

Foundations in quicksand



Feb. 25, 2020 By Nate Smelle

So far the news in 2020 has been anything but boring.

Locally and provincially, we have seen some 200,000 teachers and education workers stand together in defence of Ontario's public education system. Nationally, we have witnessed a wave of blockades and demonstrations arise in support of the Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs and their fight to protect their First Nation's sovereignty and traditional territory. Dominating the newsfeed globally, an outbreak of the COVID-19 virus has killed more than 2,600 people and infected more than 79,000 others worldwide. Connecting the dots between each of these historic mobilizations of the masses, I see one key theme ? solidarity.

Understanding that viral outbreaks do not respect the imaginary borders meant to divide nations, the health care community around the world has had to work together to contain the virus and minimize its threat. Anthropologist Margaret Mead's solidarity-inspiring statement advising people to ?Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has,? now appears to have manifested as truth in the uprising of land defenders protecting the Wet'suwet'en First Nation's sovereignty and the planet from coast to coast across Turtle Island. United on the front lines in the struggle to defend Ontario's public education system, teachers and education workers continue to resist cuts by the Ford government that will limit the potential of the next generation to succeed.

On the flip-side, this surge in solidarity has also manifested at the other end of the spectrum, uniting monetarily-obsessed far-right extremists and flat-out racists with no concern for Indigenous rights or future generations.

Between the lines of this lesson in solidarity I also uncovered another teaching that underscores the value of public education. This lesson was pointed out to me on the picket line outside North Hastings High School by Meghan van der Woude, a student in teachers' college at Western University. While explaining her reasons for joining her mother Lynn ? a Grade 5/6 teacher at Bird's Creek Public School ? she described public education as ?the foundation of every other job.?

Upon contemplating the implications of van der Woude's statement in relation to the lesson in solidarity still unfolding before us, I arrived at several important questions in need of consideration.

First, who benefits from a poorly funded education system? Society? The majority of Ontarians who can't afford to send their kids to private school? Private companies offering teacher-less eLearning at discount prices? Politicians like Donald Trump who dubiously profess to ?love the poorly educated??

Is it really in our best interest to build a foundation in quicksand for the next generation of doctors, nurses and health care professionals who will look out for our health in the years to come?

Can we really expect to achieve genuine reconciliation when the majority of Canadian politicians in power are poorly educated regarding the true meaning of Nation to Nation negotiations and Indigenous sovereignty?

Ask any architect and they will surely agree that whether building a home, an education system, a just society, or a future you don't begin the process by dismantling the foundation. That is of course if we want our creation to stand the tests of time.