

## Those who can, teach

By Peter Mansbridge on March 6, 2013 1:31 PM

Anyone familiar with my educational background will know that my relationship with teachers was cool. Not cool as in hip and trendy. But cool as in frigid and icy. The fact that I didn't finish high school is my fault. I had teachers who tried to get through to me. Mr. Bank, Ms. Bruce and Mr. Westinghouse were among those who tried, oh how they tried. But some challenges, like me, were just too much.

I put that on the record to make it clear that although a lot of people trace their success to a teacher who provided a spark, I don't. Still, I cringe when I hear and read all the teacher-bashing that's out there. I live in Ontario where the provincial government and the teacher unions have been locked in serious battle for several months. I'm not taking sides in the dispute. Not at all.

But my goodness, the things some people say about teachers. Based on what I hear on radio talk shows, and comments on the internet, there are way too many people who truly believe that teachers are grossly overpaid and under-worked.

What a strange attitude. Never mind that teachers are grooming the next generation of Canadians, the ones who will grow up to support our pensions in our old age. Maybe we can't think big-picture. The little-picture is pretty simple. Teachers are grooming our children. Yours and mine. Do we really want to trust the most precious parts of our lives to underpaid and overworked drones?

I keep seeing comparisons to what teachers make to the average industrial wage. And guess what? Teachers make more than the average. Of course they do. They've gone to school for at least four years of post-secondary education. The average teacher has been working for 11 years. They should be making reasonably good money. They're raising families too.

Then there's the under-worked part. That argument usually starts with July and August. Teachers get the whole summer off. No doubt about it; that's nice. But they need the break. I know there are lazy teachers. Just as there are lazy bankers, letter carriers, doctors, and yes, lazy journalists. But overwhelmingly, teachers are not lazy. In Ontario, the teachers stopped participating in extracurricular activities as part of their fight with the government. What an uproar that caused. School plays, sports teams, newspapers, chess clubs, fashion shows, and on and on. None of them possible without teachers freely giving their time. Critics are anxious to count the summer against the teachers, but they never count all those extra hours in their favour.

And sure, classes go from about 9am to 330pm, but anyone who thinks a teacher works six and a half hours a day, doesn't know many teachers. Preparing for class takes time.

Talking to kids after school takes time. Meeting with parents takes time. Marking takes time. I can't imagine reading through 60 essays on why Hamlet is so sad and writing helpful comments in the margins.

We send teachers children from broken homes, from abusive homes, from negligent homes. We send teachers children from homes where both parents work, or where the only parent works, or where no parent works.

We send teachers children who leave home without breakfast and whose grasp of mathematics is grounded in the reality that welfare money sometimes runs out in 28 days or 29 days, and can't be stretched to cover 30 or 31.

We send teachers children who are new to Canada, children who stare blankly ahead unable to understand a single word that is being spoken.

And we ask that those teachers turn each of those children, each of our children, into productive little citizens. We ask that even though there are 28 or 29 other students in the classroom, even though there are students misbehaving, even though some parents don't support teachers by re-enforcing lessons or by making sure homework is done, or even by insisting that the student listen to or respect the teacher.

So argue the fine points of teacher contracts all you like. I'm not saying teacher unions are always right. I'm just saying running down teachers is wrong.