with these questions in our hearts. Parents and many others, especially teachers, help us answer these questions again and again in many ways and situations over life's journey.

Answering these two questions in meaningful ways is the foundation of mental health. The great suffering of mental dis-ease\* is the way it induces us to answer: "Nobody is there. Nobody cares."

Counselling with educators at NSTU Counselling Services for sixteen years has afforded this writer the privilege to consult with teachers and administrators at all experience levels. Many have said, "We all have mental health issues. It is usual to have them ourselves, in our family, and among staff and friends at times in our life." In fact, the chance of suffering a mental illness in your lifetime in Nova Scotia: **one in five**.

#### **Educators Create Environment for Students' Mental Health**

The quality of relationship among the school staff creates the school climate. This shapes the crucible for mental health of the students during the school day. A kind, respectful, learning school climate is the condition for a mentally healthy school. Of course, when students leave school they may face troubles or threats in their personal lives. In such circumstances, it can be amazing how well many students do.

#### **Hurried Schools**

Today's educator, like a symphony conductor, attempts to harmonize innumerable expectations: language arts, math and science, diversification and inclusion, anti-bullying and peer mediation, learning disability diagnosis and accommodation, extra help, respectful discipline and expression of multiple views, family support, social services, first aid, technology innovation, assessment, modification, extra-curricular activities, athletics, obesity and malnutrition, fundraising, money counting, chaperoning, working within hierarchy, patriarchy, sexism and racism, evolving collaborative institutions, budget cuts, debt accumulation and union-employer relations.

With limited time and resources, the educator strives to shape students towards being good relational human beings, respectful citizens, capable workers and leaders in all fields within an ever-changing society.

The result of the activity can be the hurried school that produces hurried education. Hurried education reflects our way of life in an ADHD society, supposedly the best on the planet. This hurriedness exacts a toll on the mental and physical health of educators and on our relationships with family and friends and in schools with co-workers.

As educators attempt to respond to ever-increasing demands, they set a pace so intense as to put many teachers chronically on high alert – a breeding ground for mental health dis-ease. Thanks to brain scanning technology, it is now well understood this hectic pace can elevate a person's cortisol levels (the stress hormone), alter brain chemistry and brain pathways and manifest in strained relationships at school and at home. Also, elevated cortisol levels can have physical health fallout

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\* The author's hyphenation of the word "dis-ease" throughout this article is intentional.



such as decreased metabolism, weight gain, disturbed sleep, decrease sexual response and an increased risk of heart dis-ease.

## Educators' Desire is to Serve Learners

Teachers toil on high alert in hurried schools. People attracted to teaching come imbued with the desire to do all they possibly can to help students succeed. This drive for the good of students when combined with the mountain of expectations laid on hurried schools creates a cauldron for dis-ease, particularly mental dis-ease.

Health practitioners inform us that what lowers the levels of the stress hormone cortisol is happiness, understood as achieving creative purpose, positive family/friend relationships, social networks, leisure time, and a sense of belonging.

Contrast the hurried school environment of educators with these five psychological aspects of work that promote mental health: time structure (known and reasonable deadlines), social contact with co-workers, collective effort and purpose (teamwork), social identity and regular organized work activity.

The percentage of workers in Canada who experience a stress-related illness each year is **20 per cent** and for educators it is likely higher and often it goes unreported. It is also very telling that the percentage of short and long term disability claims related to mental dis-ease in Canada is **77 per cent**.

## Depression a Debilitating Dis-ease

Depression is to mental health what the common cold is to physical health: it's common. Unlike the cold, chronic depression, if left untreated, can result in long-term disability, relationship and family breakdown, or even death.

Children and youth are most vulnerable to depression since the age group with the highest rate of depression symptoms is **under 20** and death by suicide accounts for **24 per cent** of all deaths among Canadians **aged 15 to 24**.

The percentage of Canadians at any one time suffering with depression is **four to five per cent**. And depression is no respecter of social position or achievement. The Olympic champion Clara Hughes talks about her struggles with depression in the Bell Aliant TV program in February called *Let's Talk About It*.

## What is Depression?

Depression is experienced as intense feelings of sadness and worthlessness – so bad that we lose interest in life. There is no x-ray or blood test for depression. Instead, our family members, co-workers and friends may be the first to notice that our mood, functioning and temperament have changed. Many of the symptoms of depression are a case of too much or too little.

For example we may...

