

A message from the President *Peter MacDonald*



If you had a chance to read the December edition of @OECTA or if you recall the recommendations of OECTA's Financial Work Group for the past two years, you are well aware of the financial challenges facing the Association.

Unfortunately, not all of the Financial Work Group resolutions

that hit the AGM floor the last two years gained enough support among voting delegates to pass. The end result is that OECTA member fees have not provided the necessary funds to allow the Association to meet its financial commitments.

In the General Secretary's article in @OECTA he explains that OECTA has been reporting a deficit in its General Fund since 2012. That structural deficit currently sits at \$913,000 according to the audited financial statements of 2015-2016. The article goes on to explain that over the past 15 years, teacher salaries have increased by over 25% and OECTA fees have increased by 17% over the same period. The cumulative increase in the Consumer Price Index over that same 15-year span has increased by 27%.

The delegates who will gather at the 2017 AGM next month are tasked with setting the fee. Last year, because not all of the fee resolutions proposed by the Financial Work Group passed, the Council of Presidents, which I am a member of, was faced with the difficult chore of passing a balanced budget. We voted to cut the Leadership Program. The Provincial office has introduced several measures at the operational level to find additional savings as well, including relying on technology to host meetings electronically instead of having committees meet face to face; providing no food or beverages other than coffee, tea or water at Association events, with the exception of the AGM, where only water will be provided; delivering Beginning Teachers and Leadership Training only during alternating school years; and reviewing how service to units will be delivered in future.

This last initiative is most concerning to me because the average member may not realize the quality and level of service our members receive from the provincial office. But, the release officers certainly do. Staff at 65 St. Clair provide valuable support to our members who are dealing with an OCT complaint, provide professional development to members, provide counselling and support to members facing discipline, and provide support to members who are grievors against the Board for alleged violations of the Collective Agreement.

The list goes on and on. According to the General Secretary's article, OECTA's staff to member ratio is lower than any of the other teaching affiliates. The article goes on to explain that for every dollar collected by OECTA in fees, 46% is returned to the Unit to pay for release officer salaries, professional staff support and operational support for local offices. On top of the structural deficit referred to earlier in this message, OECTA has long-term financial obligations to deal with unfunded liabilities to address the support staff pension fund, retirement gratuities for professional staff and an underfunded sick leave fund.

In short, the Association requires resources to meet member needs and long-term financial obligations to the office and professional staff at 65 St. Clair. Accordingly, I am putting my support behind a motion that the majority of my colleagues at the Council of Presidents endorsed. The motion calls for an increase to the base fee from \$1,000 to \$1,100. It also calls for an increase to the base fee on a go-forward basis which would see fees increase by the same percentage as our wage gains. For instance, for the 2016-2017 school year that would mean a 1.5% increase. Remember that in addition to the base fee, our members pay a variable fee to fund our member protection fund and our reserve fund. For a member at A4 max, the total dues paid if this motion passes would be \$1,355.73. That would put the OECTA fee slightly ahead of ETFO at \$1,340, OSSTF at \$1,531 and AEFO at \$2,010. This is using the exemplar of an A4 Max teacher.

Remember, as well, that according to the question and answer section on the OECTA website dealing with the new plan design for the OECTA ELHT Trust, that we are scheduled to transition to on June 1st, our members will no longer be required to make a co-payment for our major medical and dental benefits. I, myself, currently see approximately \$20 in deductions from my pay every two weeks. Annualized over a year, that change will result in about \$500 staying in my pocket.

Ultimately, it will be the 700 delegates on the AGM floor who will set our fee. I add my voice to that of the majority of presidents, the Finance Committee and the Provincial Executive who say that if we, as an Association, do not address the long-term financial sustainability of the Association, there will be a need to slash services further. This would restrict the Association's ability to do what it does best: support our members.

My Final Year

Near the end of my undergrad, when I thought I might want to teach, I went back to my old high school with a friend to visit our favourite teacher: Jim Potter. Mr. Potter was a force of nature, in love with teaching, creative, enthusiastic and fearless. I knew he'd certainly give me sound advice. No varnish. No hedging.

Without calling ahead, and not having seen him in nearly four years, I was apprehensive as he opened his door with a flourish and bellowed "Mr. Hamilton! So nice to see you again. There are seats in the back. Sit." The class was nearly full and he was in the middle of a lesson. If I was serious about teaching, I should really be taking notes, I thought. He snapped out four or five questions to different students, and taking up the answers, he wove a lesson based not only on the novel at hand, but also on the students' understanding of it. A master teacher.

Minutes later he asked me a question. To my great relief, I answered it to his satisfaction. The message was clear to everyone in the room, no one sleeps in Mr. Potter's class: not students, not guests, and certainly, not Potter.

Near the end of the period, he asked, "What brings you back to visit?" "I'm thinking about teaching, sir." "And it's advice you're looking for then, is it? Well, remember this: teachers can be forgiven many things, Mr. Hamilton, but they can't be forgiven being boring."

Today, James Potter Road is a major thoroughfare that links the city of Brampton and many of its citizens. It acts as a metaphor to Potter's teaching career that would probably have made his eyes roll. A Peel elementary school is also named in his memory.

In my final year of teaching, thirty-five years later, each day was vivid. The novel and mundane were processed through a lens of nostalgia that caught me off guard. It was impossible to escape, especially as the year came to an end.

I attended four or five retirement workshops run by Mary LaChapelle and Joe Pece from OECTA Provincial. I moved past the theoretical to the practical steps of planning my retirement. Mary's workshops made it clear that the biggest part of retiring was the psychological and emotional change to your life. Many questions were begging for answers. How do you see yourself as a productive, contributing member of a community when teaching has been such a large part of it? We have contacts with a hundred-plus people each day and often hundreds of daily decisions would be made: some trivial, some life changing. What would it be like without those social contacts? How do you know when to retire? Essentially, teaching had become such an indelible part of me that I wondered what my world would be like without it?

