

## **GROWING UP IN... GRANDIR EN...**

### **Growing Up Progressive? Part II: Going to High School in 1950s Ontario**

**Robert M. Stamp**

It's September 1950, the Tuesday after Labour Day weekend, as I enter Grade 9 to begin my secondary school education. The school is Port Colborne High School (Port High, or PCHS), located in the town of the same name in the Niagara region of southern Ontario. I am part of a 46,000-strong cohort of Ontario kids entering Grade 9 that year. Locally, there are 150 of us entering PCHS from our town's four neighbourhood elementary schools and from a few surrounding one-room country schools.

I am thirteen years old. So is the Ontario Department of Education's much-heralded 1937 high school curriculum revision – the so-called McArthur Plan. Though drafted by a departmental committee, this program is named after Duncan McArthur, Minister of Education in the provincial cabinet. How will this, the “new” curriculum, shape my teenage years and my future learning? Will I have a “progressive” experience?

At first glance, Port High is a standard-issue, two-storey, red-brick structure, housing a total of 500 students, dating from the 1920s. Besides regular classrooms, however, our school boasts a 1940 addition offering well-equipped science labs and special rooms for teaching industrial arts, home economics, and business practice. PCHS was among the earliest of Ontario high schools to take advantage of construction subsidies and new program offerings arising from the McArthur Plan.

We 1950 pupils encounter a more flexible first year of high school than did our parents. Thanks to the McArthur Plan, Grade 9 is now a “common first year,” allowing a wide choice of options, delaying for one more year the traumatic decision on the part of each of us as to the choice of matriculation, technical, or commercial program. The provincial curriculum includes English, social studies, health, mathematics, science or agriculture, French, home economics or general shop, music or art, and business practice. Are we progressive?

Group guidance work in the form of a Grade 9 “occupations” course is compulsory at Port Colborne High School, as it has been for

all Ontario schools since 1944. Taught by Dorothy Farr, our 9C home-room teacher, this course is designed to orient new students to the complexities of high school life, help us develop proper study habits, introduce us to future employment possibilities, and help channel us into appropriate courses and programs. We think “occupations” is a laugh!

But it’s certainly easier than Latin. The elimination of Latin caused consternation among supporters of the classical tradition. But McArthur saw this as the only way to ensure that Grade 9 could be “a year of testing...in which the boy can try himself out along different lines under the guidance and direction of teachers, that he might reach conclusions regarding his particular capabilities and aptitudes.”<sup>1</sup> Shop work and home economics were not intended to train for future employment, but would “provide an opportunity for practical vocational guidance, and at the same time offer an activity program” which would “be attractive to youth and probably have the effect of holding them longer in school.”<sup>2</sup>

Options or no options, our first day at PCHS is totally bewildering. Unlike elementary school, where we spent nearly all day, every day, with our home-room teacher in the security of our own classroom, at Port High we move around to different rooms for different teachers and different subjects. We are on a rotary schedule, with five 35-to-40-minute classes every morning and four more after lunch. How do you find your way around such a labyrinth of a building?

We must memorize our entire morning or afternoon timetable and take the textbooks for all those subjects with us as we move from class to class. There will be no opportunity to go back to our home-room desks or our lockers to pick up books we forget. And next day’s timetable will be different than today’s. Why do they expect so much from us beginning Grade 9 pupils?

All those different subjects, each with its own teacher. How long will it take us to learn which teacher’s face goes with which subject? Principal D.J. Pierce masterminds the entire operation. Duncan John Pierce has been principal for five years before we encounter him, and he will remain on the job until 1968 – an indomitable, larger-than-life, one-of-a-kind school administrator. “Dunc,” or “D.J.” as we call him behind his back, is tough and firm, feared by students and teachers alike. He, more than any individual teacher or specific subject, shapes our life at Port Colborne High School.

---

1 *Canadian School Journal*, April 1937, 126.

2 Provincial Archives of Ontario (PAO), Record Group 3, George Drew File, J.G. Althouse to Drew, 27 March 1945.

\* \* \* \* \*

Additional high school changes supposedly carry the philosophy of the McArthur Plan beyond Grade 9. A partial common core of subjects continues into Grade 10 with all students taking English, social studies, and health, plus optional subjects from one of four programs: general, industrial arts, household arts, or commercial.

Against this background, my classmates and I move on to Grade 10 at Port Colborne High School in September 1951. While our friends in home room 10A continue with shop and home economics, and the all-girl 10C commercial class does typing, shorthand, and business practice, we academic types in 10B and 10D begin the study of Latin. Goodbye art, music, and occupational guidance. Textbooks are heavier this year, problems harder. There is more homework at night. Term tests and final exams are tougher.