- be sleeping little or sleeping too much;
- have gained or lost weight;
- be highly agitated or sluggish or inert;
- be extremely sad or very bad tempered, or both.

We may also feel...

- a loss of interest in the pleasures of life, as well as work, family and friends;
- inability to concentrate and make decisions;
- negative, anxious, trapped, unable to act;
- despairing, guilty and unworthy;
- fatigue and an overall loss of energy;
- suicidal – expressing thoughts and sometimes, making plans;
- numb – a profound feeling of emptiness.

A diagnosis of depression is arrived at when a person has been experiencing at least five of these symptoms for a period of two weeks or more. Depression is a treatable mental dis-ease. The percentage of people suffering depression who respond well to treatment: **80 per cent**.

The most effective treatment for depression combines the use of medication to treat the symptoms, together with counselling to assist in changing the negative thinking and behaviour patterns that underline depression.

## Breaking the Silence, Dissolving the Stigma of Mental Dis-ease

The stigma associated with mental dis-eases has meant that **90 per cent** of people who suffer with depression never seek treatment.

Suppose one teacher turns to two people on either side in a staff meeting. Chances are that at some time in their career one of these five people may suffer a mental dis-ease, often depression. How many among the



staff will be tuned into this reality? Few. Yet our keen awareness of physical dis-ease allows us to provide support for a teacher who is struggling with heart dis-ease or cancer or tumours. We need similar support when suffering mental dis-ease. Members experiencing this support, report how healing it is to feel the connection with co-workers in similar emotional distress.

This writer knows mental dis-ease personally and in the family, and he knows that the support, understanding and treatment of family, friends, co-workers and professionals can give a person the support to live with courage and regain full health.

Support can happen when one person in a safe setting talks about mental dis-ease. Others may join the conversation, revealing their struggles with mental dis-ease. Silence is broken, stigma is lessened, making it more acceptable for others to seek support and treatment for their suffering.

Nova Scotia allots **five per cent** of the healthcare budget for the vast mental health needs. Any action we take to break the silence and stigma surrounding mental dis-ease will increase acceptance, knowledge, understanding and treatment for all individuals and families who are suffering.

### **NSTU: Leader in Supporting the Health of Members**

For more than 20 years, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union has shown progressive leadership to lessen the effects of both mental and physical dis-ease among its members. NSTU established the Counselling Services Program in 1989 and the Early Intervention Program in 2001. Both of these programs are available to all union members throughout the province at no additional cost. This contrasts sharply with the fact that in Canada the percentage of employers who have plans to address mental health and mental illness in the workplace: **31 per cent**.

### **Kindness: The Universal Antidote for Suffering**

How do we measure the value of a life? Is it measured by the number of people we have under our authority on a job, so that the value goes up as we climb the ladder in the system? “Yes,” our society affirms.

Or is the value of a life measured by the kindness we bring to each contact with each person in our day?

The spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, when asked about his religion replied, “My religion is kindness.”

Each time we show kindness in our family and with friends, co-workers, and students, we exercise our greatest human capacity: the power to create goodness with each person whose life we touch.

For many of us, even getting into work on any given day can be a major achievement. To be met with kindness cannot help but make the day a little brighter, a little lighter. As we practice kindness, we see goodness arise in surprising random ways. We grow in humanness as we treat each with kindness and especially when we struggle to treat ourselves with kindness.

### **A Reflection on Mental Health for Educators**

For our children, communities and ourselves, let us take heart to foster mental health in small and large ways employing:

- not so much ignorance, as knowledge;
- not so much awkwardness, as skill;
- not so much fear, as courage;
- not so much judgment, as understanding;
- not so much isolation, as common effort.

For it is in listening with compassionate hearts and acting with informed minds that we widen understanding, deepen kindness and strengthen action.

### **Is Anybody There? Does Anybody Care?**

Then, even more, our school communities become places where all belong, all are accepted, all are encouraged to become all that we may be. And we help each other to answer the two questions in our hearts: “Yes, someone is there. Yes, someone cares.”

**Note:** All statistics/definitions pertaining to mental health in this article were gleaned from Quick Facts: Mental Illness and Addiction in Canada, October 2009, Mood Disorders Society of Canada.

We are grateful to the union members who access our services and teach us repeatedly about their courageous resilient capabilities.

For an excellent audio presentation on mental illness go to: <http://www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/episode/2011/01/07/mental-health-guest-host-steven-page/>.

