The Privilege of Teaching

I would like to begin by firstly clarifying that it is my most esteemed and heartfelt privilege to be a teacher. It is an honour to be entrusted with this distinct task of being part of educating the future generations of Canadian children to help them reach their full potential and open up new avenues and universes for them to explore. As a parent I know full well that I entrust my most precious treasure to others for the majority of their waking day and gladly and solemnly take on this august privilege in each of my teaching days. This is a tall order, and one I must face each day with renewed vigor and purpose.

We must move beyond this petty petulant childlike bickering and stem the tide of ignorance and hostility. The current education system in British Columbia is on life support, and I fear that it will not survive this current conflict.

We honour those that serve; it is one of the most solemn duties as Canadians. We honour the soldiers who sacrifice wellbeing and blood for our freedom, the lawyers who work tirelessly above and beyond the call of duty as stewards of justice, and the nurses and doctors who strive against the endless onslaught of disease and injury to aid in our recovery. We honor the officers of peace that stand in path of danger to ensure our safety, who root out injustice and perversion. We pay tribute to the men and women who build our homes, pave our roads, fix our leaky faucets and keep our assets safe and growing. As Canadians we respect the working people, the collective that keeps the economic engine of our great nation moving swiftly and surely on the path to a better tomorrow.

The one thing in common that these heroes of industry and progress have is that at one time they to sat at a desk and learned. They explored new worlds, they progress together through the path that is education, and they came out from this auspicious journey, better people.

Education is not simply a fiscal or quantifiable commodity; it is a moral endeavor that we as a nation have chosen to support. We know that an educated populace is a better people. That those that can read, write and do basic arithmetic functions, are a happier, healthier and more productive cooperative. We know, that values we share as a nation, do not permeate on fallow ground, they need good soil, a literate and educated populace, to grow and flourish. The great movements of the ages, stem from a people that can think. They explode from ideas shared through print and voice, to propel us toward a better tomorrow and a future that holds more promise than the past that preceded it.

Humanity has accomplished astounding feats. We have circumnavigated the globe, we have split the atom, cured polio and we have landed men on the moon and touched down on Mars. Education played a vital role in these human endeavors. The more we put into the education system, the brighter our future.

As an educator, I understand that resources are finite, and the very notion of paying teachers more, while the economic system collapses around us and each dollar we earn is stretched further and further on a daily basis, is a difficult concept to understand. Concerning this, I heartily welcome debate and inquiry. If I may be so bold, I will offer my humble opinion on the matter.

I am 31 years old; I have 3 children under the age of 10 and an amazing wife. I earn, after taxes and deductions \$2,896.48 per month. If you have lived in Metro-Vancouver for any length of time, you will know that this is not enough money to support a family of five. I have pretty good benefits, and good pension. I pay for my benefits, and have from the first day of teaching, until the day I retire (34 years after my first day) contributed 10.86% of my gross annual salary toward my pension. I am fortunate in the fact that I have these benefits and pension, and do not begrudge any resentment some might have that I receive these perks from my job, but they do come at a cost. If every labour force in the province, combined 10.86% of their gross income as a group and invested it collectively in RRSP's, it would create and excellent and almost inexhaustible retirement fund. Even individually, if one were to allocate a set 11% of their income to retirement savings, they would save large amounts of money over a 32 year period and pay significantly less taxes.

I come from humble origins in East Vancouver; I was the first member of my family, stretching back several generations to complete post-secondary school. I spent 5 years doing so and earned two bachelor degrees from SFU. This came at a cost. It was a choice freely made, and with the understanding that I would spend a large portion of my income over the next 15 years of my life repaying this debt. My current student debt is \$68, 498.84, a sum at which my benevolent government charges me Prime + 2.5%. I did not get into teaching for the money; no sane person ever has, nor ever will. I entered this profession, and profession is exactly what it is, to play my small part, albeit an important one, in bringing forth a new generation full of passion and knowledge of the world within which they will live, work and contribute.

