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It's back to school for Manitoba's students — but some of the lessons they're being taught are painfully old.

# The new school year and the old curriculum

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**I**HAVE spent most of my life either being taught or teaching. So back-to-school time in the fall is a familiar experience.

In many ways, September is more of a fresh start than January, with those New Year's Eve resolutions soon forgotten.

September means entering new classes, perhaps exploring a new school, and dealing with both new teachers and new classmates. Like the shiny new notebooks in our backpacks, we have clean, blank pages on which to write, hopefully having learned some lessons from what did not go well last year.

It is the same (or should be) for teachers. No class or course, no term or school year, ever goes as smoothly as we had hoped. There is always something to be learned, new ideas to be incorporated and old ones discarded as unhelpful.

Good teachers know this, and so go through the process all the time. They do not need to be reminded, or chivvied, or shamed into making these kinds of changes, so far as they are able.

Unfortunately, whether it is because of the assigned curriculum or the way the school is administered by the principal (or overseen by the school division, or mandated by the province), teachers may be stuck repeating last year's mistakes, over and over again.

While I wrote a couple of months ago about how much I appreciated my Grade 12 English teacher for cutting me loose from the curriculum and letting me explore and write, I said little

about Grade 11 English. There, we read novels like *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *Lord of the Flies* (1954), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). These were not new in 1974, but back then you could at least argue that it takes a while for a book to be recognized as a classic.

In university, I took a course on Canadian literature. I was astonished by the range and depth of what Canadians had written, and wondered why my high school curriculum contained none of it.

Fast forward 40 years. My two kids actually read the same three novels as I did in their Grade 11 English class at the same school. While both had excellent teachers and became gifted writers themselves, somehow I think there were other more recent (and Canadian) books they could have studied.

We often ask ourselves, as parents and members of society, what our children are learning in school. That's a tough one, because children often learn different lessons than the ones we intend, both in school and at home.

But a better question to ask — because it can be answered — is what are we teaching them?

I was reminded of my Grade 11 English experience when I scrolled through the provincial website for Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning. Looking in particular at the history curricula the province offers for senior years (especially Grades 11 and 12), I was not impressed.

The most recent history course considered "cinema as a witness to modern history." Setting aside obvious problems with the word "modern," that course was published in 2015. Everything else was earlier, usually much earlier, with Grades 9-10 history material published around 2007.

To make things worse, under a somewhat pompous blanket statement ("The following courses can be offered until further notice"), there were bare outlines for American history (2008) and — worst of all — "Western Civilization: Historical

Review of its Development" (1995).

Seriously? In 2025?

In fact, the most recent course anywhere in social studies for senior years is the "new" option of "Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability" (2017). This course emerged from the UNESCO Decade for Education for Sustainable Development, and only saw daylight because it was persistently mandated by former deputy minister of education, Gerald Farthing.

I was an external witness to the bureaucratic wrangling involved in it back then, and was dismayed that a course dealing with the real world, in real time, could generate so much administrative pushback despite the DM's explicit direction. After Farthing retired and the Pallister government took office in 2016, no further updates, revisions or changes (based on evaluations of its effectiveness) seem to have been made.

As someone who has taught in faculties of education, I am aware of the plethora of courses would-be teachers must take, not in their subject matter but in the pedagogy of teaching it. Add poor provincial resources to large numbers of random contract university faculty, I wonder just how much useful background preparation these new teachers actually receive.

High school students will soon graduate into a world complicated by dangerously false views of history, in which poor choices about sustainability lead us rapidly toward climate disaster.

No doubt there are some good teachers who will eventually overcome the deficiencies in their own education and will fill the gaping holes in what the outdated provincial curriculum prescribes.

But for all the money we spend on education, they (and their students) deserve much better to start this new school year.

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