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**Peter Mullally is a counsellor with the Nova Scotia Teachers Union.**

# Teaching Students and Subjects

*Susan Linfield*

**A**s teachers, we are well aware of mental health issues. Our professional associations frequently offer sessions on “wellness” and “balance” at provincial in-services. Our union is presently cooperating on a study of stress issues in the workplace with faculty from Saint Mary’s University. As members of the NSTU, we have access to qualified people and programs, should we need support for issues that affect our own mental health.

Students, too, benefit from support in our schools: individualized educational plans, learning centres, program planning teams, literacy initiatives, school psychologists, mentors and student services. Maybe these initiatives do not reach many students. Perhaps they do not even exist in your school. Supports may be in place, but many students may not get exposed to, or be informed about, them.

Today, more than at any other time in the past, young people come to school with major problems that greatly affect their ability to learn. As professionals in public education, we deal with them on a daily basis for ten months of the year. We teach students with wounds from words, failure, loneliness and loss; scars from poverty, violence, abuse and death; bruises from friends, family and foe.

As a classroom teacher, I am on the front line, with many girls and boys whose mental health issues have impaired their ability to be successful in the traditional school setting. They came, and continue to come to me, stressed-out, yet barely able to identify that which is dragging them down. I used to jest about my ability to even *teach* teens, given the number of stressors they face. They enter our classrooms burdened with the age-old stressors (including parents, siblings, love interests, friendships, body image issues, zits, hair, hormones, clothing, feelings of not fitting in, grades and peer pressure.) Now, the new age sources of stress add to their angst: cell phone issues, Facebook drama, financial woes, bullying and cyber-bullying, drug use, sexual identity issues, and more. They enter our classrooms and we are expected not

only to deal with their “challenges” but also to teach to their strengths and meet their needs, all while assisting them in reaching the outcomes for our course(s).

It is 2011, and our youth attempt to handle these perennial problems. “Family” is more often one-parent, rather than two, sometimes with a second adult, unrelated to the child. How does this impact on the student? It is difficult to speak with Johnny’s mom if she isn’t at home when I call. Often, no parent is there. Johnny may be needing support/encouragement/communication with a guardian, but often it isn’t forthcoming. He will bear the confrontation and fallout of any negative experience on his own. Lack of home support contributes greatly to personal hardship, and often academic failure, for the student. Student stress builds with time; the combination of negative circumstances and individual isolation.

Poverty has always been with us, but our changing family structure undoubtedly contributes to increased poverty-induced stress in our students. Two homes are much more expensive to maintain than one. Adolescents living in poverty, in sub-standard housing, or in dysfunctional families, constantly face stressors that are toxic to their mental health and well-being. Consider young people, already overwhelmed by circumstances beyond their means to control. Minor altercations at school quickly escalate to volatility. Fragile mental health makes it difficult for young people to learn and to conform to standards expected of them. The teacher, so essential to the student, can easily and inadvertently become one more burden on young shoulders, already weighed down by privation.

Some children come to school hungry, and hungry kids do not learn well. Some of my students can’t bring an apple or sandwich to school because there is no food in the fridge, or because “cheque day is tomorrow.” In fact, of the 40,000 Nova Scotians who received food assistance from Feed Nova Scotia in March 2010, one-third were people under the age of 18.

*We are very significant to the students we teach. It is up to us to make that significance a positive one.*

We know that chronic stress, which creates excess cortisol, inhibits the brain's ability to make new connections. Memory, attention and motivation suffer. Conversely, when that stress is minimized and students feel safe in a relaxed and caring environment, learning becomes a natural outcome. When students begin to take control, and start to feel a connectedness to their education and the whole learning process, something wonderful, almost magical occurs.

I am privileged to experience this quite often. You might think that I am removed from my students, given the nature of my assignment. I teach "academics" English 10, and English Communications 11 and 12 in one of Nova Scotia's largest high schools. Not so. I am able to forge close relationships with many students. Teaching in a specialized program has allowed me to contribute not only to students' academic growth, but also to their healthy social and emotional development.

C.E.P. stands for Career Exploration Program – one of five in the Chignecto Central Regional School Board. It is an engaging program, with a "hands-on" component that has tremendous appeal for many who have struggled with school demands in the past. Most enter Grade 10 with a wealth of skills, although some are not the ones typically valued in schools. Some perceive themselves as "stupid." I recall a 16-year-old girl who blurted out, "You think I'm \*\*\*\*ing stupid!" before storming out of the room. In January, she visited us with news that she would be joining the armed forces. The strength in her hug, and the tears in her eyes, lead me to believe that the teachers here had made a huge difference for her in those earlier tumultuous years. She clearly learned that she was not stupid. (This can take some time.)