I do not work from 8:30 – 3:00, if I did, I estimate that I would cover less than 50% of the government mandated curriculum, and would do so in a very boring and mundane fashion. The exploration and acquisition of knowledge should be adventurous, engaging and passionate. Students should leave each class with a renewed fervor and desire to expand their understanding. I teach some incredibly exciting subjects, and I hope my students thrive off of my passion and carry on the torch into their own lives. If each one of you reading this, would simply take a minute to hearken back to your days at school, I am certain that you will remember a teacher that had a profound influence on your life, even if you hated school, in your 13 years there must be at least one. When you paint teachers with a brush, whether negatively or positively, do them the honour of picturing them as you rail against the injustice you feel exists with teachers hoping for a better wage. If you have the guts, contact them, that person that made your life just a little better, and tell them that they, despite who they are and what they have done, do not deserve your respect.

In regards to my wage, I understand that it is better than some, and not as good as others. There are professions to whom we do not begrudge a high wage: Doctors, lawyers, CEO's, financial advisors and investors and many more. My question then pivots on this point: why are educators not worth the wages they are allocated, and why do you collectively feel that teachers do not deserve better? What has turned you so bitter that a group of people who strive endlessly to enhance our society, educate the coming group of workers, doctors, police officers, roofers, mechanics, inventors and entrepreneurs are viewed as unworthy of respect and a respectable wage? Simply put, why do you hate us? Where does this loathing originate? For what crime are we guilty?

Remember your kindergarten teacher that helped you learn how to tie your shoes? Do you remember your grade 2 teacher that shared her lunch when you forgot yours, or there wasn't enough food in the cupboard? Do you remember the teacher that wrote you a letter of reference and helped polish your resume that got you your first job? Do you remember any of the teachers that inspired you, or ignited a passion for learning?

How did they somehow become the enemy in the fight for betterment?

Education is freely given to all strata of our society. It is the great equalizer. Whether poor or rich, religious or not, tall short, heavy, thin, pretty or homely, education is the foundation upon which we stand in equal measure. In BC we have an exceptional system and it is propelled ever onward by people who no matter how hard they work, or how many extra activities they do, are destined to maintain the same level of compensation. Merit pay to "good" teachers does not work. It is no secret that the largest purveyor of this style of teacher motivation is currently experiencing a collapse of their education system and is in deep fiscal and social crisis. The nations that produce the best students and top quality education are ones, primarily in Scandinavia, that compensate teachers for their role in society proportionally to the respect that they are accorded and that is very high indeed. They are viewed as autonomous professionals worthy of homage, who are granted a significant role in society and compensated with a very good wage. Why not us? Why can we not agree that teachers are vital to progress and the continuation and development of a magnificent society?

It is no secret that the rising powers in the world do not share our values. They are totalitarian, they allow horrendous abuses of their citizens to occur regularly with never a hand raised in defense of the defenseless, rather they send tanks to do their talking. These are our competitors, and we prostituted our excellent system to their students, who we accept in droves. I have never heard of parents in Canada sending their 12 year old across the ocean to stay with strangers and study in a foreign land because their system is superior, have you? As their influence grows, the vital importance of our education becomes ever increasingly imperative.

I would gladly accept the net zero mandate on my wage if the government would take a stronger stance and fund our system as it requires and deserves. We are entering a period of change unprecedented since the invention of fire. Our world is evolving at such a rapid pace that we need to equip the future with the skills and abilities that they will most assuredly need to take on the coming world with heads held high. If we are retain our place in the world, a seat at the global table, then we need a populace that it ready, willing and able to take up the torch of our forbearers and carry it onward and upward. We cannot do that if we are not given the resources. We cannot face the 21st century with a 19th century education model and 20th century technology. We cannot train and equip the coming generation as they so desperately need if we as teachers are relegated to child minders and punching bags for the ills of society. The challenges we face in the modern age, the competition for the hearts and minds of your children are unparalleled since public education originated during the industrial age. We live in a society where celebrities command greater respect and hold more sway than politicians, inventors and giants of industry and civil rights. An age where "I have a dream" is a punch line and the concept of liberty is cliché.