Still, we have fun at school. We know which teachers let us fool around in class, and where we must toe the line. We also pick up on out-of-class social skills. We discover the best spots for talking and flirting before the morning bell. We learn who to make friends with and who to avoid, what to wear and what not to wear, all the important things in life. Best of all, we 10B boys fall in love with our home room teacher. Janet Truckenbrodt is a brand-new teacher, and she has much to learn about discipline and classroom management. But “Trucky” is young, attractive, and personable. All the boys have secret “crushes” on her.

Successful completion of Grade 10 earns each of us an intermediate diploma. Thus classmates who progress no further will supposedly leave with a sense of accomplishment. One senior inspector refers to the reforms as “making our academic schools less academic and our vocational schools less vocational, in other words to provide all secondary schools a kind of general education which will fit our adolescents for life – as individuals, as citizens, and as workers.”<sup>3</sup>

We continue to fill four home rooms through Grades 11 and 12, divided up according to our enrolment in Latin, shop/home economics, or commercial. The commercial program is a strong feature at Port High: typing, shorthand, bookkeeping, and general office practice. Graduates have no trouble getting jobs in Port or the Niagara district. Ninety per cent of commercial students are girls. Boys shy away from what seem to be gender-specific courses and programs. Guys wanting a technical education program travel to Welland High and Vocational School.

For both academic and commercial students, each succeeding grade entails more work. We struggle with longer homework

---

3 *Canadian School Journal*, June 1937, 235.

assignments and tougher mid-term tests and exams. Our curriculum grows more specialized. Math classes concentrate on algebra in Grade 11 with geometry ahead of us in Grade 12, while science splits into physics for Grade 11 and chemistry for Grade 12. We learn how to solve quadratic equations, Newton's laws of motion, the periodic table of the elements, reasons for the decline of the Roman Empire, causes of the French Revolution, hundreds of French and Latin conjugations, Shakespeare plays and nineteenth-century poetry. Are we progressive?

Successful completion of Grade 12 gives each of us an Ontario Secondary School Graduation Diploma, though our parents and most of our teachers still use the pre-1937 terminology of Junior Matriculation or "Junior Matric." One more year will earn us an Ontario Secondary School Honours Graduation Diploma or "Senior Matric." What mouthfuls! We are happy to call the pieces of paper simply Grade 12 and Grade 13 diplomas.

Finally, in September 1954, my classmates and I reach Grade 13 – that once-unique aspect of Ontario schooling now consigned to history's dustbin. Just 35 of us remain from the 150 that entered Grade 9 four years earlier – very close to the province-wide 22 per cent retention rate. We barely fill two small classes. Home room 13A is all boys, heavy on mathematics, physics and chemistry. 13B is mixed gender, emphasizing biology, history and Latin. Both classes take huge doses of English and French.

We struggle through the year, every period of every day of every week, preparing for the provincial departmental examinations. Pressure increases through the fall and winter. Christmas exams, Easter exams, plus a special set of spring exams, are trial runs for the biggies coming up in June. The "departmentals" are our academic rite of passage. Success on these exams leads to university admission, professional careers, and "making something" of our lives. Everything depends on these exams. They alone determine our final Grade 13 mark in each and every subject, from algebra through to zoology. Teachers' grades do not count.

A full Grade 13 schedule involves writing eight or nine exams, or "papers," from a lengthy list offered at Port High: English composition and English literature; French authors and French comp; Latin authors and Latin comp; single exams in algebra, geometry, trigonometry, history, chemistry, physics, botany, and zoology.

By May we are in full study mode. None of us ever studied so hard before; few of us will come close to matching our Grade 13 effort in college or university. We read our Shakespeare play, *Macbeth*, over and over. (I stop counting when I finish my thirtieth reading of the darn drama!) We memorize our history textbook, practise French and Latin declensions and conjugations, work through math and science problems.

The exams are set at the provincial department of education in Toronto, uniform exams for every student in Ontario. They arrive

secretly at the school in sealed envelopes, and are kept under lock and key till the day in question. They are also marked centrally at the education department in Toronto. We have to wait till mid-August to learn our results.

Marks between 75 and 100 per cent in any subject earn First Class Honours, or a First in the lingo of the day. Sixty-six to 75 per cent is a Second, 60 to 65 a Third, and 50 to 59 a Credit. Anything below 50 is a failure, no appeal, sorry about that, try again next year.