I also remember a "Michael" in Grade 11 who sat passively when I called his name and announced, "88 per cent! Amazing test, Michael." Michael didn't even blink. I called his name again, "Michael!" But still no acknowledgement from Michael. I spoke again, this

time with more volume. "Michael! Come and get your test!" Finally he replied, "That's not mine. I couldn't make an 88." I insisted, "Michael, come here. This IS yours. See your name? This is your work. You did so well." He sauntered to the front, still in disbelief. Then, slowly, a smile spread across his face. It was one of those moments I will always cherish.

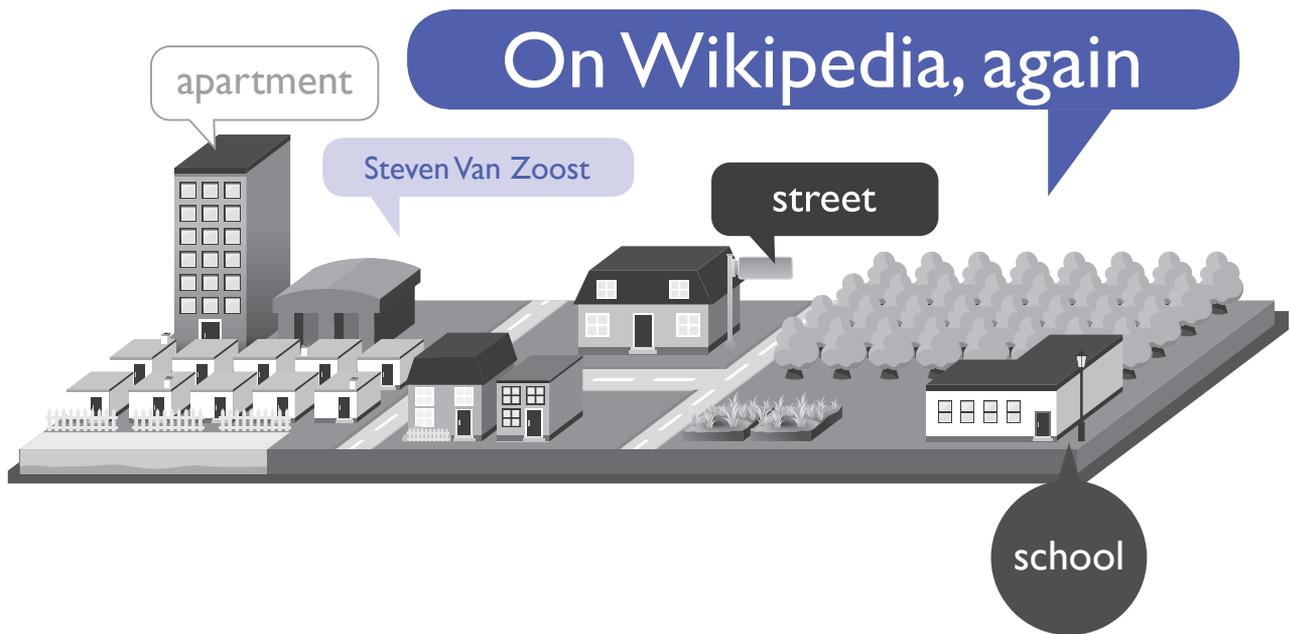
Many of our students have endured long and tough journeys. For us, this may be difficult to appreciate. Many of us were raised in two-parent homes, where at least one parent was employed. Many of the students we teach do not have this same background of experience. School (and life) isn't easy for them.

I think of a Grade 12 girl who beams as she shows me her graduation photos. She was a young woman we often praised for being present. She still missed time, but she was in attendance so often, even she knew that it was making a difference and she was proud of herself. She'll be the first in her extended family to graduate from high school. It's been an arduous road for her. Chronic health problems, shyness, and limited success in school resulted in entrenched absenteeism by the end of junior high. Her high school years began to reverse that trend. Now she has a goal for future education, and may remain free of those evils (substance abuse, joblessness, poverty, anxiety and depression) that plague so many youth today.

As teachers, we have a unique opportunity to influence and shape the lives of students in our care. I believe that our mandate extends beyond the creation of competent lessons, and management of the classroom environment. We teach "subjects" but we also teach "people." Whether we believe it or not, we are very significant to the students we teach. It is up to us to make that significance a positive one.