My colleagues and I are not motivated by money; it is not the sum of our existence. We are motivated by a deep and fervent hope that the students that leave our charge, will take up the call and strive ever forward toward a future that is brighter than the past. The people who will one day pay

taxes for our health care, who will build the car that we drive, invent the cure for cancer, stem the tide of AIDS and HIV, are in our care this very moment. Do we not want them to be better than we are? Do we not hope our children will progress further than we did? As a father of three I cannot wait until the day that my children are more successful than I am, the day when they know more, understand more deeply the finer details of life and master the skills that will make them contributors to the collective that is the true north strong and free.

A free and democratic society requires responsibility, it necessitates knowledge and understanding of our governmental structures, laws and lawmaking and a firm grasp of the trails and tribulations of those that built the world that we enjoy today. From the French peasant who screamed liberty as the troops of Paris murdered him, clutching his *tricolor*, or the troops that stormed Juno beach in defiance of tyranny and oppression. They need this knowledge, and it is my responsibility to ensure that they leave my care with it in tow.

Ensuring that my students leave school with basic skills and knowledge of our country and its structures and history is a duty I do not take lightly. I have to compete with PS3's, Facebook, Twitter, drugs, sex, hip hop and relationship issues. My students hail from the most affluent areas of town, to the least, they are as diverse in belief and origin as you will find anywhere in our nation. I do not choose what I teach them, only how they learn it.

In response to many of the skeptics and naysayers of the profession I would respond that yes, you may have some legitimate points regarding some of your positions. I would encourage further dialogue between those that teach and those that do not. A point to remember as you prepare your rebuttals: teachers often wear many hats, and have done so for years. Often we work additional jobs to supplement our income in the summer and throughout the year, as well as the 5 plus years we were in university. I myself have worked in many areas and fields of labour. I have been a tile layer, a roofer, a stone mason, a gas station attendant, a framer and several other jobs that were required of me to make the ends meet. Can you say the same? Can you say that you have been a teacher? I have walked a mile in your shoes, and it is a tough journey. Construction in particular in all of its forms is a tough gig! It is grueling work, often at significant danger to personal safety and more often than not, with inadequate compensation for the work done. My reply is kudos to you. I applaud the efforts you take and the contributions you make to our society. But can you say that you have spent countless hours preparing engaging lessons to help students learn vital concepts. Can you truly say that you have given the wonderful gift of the ability to read to students year after year? If you cannot, then maybe you should re-think your stalwart opposition to my profession and find your grade one teacher and thank them that you have been able to read this. This is not because they simply did their job, but rather because they did their job well.

I would encourage open and honest dialogue between those that support education and greater funding and influence for our public system and those that would decry this hallowed institution as a form of childcare. In my experience there are several primary opposition to teachers and I understand both the conceptions and the misconception of them and would encourage further dialogue regarding these oppositions.

The first is that teachers get paid holiday and the summers off. This technically is true. We do not however, work fewer hours than the average worker, we simply frontload our work during the school year, and take time off in lieu of time already worked. How is this possible you may ask? Teachers, on average, throughout the year work an average of 9.5 hours per day. This includes time spent during the mornings, evenings and weekends. This does not include time spent coaching teams, sponsoring clubs or music groups or the host of hours put into student centered events such as graduation ceremonies and dry grad. These hours are used to prepare lessons, mark test and exams, research better methods and means by which to teach and assess specific learning outcomes mandated by the provincial government. As an anecdotal example of this, I will use myself. I teach a university level advanced placement course, which has an international examination attached to it at the end of the year, which keeps me accountable and ensures that I cover ALL of the required content and skill building exercises during the year. I also teach 2 other senior academic courses (Law and Psychology) which require up to date research, particularly since my textbooks are antiquated, and I want my students to have the most up to date information possible. I also teach a course on Canadian history and government, which can often be rather dry, but vital for our future citizens and constituents voting in provincial, federal and municipal elections. So how much time does this require? Here is an example

It requires significant time to make these courses pertinent, modern, and engaging. I am allotted one 70 minute block out of 8 to prepare, which is useful and I can assure you that I use my preparation time efficiently.