For several years, I deliberately misled anyone who asked the question, "When are you retiring?" I felt the question was too personal, too intrusive and the images of circling shadows overhead occasionally came to mind.

Everyone got the same answer: five years. It was simple and discouraged further enquiries. The truth was fairly simple too, we still had sons in school.

If I was looking for reasons for retirement in my last year, there were plenty. But three incidents stood out: on social media I reconnected with JH, a student from my first year of teaching and she wanted to Skype, from Bristol England, into my last class. That was bookending.

My Final Year (continued...)



First class: grade seven, St. Joseph, Brampton, 1981.

A month later, TI, who graduated twenty-one years prior, dropped in to say, hi. I asked: "Did you get your doctorate in Political Science?" "Yes." "Did you do it on the African diaspora as you thought you might?" "Yes." Unlike Jim Potter, I'm not great with names but hers had come to me immediately. Quit while you're ahead, a tiny voice said.

And the third incident: I was paged on a PD day to meet a parent. I was surprised to find her and her daughter inside our small department office talking to my colleagues. When the mom turned to me, I didn't recognize her. I looked at her daughter, though she looked vaguely familiar, I knew she wasn't a student of mine. Looking back to Mom, she tilted her head and said, "Oh, come on!"

I was in every experienced teacher's waking nightmare: I had taught Mom and had no idea who she was, and I had an audience. My colleagues, two former students, were grinning at my loss for words. "I'm sorry. I've got nothing, nothing at all. A hint?"

She opened her purse and took out a plastic protector sheet with a leaf in it. She was in my class twenty-seven years ago, at a previous school. I gave the leaf to her when our geography classes were cleaning up a neighbourhood park one fall. DG had been in grade nine then, about her daughter's age now.



Grade 12 environmental class, Notre Dame CSS, Brampton, 2014 at Mountsberg Conservation Area

Apparently, I said, "A perfect leaf for a perfect student." The gesture and the timing of it was a huge thing for her. Unbeknownst to me, she was been dealing with the disintegration of her family at the time.

Looking back after six months of retirement, I can say that my last year was humbling. It helped me understand that coming to terms with ending your career, and timing your retirement is a very personal process and choice. For me, chance reconnections with former students was a part of that. I am lucky to have had a very supportive spouse and uncomplicated circumstances to make it easier. In the end, I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to work in a career that offered the degree of challenge and satisfaction, that teaching did. It was anything but boring.

To paraphrase a recently retired colleague: "Retirement becomes the pivot to what's next". This is really going to be fun.

Malcolm Hamilton
NDCSS-DPSU (retired)

Great Things Come from Working Together

John Cabot CSS and St. Edmund Campion SS Social Justice Trip to Nicaragua



Staff and students from St. Edmund Campion and John Cabot Secondary Schools pose with villagers from Jinocuabo, Nicaragua during their recent social justice project prior to Christmas.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta said, "I can do things you cannot; you can do things I cannot. Together we can do great things." These wise words were given life as staff and students of John Cabot CSS and St. Edmund Campion SS worked in solidarity with Casa Pueblito and the villagers of Jinocuabo, Nicaragua from December 10-18, 2016.

Managua was our first stop in Nicaragua. We toured Managua's affluent and impoverished neighbourhoods, learning about life in both areas and the growing gap between these socioeconomic groups. Visiting the city's central square and the Augusto Sandino Museum, we learned about Nicaragua's recent history. We were honoured to spend an afternoon with Yamileth Perez, a community leader in the barrio that surrounds the city dump. Her impressive list of accomplishments includes founding Esperanza en Accion (Hope in Action), an organization that works to establish fair trade for goods made by residents of the barrio. Later, at a local food market, we challenged students to buy enough food to feed a family of four. But they were not allowed to spend more than \$2.00 USD or the average Nicaraguan daily wage. We also celebrated Christmas by attending Advent mass at Batahola Norte Cultural Centre and visiting the nativity scenes that line Managua's main avenue.

When we arrived in the village of Jinocuabo, people opened both their homes and hearts to us. We lived in local families' homes and soon fell into the rhythm of village life: feeding livestock, milking cows, cooking tortillas, beans, and plantains, and washing clothes. It was here that we also worked on our building project. We helped to purchase and install latrines for forty-four families in the area who previously had no proper sanitation. We worked beside villagers, learning the many steps involved in the six-day process of installing a latrine. We transported rocks, mixed cement, dug holes and broke slabs of stone. We met people who would be receiving latrines, and residents of the most remote sector of the village, who honoured us with a thank you lunch.

While we did chores and worked on our building project in the mornings, we spent our afternoons engaged in community activities. We planned sport and art activities for the children, and we met with community leaders who taught us about the history of the region, the roots of their faith, and their climate change concerns. We were also guests at a celebration of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. On our final day in Jinocuabo, the community hosted a party that included piñatas for the children, a farewell dinner with our host families, and an entertainment-filled evening. At this event, we presented school supplies to the community. Before our early morning departure from Jinocuabo, villagers gathered for a church service of thanksgiving and blessings for safe travels. We shed tears as we said goodbye to these people, who became fast friends and mentors.

Our trip to Nicaragua was experiential learning at its best;



making us better stewards of the earth, showing the dignity and importance of collaborative work, and strengthening our faith. We are thankful that, together with our Nicaraguan partners and our many supporters and volunteers here in Ontario, we were able to "...do great things."