The exam schedule stretches over a week and a half. We write one, occasionally two, a day. We tape the schedule to our desk or stick it on our bulletin board. Woe be tide the person who oversleeps the morning of the algebra exam! We portion out our study time. Tonight for history, Sunday afternoon for chemistry. Some cram hard the night before, others somehow get a good night's sleep and enter the exam room fresh. Many of us wear the same lucky shirt or blouse for every exam. Others come in with good-luck trinkets on their charm bracelets.

Somehow, we get through the exam week. At 4:00 on the last Friday afternoon in June 1955, we are stunned and speechless – relieved that the departmental exams are finally over, ready to celebrate. That evening, we have our beer bash at Sand Hill along the Lake Erie shore. The following Monday, we pack our lunch pails and begin summer jobs in Port Colborne's stores, offices, and factories. By September, we will be dispersed all over the map.

\* \* \* \* \*

A closer look at two of our subjects, English and science, sheds light on the 1950s debate between classicism and progressivism in the Ontario secondary school. Certainly English classes dominate our five years at Port Colborne High School – beginning and ending with Shakespeare. We start reading Act I Scene 1 from *The Merchant of Venice* in our very first English class in September of Grade 9. Five years and ten months later, we finish our Grade 13 departmental exams answering detailed questions about plot, character, mood, and language in *Macbeth*. Are we progressive?

The *Merchant of Venice* sets the pattern. We study it without benefit of live, video, or movie versions. The text sits in front of us, only the text. We learn to understand that text according to predetermined official interpretations coming down to us from the provincial department of education via our own teacher. This play is also presented without cautionary lessons or sensitivity training in anti-Semitism. That is difficult, since two of our most popular classmates all through elementary school and into Grade 9 are Jewish.

Grade 9 English also includes poetry drawn from the masters, and a book of stories titled *Old Greek Folk Tales* (Old Freak Joke Tales).

For variety, we overdose on grammar – parts of speech, how to parse sentences, proper use of the apostrophe, difference between who and whom.

Grade 10's Shakespeare offering is *Julius Caesar*, nicely coinciding with our introduction to Latin. *Caesar* teaches us about the Ides of March, funeral orations, and how to stab enemies in the back – great for understanding current movies and television crime programs! Grade 10 English also introduces us to the novel via *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens.

The pattern continues through Grades 11 and 12. Each year a Shakespeare play; a novel by Dickens or Thomas Hardy; the poetry of Keats, Wordsworth, Byron, and Tennyson; modern plays by British or Irish authors. (Do Canadians not write anything?) These texts produce memory work assignments. We learn to recite dozen of lines from Shakespeare and Tennyson for reproduction on term tests and exams. Composition and grammar intensify. We learn complex rules of English grammar, how to do a précis (an abstract or summary of wordy text), how to write compositions. For two years running, we work and re-work an essay titled *A Summer Thunder Storm* – a subject of immense interest to active teenagers!

Grade 13 brings more précis work and composition writing. *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* is our modern play, Earle Birney's *David* our modern poetry. We boys much prefer the male imagery of *David* to the feminine nature of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Besides, Birney's *David* is even Canadian! Most of all, Grade 13 English is *Macbeth*. Having read the play a total of 30 times between September and June, I can answer questions on our departmental exam with some confidence and authority.

Science presents a distinct contrast to our teacher-dominated, received-wisdom English classes at Port Colborne High School during the 1950s. In science, more than any other academic subject, we come close to constructing our own reality. Here is the strongest legacy of the progressive education influence that infiltrated North American education earlier in the century.

High school science begins with George MacVicar's Grade 9 classes. After Mr. MacVicar does a front-of-the-class demonstration, we replicate procedures at our lab tables. Yes, lab tables. Science rooms are a welcome break from regular classrooms. We pair up and sit at tables with sinks and water taps, even gas jets for bunsen-burner work. We use test tubes and other apparatus for individual experiments. The best part of lab work is pairing up, two to a table. You try to get with your best friend, or perhaps a girl you have your eye on. (Just imagine how much conversation focuses on science, and how much strays off into more interesting areas!)

But we push ahead with our experiments. We dump a prescribed amount of soap flakes into two water-filled test tubes, heat one of the

tubes while leaving the second cold, then observe the froth-up of suds. Do soap suds dissolve faster in hot or cold water?

MacVicar runs us through the set steps of every experiment: Purpose, method, equipment, results, observations, conclusions. Then we write up our work in our lab books – two-ring, looseleaf black binders. We carefully diagram the experiment on the left-hand page, and write up the purpose-method-equipment-results-observations-conclusions sequence on the right side. Once a term our binders are collected and graded for neatness, accuracy, and completeness. Are we progressive?