Here is some simple math that might clarify my point. If I have 210 students (7 blocks of 30 students) and it requires 20 minutes of preparation time to prepare each 70 minute block, this would require roughly 2 hours and 15 minutes of preparation per 2 days of teaching, of which I am allotted 70 minutes. That means I use an additional hour of my own time every 2 days to prepare what I teach.

In addition to this, I am required to assess how well my students are progressing through each course. A term paper requires roughly 10 minutes to mark, and a test requires 7 minutes, a review activity requires 3 minutes and so on. We can assume that the time required to assess learning is roughly 10 minutes per student per week if in a given week I give each student at least 1 task that needs to be assessed. This means that I spend, on average 35 hours per week, outside of instructional time to assess how well my students are learning. I, of course, do some of this during class time while my student are working on activities, researching, discussing, and participating in general enhancement of their learning. However, whatever is not done at school, is then taken home to be done on the weekends and in the evenings. This is time, used for my job, which robs my children and my wife of time with me. So yes, I get the summers off, and one week for spring break and two weeks during the winter, but when the whistle blows at the factory, or the foreman calls for tools to be signed back in, or the office closes, you all go home. I lug a 15 lb. bag of marking back to my house and carry on. I honestly don't mind. It is part of the job, it is required to know precisely how well my charges are mastering the skills they need, and taking ownership of the knowledge they will require to be upright, active participants in our society. But please do not begrudge me time taken in lieu of time served. This being said, I have never had a summer off. I usually end up hauling granite up the hill in the British Properties and mixing cement by hand the way real Italians do.

In regards to job security, over the last 5 years, I have been laid off 4 times, not knowing if I would find work again in the fall. Fortunately I am skilled at a variety of trades and can always enter the workforce in an alternate profession when times get tough.

A reoccurring objection to teachers is that there are teachers that do their job in a manner unbefitting the requirements; the teachers who do not teach well. You may be right; it is not my place to say, can you truly say that it is yours? If your child is struggling in school, there are so many avenues to take that can move them to a place where they will succeed. And maybe there are some that need to rethink their career choice, or be retrained.

Each of these points are valid and are deserving of our inquiry and continued dialogue, I have several ideas, and would gladly sit down and discuss them. But let us discuss them as engaged and responsible citizens. Let us employ mature methods to solve these issues, let us not resort to petty name calling or enraged discourse, let us remember that we are not descended from fearful men. We do not shirk from our duty, we engage. Make no mistake, the state of education in our province is dire, and the stakes have never been higher.

So let us remember what it is truly that we are standing up for. Teachers love your kids and we care about our country deeply. We strive ever forward in the hopes that the future we help build will bring about lasting and profound change. Teachers are an easy target, and blaming the ills of society on us is a cheap method of encouraging change. When we see the problems with out economy, when we see the youth of our society engaged in mayhem and destruction it is easy to find a scapegoat, and we are front and centre. We are demoralized, we are stressed, we are overworked and we face a continued uphill battle. I ask, in all earnestness that you, as the public take a long hard look at what really irks you about us. What have we done that makes us deserving of your venom and scorn? For those that support us in our battle for a better tomorrow, you have my heartfelt gratitude. We as educators and professionals truly appreciate that you support both verbally and materially those students that have so little, we graciously accept your generosity. We welcome future debate on how to improve an already great system and ask for your continued support with our government in continuing to fund and support teachers and students. If we truly desire it, we can achieve a brighter future for all of us. We can bring about positive change in our society and help make Canada even better.

I thank you for the time and patience you have shown in reading this.

Sincerely, and in all respect, Mr. John M. Watson Burnaby School District (SD41)