

Public schools serve everyone

by Lance Read

Luckily, both of my sons were diagnosed as reading disabled dyslexic when each was in Grade 1. I say luckily, because they were diagnosed early in life. Stuart, born in 1985, and Thomas, in 1989, always showed an interest in being read to, something both my wife and I did every day and frequently. They were surrounded by books, and because we modeled, they copied, flipping pages and pretending to read, from the age of two. Little did we know that Stuart had already, by the age of three or four, mastered memorization and mimicking. He could "read" verbatim favourite stories, Green Eggs and Ham, Cat in the Hat, and others, that he had enticed us to read hundreds of times over.

Perhaps we were naive, perhaps we were just typical proud parents, but sometime in the latter part of Kindergarten, things fell apart as we noticed that when we asked Stuart to follow along with his finger as he read, he was way off, either ahead or behind the words and phrasing. He could not read. Coincidentally and fortuitously, we discovered it just as his public school teacher and reading diagnostics aid did. When they came to us with the suggestion that our son was dyslexic, we were surprisingly relieved. The p, g, q, t, b, p mix-ups he was making and his and, but, the interchanges finally made sense. He was guessing. He was and has always been above average at math, so three-letter words were just addition to him, not reading. Geometrically shaped letters were interchangeable symbols, not letters.

This is where I am so proud of the public school system. Mrs. Marshall—bless her overworked, underpaid heart—patiently and diligently taught our son strategies that (along with our help as parents with her direction) by the end of Grade 4, saw him leave the remedial-reading program and enter the mainstream. His teacher-librarian also played a huge role in exciting his need to read. Our son has been on or near the honour roll since that time. As a result of the special reading strategies Mrs. Marshall gave him, he enjoys reading. This summer, while on a very active camping trip to the Klondike, he read a 900-page book, in less than two weeks.

When the second son came along, zoom, we were locked into problems we and the public school system already recognized. He, too, was lucky to have Mrs. Marshall, and he, too, after four years of public school and parent assistance, has become a well-above-average student by Grade 7.

You may note that I have mentioned "public school system" several times in this article. I did so intentionally, partly out of pride and appreciation and partly out of regret.

Funding for special needs and smaller classes often seems to be in contention and first on the chopping block. Can we afford to fund smaller class sizes and small groups of atypical students? is a question that pops up during times like this.

Can we? My nephew lives in England. He has attended Birkhamstead "private" school since age four. His older brothers were exemplary, typical, and high-achieving students, one who has gone on to university in Swansea, Wales. The youngest, reached 'Grade 7' without ever having been diagnosed, reading disabled. Apparently "they do not provide these extra expense related services" in this prestigious "private" school. His marks in reading-dependent subjects finally bottomed out in the low D range. His GPA was unacceptable in maintaining the over-all achievement rating of his private school. He was asked to dis-enroll. My brother and sister-in-law have had to enrol him in a local government-funded public school. Wonderfully, he is now finally receiving remedial-reading strategies. We all hope the damage, although now far more expensive, is not too extensive.

Can B.C. public schools afford to fund smaller classes over all, special programs such as remedial reading and the all-important teacher-librarian? We cannot afford not to. The costs to society are much higher, the older an individual gets.

If Christy Clarke's son is reading disabled or dyslexic, or Gordon Campbell's kids were educationally challenged, perhaps we would see a real appreciation for public schools and proper funding for them and the devoted teachers who are a part of the great public school system in this province.

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