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Susan Linfield teaches at Cobequid Educational Centre, Chignecto-Central Regional School Board.



So there I was, on Wikipedia, again. I was preparing for my Grade 12 English class and conducting a basic internet search for an author study in December. We would be studying selected works of Dr. George Elliot Clarke, who is currently working at the University of Toronto, but was originally born in Windsor in the Annapolis Valley, where I am presently working at a high school. In September, I had applied to the *Writers in the Schools Program* through the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia. This program, and my principal's support, allowed me to arrange for Dr. Clarke to meet with my students. Dr. Clarke had visited my classroom twice before in the last ten years, and I remembered him telling me that he proudly owned land in Three Mile Plains. My internet research about Three Mile Plains was how I ended up on Wikipedia.

The only description available about Three Mile Plains was a geography stub that simply stated, "Three Mile Plains is a small community in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, located in The Municipality of the District of West Hants in Hants County." This description on Wikipedia, typical for most small places in Nova Scotia, was not helpful for students interested in learning more about the communities surrounding our school. I was inspired.

The first thing I did was contact Dr. Clarke to ask if he would be willing to meet with my students in a location of his choice in Three Mile Plains, rather than

in my classroom at the school. I was interested in place-based learning, where students develop an appreciation of local places by connecting their learning with experiences in the community. He suggested the Windsor Plains Baptist United Church as a meeting place. My students agreed to his suggestion and I contacted the pastor. The students had planned – or rather ordered – a lunch and invited her to join us.

I started to share our idea of "class trip" with other people. At the Remembrance Day ceremony held in Windsor, I bumped into a Department of Education official. When he learned what we were up to, he wanted to attend. News spreads quickly in a small place, and I received an email from a local visual artist. Previously, she had incorporated Dr. Clarke's words into her painting. She requested to meet my students at school as well as attend the meeting with Dr. Clarke in Three Mile Plains. Then, the winner of the African Nova Scotia Music Association's 2009 "Rising Star" award, Pat Watson, phoned the school to ask if she could attend, and asked if she could sing for us! Could she ever! She will be recording musical interpretations of Dr. Clarke's works in the spring of 2011. And so, it continued; several other community members found themselves joining my English class' trip to Three Mile Plains.

In early December, I made the necessary arrangements to transport the class to Three Mile Plains. It was sunny and windy when we met Dr. Clarke. I remem-

*Students develop an appreciation of local places by connecting their learning with experiences in the community.*

ber that because the church door would blow wildly whenever someone tried to enter or exit. Dr. Clarke had sent the class some additional readings for us to consider. One of his longer poems – an excerpt from an epic poem he is currently writing – was interpreted by students in preparation for his visit. Students annotated key lines of this text and shared their interpretations with other classmates by posting their annotations in a wiki in our class Moodle. When we met with him, Dr. Clarke read this entire selection, and it was exciting for me as a teacher to have students follow along in their own marked-up text as he read. Students had struggled with understanding his work and had prepared questions to ask him about specific lines, specific poems, and about their unique inquiry question. Later in the month, each student would be responsible for writing an academic paper that responded to an individualized question that the student created and had my approval. I have been using this approach to studying a common set of texts within a class and it has allowed for a wide range of exploration:

- What writing strategies does Dr. Clarke use to sustain his readers' interest?
- How does Dr. Clarke's work appeal to various audiences?
- In what ways does Dr. Clarke use flower imagery in his poems?
- In what ways does Dr. Clarke use religious references to engage the reader and change the importance of the writing?
- In what ways does Dr. Clarke express rural life?
- In what ways does Dr. Clarke represent cultural background through his writing style, choices, and content?

After lunch, the students were surprised with books from the Department of Education. Then, Dr. Clarke answered students' questions, he read, and Pat Watson sang. My students had prepared a gift for Dr. Clarke – something that we called "Potluck Poetry." Students

wrote mash-up poetry by rearranging lines from multiple poems written by Dr. Clarke to create new meaning. We bound the students' poetry into a small book and presented it to him. I hope he was impressed with the ways in which students thought carefully and creatively about his words. We parted, smiling. It took only ten minutes to get back to the school, but it felt as though we were a world away.