After two years of general science, we move into more specialized work – a full year of physics in Grade 11 followed by chemistry Grade 12. Each year continues the hands-on, experimental approach, still with two-ring lab books, still emphasizing purpose-method-equipment-results-observations-conclusions.

Despite the talking and the horse play that occurs as we joke in pairs at our lab tables, we continue to do our experiments, observe the results, and write our reports. No student suffers sulphuric acid burns. No one blows the place up. Port High produces its share of grads who pursue science-oriented careers. The rest of us march through life chanting purpose/method/equipment/results/observations/conclusions. And we keep writing things up (neatly) in the two-ring binders of adulthood.

Whatever the subject, we have no time for current events and global politics at Port Colborne High School. In science classes we learn Newton's laws of motion and the periodic table of the elements, all important pieces of knowledge. But we are allowed no time to reflect on contemporary scientific developments in atomic energy. The Great Powers test their atom and hydrogen bombs, while ban-the-bomb marches tear apart British society. We keep doing our prescribed experiments.

Social studies, as envisioned by the McArthur Plan, might have allowed opportunities for current events. But by the 1950s, history and geography have crept back in as separate, discrete subjects. History teaches us all about European wars of previous centuries, from the Hundred Years War through the Napoleonic and Franco-Prussian wars. And while history helps us grasp the horrors of Naziism and the Second World War, it allows no time to study the post-war world of the United Nations, the Cold War, and worsening Soviet-American relations.

Geography is much the same. We memorize names and locations of all the American states and their capital cities. We know Boise, Idaho, and Pierre, South Dakota. We learn which states make up the North, which the South, and where they ran the Mason-Dixon line. But geography has no time to deal with racism in those southern states. We remain largely ignorant of the integration crisis at Central High School

in Little Rock, Arkansas, or smouldering racial anger sweeping through Alabama and Mississippi.

\* \* \* \* \*

The annual public-speaking contest is the most traumatic aspect of extra-curricular life at Port Colborne High School in the 1950s. Forgetting your words, flubbing your speech at a school-wide assembly, is far more embarrassing than bumping into another couple on the dance floor or missing an easy lay-up shot in a home-court basketball game.

Other high schools have their debating clubs and choral speaking, bands and orchestras, annual Gilbert and Sullivan productions. But at PCHS, public speaking rules the world of extra-curricular activities. Every year, every kid. No one escapes.

The annual extravaganza is run through English classes. You begin at the home-room level, with everyone standing up and giving a five-to-ten-minute talk before 25 or 30 classmates. You choose your own topic, anything from "How I Spent My Summer Holidays" to "How I Deal with an Annoying Kid Brother." You often poach your ideas (and even your very words) directly from magazine articles. Your English teacher serves as judge and jury.

Each home room sends two speakers forward into school-wide competition, one category for Grades 9-11 and one for Grades 12-13. Now you speak in the gymnasium, before a sea of 250-300 friendly and not-so-friendly faces. You polish up your home room speech and give "Eleanor Roosevelt" or "The United Nations" your best shot. (I deliver absolutely boring speeches on such hot-button topics as "Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier" and "Sir Frederick Banting." My classmates hide their faces in embarrassment.)

Another wrinkle is added for school-wide competitions – the impromptu speech. After your set speech, you draw a surprise topic out of the hat – something like "Laughter" or "Steam Engines." Then you have ten minutes to prepare off-the-cuff remarks. If you are serious during your major speech, you are expected to be funny during your impromptu.

Public speaking is just one of Port High's many extra-curricular activities – part of the character-building mission that North American schools increasingly embrace during the twentieth century. It is all part of that glorious, progressive mission to educate the whole child.

We have students' council, activity clubs, intra-mural and inter-school sports. Each fall season brings football (still called "rugby" by the older teachers) for the boys, volleyball for the girls. Basketball takes over in the winter term, then athletics (we call it "track and field") in spring.



Everyone who competes at the school level gets a blue-and-white school “bar” that spells out PUBLIC SPEAKING or BASKETBALL or DANCE COMMITTEE or STUDENT COUNCIL in capital letters. These bars are pieces of blue felt, about 8cm x 2cm, with white lettering. They are given out at school assemblies, as winners come to the front of the auditorium, shake the principal’s hand, and listen to the applause (or wolf whistles) from their pals in the audience. You (or, more likely, your mother) sews these bars on the sleeve of your cardigan sweater or jacket. Gifted students sport these bars running up and down their sleeves, like military stripes or Boy Scout/Girl Guide badges. Sweaters and jackets are often royal blue with white trim, so that the hallways are emblazoned in blue-and-white school colours.

