

A poison apple



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Life unfolds in unexpected ways the more we have faith in our expectations. Still, progress is impossible without an awareness of where we have been to establish a solid footing in the present which allows us to put our best foot forward into the future. With every present moment constantly slipping into the past the task of getting a handle on our history can become more daunting as time goes by. Rather than allowing ourselves to become paralyzed by this predicament, we luckily have the option of investing our time and attention in the past, present or future whenever it appears wise to do so. After standing out in the cold with the teachers at North Hastings High School last Wednesday and listening to their reasons for striking, I felt the need to look into the origins of the dispute and the views on both sides of the bargaining table. The motivating factor urging me to focus my attention on the past was the fact that for many of the teachers on strike this was not their first rodeo. Speaking with the head of NHHS's art department Dianne Winmill as she waved a sign at passers-by bearing the words "On Strike," I learned that this was the second time in her teaching career she has been compelled to stand up against major cuts to the education system by conservative government. Back in 1997, shortly after becoming a teacher, Winmill said she found herself carrying a similar sign on the same sidewalk in opposition to deep cuts to education proposed by former conservative premier Mike Harris's government. At that time Winmill had a class of 41 students. Recalling how it was impossible for one teacher to address the unique needs of each student in a class so large, she explained how the cuts by the current Ford government will negatively affect students in the same way. Remembering the strike but not the details I dug into an old stack of newspapers chronicling what went on to become the largest teachers' strike in North American history. The two-week province-wide strike in 1997 saw 126,000 teachers walk off the job in protest of the Harris government's "Education Quality Improvement Act" (Bill 160), and their plan to strip away the teachers and school boards power to shape education policy, as well as classroom and teaching conditions. One of the biggest issues on the table during this time, like today, was the government's plans to increase class sizes. Upon reading the statement provided to The Bancroft Times/Bancroft This Week on behalf of MPP Daryl Kramp by his executive assistant Bob Hadley, and comparing it with that of Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation District 29 president Scott Marshall I decided to get out my calculator and do the math. According to Kramp's office, the Ford government has "lowered class sizes from 28 to 25 [students]." Pointing out that the current student to teacher ratio in the classroom is 22:1, Marshall said the statement from Kramp's office is a continuation of this government's "pattern of misleading the public." Employing the problem solving skills I attained when I was in school, I took a look at these numbers from the perspective of a fruit-picking farm labourer - a job I held for a brief period in the late '90s while living in the Niagara Region. If the maximum capacity of a box is knowingly established to be 22 apples, and the owner of the business who has never picked an apple in their life tells you that you need to put 28 apples in said box, my calculations reveal that the employer is demanding an increase of six apples per box. Therefore, if the employer discovers that it is impossible to overload a box of apples to this degree because some of the apples fall out and become damaged; and then tells their staff to pack 25 apples into that same box of 22 instead, no matter how you crunch the numbers it still translates into an increase of three apples. Likewise, no matter which

way you look at it, changing the student to teacher ratio in the classroom from 22:1 to 25:1 is still an increase. What this government has also continuously failed to address is how their plan to remove the caps on class sizes will fill many classrooms with far more than 25 students. In addition, because the proposed 25:1 ratio changes the education funding formula this increase will eliminate 5,000 teachers across the province. So, using Premier Doug Ford's logic ? 5,000 less teachers in our schools + more students in the classroom + less funding for resources and support staff + less course options and forced e-learning for students = an improvement to the quality of the education system in Ontario. Seems to me that Premier Ford might be using the same calculator as former premier Harris.