Back in class, on the worldwide web, Three Mile Plains was much harder to find. My students made an effort to change this. Using a wiki in our Moodle, the students wrote a brief description of Three Mile Plains, about Five Mile Plains School, and about prominent community members. A wiki, by nature, is intended to be community-edited information. It was our hope that we would start a conversation in Wikipedia and that others will contribute to the description of Three Mile Plains. An unintended yet pertinent learning that occurred was brought to my attention when I overheard one of my students explaining to a student in another course that, "Wikipedia is a starting point for internet research, but it's not all that reliable. I mean, *our class* even put information on Wikipedia!"

Last year, following a similar process, my Grade 12 English class studied the work of Alden Nowlan, who was from the community of Stanley, a 20-minute drive from our school. If you look up "Stanley, NS" on Wikipedia, you'll see that my students have been there too. I can't help but wonder what other Nova Scotia communities, places, events, monuments, prominent figures, or authors are not yet described on Wikipedia. There are plenty of opportunities for teachers and classes across the province to participate in creating, distributing, challenging and updating online material. Either as readers or as writers, it won't be long before my students will be on Wikipedia, again.

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# Priority Setting

Greg O'Keefe

Celebration. This may seem out of place in an issue of *Aviso* whose theme is *Mental Health Issues in Public Education*. You might wonder what one could find to celebrate in this winter of discontent for Nova Scotia's public school system.

I could begin by listing the current problems in schools as outlined via the media from instant "experts" whose last contact with schools, teachers and students, was the day they left school themselves. Being educators, we listen, read and weigh the merits of their views in the hopes of coming across a positive suggestion of value to the children we teach.

It all comes down to priority setting. If I had to go to court, I would want the advice and representation of the best lawyer. If I, or a loved one, needed medical attention, I would seek the expertise of a doctor. I would not seek out the advice of the Department of Justice or the Minister of Health. It may come as no surprise that I wouldn't even contact the Premier.

Our system of government enables such elected officials to set the priorities regarding seemingly all aspects of our lives. I wish them well in their daunting task. I also wish to offer them my advice, at no cost and being offered after a lifetime of experience: All input offered on a particular issue should be listened to in relation to its connection to the issue. It is important not to discount any ideas that may be contrary to the final decision (which may have already been made). If discounted, the time and efforts of the presenter is a sham.

It is equally important not to dismiss the input of those who will be carrying out the decision. It is vital not to use the excuse that these professionals belong to self-interest groups. To dismiss their experience-based input would be foolish.

Teachers are the ones we must turn to for advice on solutions and future actions regarding Nova Scotia's public school system. Concerned students and/or parents

seek out the teacher, not the Premier or the Minister of Education, with their concerns. It is the teacher who is approached with questions like, "How is my child doing?" or "How does my child relate to classmates?" If improvement is needed, then, "What should my child be doing? What should I do as a loving parent?" There is no shortage of questions from a concerned parent and no end of suggestions of positive actions from the teacher.

The theme *Mental Health Issues in Public Education* is like beauty; it lies in the eye of the beholder. If regarded as negative in nature, there will be a never-ending list of daily occurrences in school which take this term to mean "illness." However, it can also reflect the many positive experiences which bring out the professionalism in you every day. In your classroom, you teach material to a room filled with students with different needs, abilities and interests. You are prepared and interested and, most importantly, your students know that you respect them. You are positive, even when some students are not; you have students working together as a class, in groups and as individuals. Other days may not go so well, but even then, you try to have the correct response when questioned by a student. Think of the expression on a student's face when something you are teaching finally gets through. That smile is probably not as wide as yours – talk about a reason to celebrate!

There is no profession like it. Focus on the times when you did what your vocation called you to do. You may not always be the best you can be, but as you continue to try to be that best, you will have unlimited opportunities to experience satisfaction with a job well done. My short closing advice – be positive and treat others with respect. The result will be **mental health** – I guarantee it!

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Greg O'Keefe is a retired teacher and former President of the NSTU.

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## COMPETITIVE RATES

Whether for mortgages, consumer loans, student loans or personal line of credit, our lending department will help you get what you need.

## EXCELLENT SERVICE

As a member, you are also an owner of the Credit Union. We are there to help you and pride ourselves on our service.

## A million reasons to do business with us

*In the last 5 years we have given back over \$1,000,000.00 to our members.*



Johnson Inc.  
Brokers/Consultants/  
Administrators

Unifund Assurance  
Company  
Underwriters

Medavie Blue Cross  
Underwriters

**etfs. inc.**  
Service Provider

Manulife Financial  
Underwriters

AXA Assurances Inc.  
Underwriters



NOVA SCOTIA TEACHERS UNION

# Group Insurance Plan