After ten bars you qualify for a school letter, a large “PC,” letters intertwined, blue felt outlined in white. You cannot earn a PC, however, unless at least one of your bars spells out ACADEMIC – awarded to high-achieving students on each year’s June examinations. PUBLIC SPEAKING and FOOTBALL and CAMERA CLUB may help rack up points, but Principal D.J. Pierce never lets us forget that the main prize is academic success, that the main purpose of the school, like all high schools across the province in the 1950s, is academic preparation for the adult world.

\* \* \* \* \*

In common with several other provinces in the post-war years, Ontario chose to study its long-range educational future through the vehicle of a royal commission. In March 1945, a twenty-member Royal Commission on Education was appointed under the chairmanship of John A. Hope, a justice of the Ontario Supreme Court. Through written briefs and open hearings, the Hope commission provided a forum for the competing philosophies of progressivism and traditionalism. Progressive education was certainly on the defensive, wounded by the pedagogical criticisms of the war years and the rightward drift of the Conservative government. Emboldened by this neo-conservative trend and still fighting the McArthur Plan’s removal of their subject from Grade 9, the province’s Latin teachers told the commission that progressive education had “eroded the national leadership,” while the Senate of Victoria University charged it with “sabotaging academic education, thereby jeopardizing much of the democratic ideal in Ontario.”<sup>4</sup>

Ontario waited five-and-a-half years for the commission to finish its work. When finally released in December 1950 (while I write my

---

4 PAO, Royal Commission on Education, Brief No. 125.

Grade 9 Christmas exams), the Hope Report reflected the social and intellectual conservatism of its commissioners. While purporting to take a moderate position between the extremes of traditionalism and progressivism, the report demonstrated a consistent underlying preference for a conservative philosophy. Although endorsing “critical and honest inquiry” in every field, the commissioners laid down “two virtues about which there can be no question – honesty and Christian love.” Although calling for a smoother transition between elementary and secondary school, they were unwilling to suggest “any radical departure from the established trend” of the subject-centred high school. “Mastery of subject matter is the best present measure of effort and the most promising source of satisfaction in achievement.” School tasks should be challenging, “because much of life is equally so.” Here was a classical and Calvinistic view of life. “Efforts should be made to impress on pupils that all who work hard and honestly...are partners in the good society and warrant social recognition.”<sup>5</sup> It was, undeniably, a widely shared Ontario perspective.

Education Minister William Dunlop soon gave his unequivocal support to this swing of the pendulum. In writing the introduction to the departmental annual report for 1951, barely three months after taking office, he emphasized that it was increasingly important to make sure that fundamental purposes and values were not overlooked.<sup>6</sup> “Too many fads are creeping into education these days, to the exclusion of down-to-earth fundamentals,” he told a group of Toronto teachers. These fads encouraged “self-expression and day-dreaming” and “were slowly giving the taxpayer the impression that he was contributing to psychological laboratories rather than schools.” The prime purpose of schooling, he emphasized over and over again, was “to produce loyal, intelligent, right-thinking, religious, and freedom-loving citizens.” But this could not be accomplished “until the last shreds of this so-called progressive education are gone.”<sup>7</sup>

Ontario high schools of the 1950s proved even more faithful to tradition and hostile to progressive elements than their elementary counterparts. Teachers of the decade were highly qualified, with more than half possessing honours degrees. Most taught in the traditional manner, taking textbook in hand and proceeding carefully through it, chapter by chapter, from September to June. The teacher would set a page of problems or chapter to read for the night’s homework; next day the work would be taken up, errors corrected, difficulties explained, and another chapter or more problems assigned for that

---

5 Ontario, *Report of the Royal Commission on Education in Ontario* (Toronto: King’s Printer, 1950), 23-40.

6 Ontario Department of Education, *Annual Report (AR), 1951*, 1.

7 Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, *Bulletin*, March 1953, 63; *AR, 1952*, 2; *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 16 April 1958.

night. Schoolwork was routine, and it meant homework, memorization, and frequent testing. Shakespeare's plays, the causes of the French Revolution, irregular verbs, inclined planes, quadratic equations – all seemed to exist in a vacuum, divorced from the outside world.

Should we blame Port Colborne High School and our teachers for gaps in our knowledge? In truth, our curriculum was never meant to address the contemporary world directly. It was designed by provincial authorities to expose us to the best of our Judaeo-Christian and classical heritages, and give us basic critical skills for adult life. And to get us through our Grade 13 departmental exams!

(Part I of "Growing Up Progressive?" by Robert Stamp was published in the Spring 2005 issue of *HSE*).