

GIVE US BACK OUR SEX-ED

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# SEX-ED ROLLS BACK, STUDENTS WALK OUT

By Kieran Delamont



*"This walkout changed me and so many people," said Quinn Jeffery-Off. "And it will continue to change us as we understand our power and voices."*

The first thing down was the stop sign, because it was there, because it was convenient, and because stop signs aren't ambivalent in their message.

I'm not really sure whether it was pulled down sometime before a couple hundred high school students walked out of their classes, or during, and it didn't really matter anyways. It was theirs now, a suburban talisman on which the simple, distilled message of protest could be projected.

**STOP** it read, before a young woman yelled out for someone to hand her a sharpie, knelt down over top of it while her classmates looked on, and added, in handwriting

**DOUG FORD!!** with two exclamation points, since one was not enough and zero wasn't an option.

And then she backed away, having done what she wanted to do. The high school boys took over (as they do), hoisting it in the air and parading it around as if it were a war standard flying above a battle that, technically speaking, isn't even theirs yet.

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On Sept. 21, nearly 40,000 students across Ontario walked out of their schools at 1:00 p.m. to protest the Ontario government's roll back of the elementary sex-ed curriculum.

Teachers had been instructed to teach the same sex-ed as 1998 - curriculum created before gay marriage and trans rights, before social media and sexting, curriculum with gaping holes where discussions of consent and gender identity should have been.

As 1:00 p.m. hit, the students began streaming out of Glebe Collegiate Institute (GCI) in Ottawa. They formed a crowd on the lawn, as media stood along the outside of the property, a school-administration-requested perimeter.

They were angry, but in a way they were jubilant too. Many of them seemed proud to be standing up to the Ford government, even if they didn't know what good it would actually do.

One young girl walked around handing out cookies - rainbow cookies, she said, to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community - while others laid out picnic blankets and ate their lunch.

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None of the students walking out of class were of voting age - how much of this was actually their fight to fight? What

responsibility do they bear for the choices done to them? Stopping Doug Ford was both the point of it all - and not.

Nothing - not the courts, not other political parties, not some fuzzy and nebulous notion of norms - seem poised, or able, or willing to stop Ford. How would some high school students, even 38,000 of them, manage to do it?

Can a show of solidarity among students, however complete and visible, change the minds of the PC government? Probably not. And absent any reason to do so, expecting it to change feels, to be honest, somewhat naive.

There is a point to protest that goes beyond achieving a halting effect, though. It is about community and solidarity and sending a message. Protest can be - maybe - about vanquishing apathy.

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There is a theme, I've noticed, when I talk to and interview people in their early twenties or younger - a feeling of exhaustion and a nausea existing on a cellular level.

They look out and see a world that needs to change or be changed - and feel like they're the only ones who see it.

It's a feeling of despair as they look on as the world gets stupider and meaner, as it lets them down over and over again - while all the important people seem to agree that everything, at last, is getting better.

It is not a universal feeling, though, and these young people, who will feel the cancellation of modern sex-ed the most (can you ever know all the ways an absence of knowledge affects you?), they seem willing to overcome it.

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As a couple hundred kids streamed out of Glebe Collegiate Institute, hopelessness was banished, replaced with defiance and hope and all sorts of other feelings that - to a high school student in the year 2018 - must have felt big and must have felt important and must have felt real.

Quinn Jeffery-Off, wearing a bright pink t-shirt and blue jeans, but probably more identifiable by their full head of bleach-blonde hair, emerged as the ringleader with a megaphone.

A circle of high school students formed around him, chanting slogans like "stop Doug Ford," "Indigenous history



is Canadian history" and "decolonize my classroom." As they gathered and chanted, students took to the mic to talk about how crucial it is to have a modern sex-ed curriculum.

Several came out publicly, possibly for the first time, to their classmates. Many identified openly as part of the LGBTQ+ community, and said that to have a modern sex-ed curriculum, such as the 2015 curriculum, meant something, even if it wasn't perfect.

It meant that kids in school were being taught about the world they lived in, about the skin they lived in.

And then, suddenly, it was gone. They were all high school kids, so it wouldn't directly impact them.

That's right, high school students will still be taught the 2015 sex-ed curriculum. See, the two curriculums - one for elementary schools and the other for high schools - were introduced at the same time, but only the elementary curriculum was rolled back by the Ford government.

But many of these students weren't far out from grade eight, where much of this information is taught.

Even if the policies don't directly impact them, they feel them.

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What is an abstraction for politicians at Queen's Park is, for young high school students, becoming a very real disconnect between what they are taught and the world they live in.

I spoke with Ian and Zoe, both grade nine students at GCI who asked for their last names to be withheld. Ian identifies a bit more conservatively - he thinks that some "SJW policies" hurt free speech. Zoe is a bit more demure, politically, if she has any real leanings at all.

But both agreed that the education reforms passed by the Ford government are a mistake.

Ian called the sex-ed rollback "wrong," while Zoe said that learning that information in grade eight made several of her friends confident enough to come out to their classmates. Both worried that the rollbacks would erase those gains.

Both also complained that overall curriculum changes would decrease the amount of information on Indigenous history and culture that would be taught.

"Getting rid of residential schools [in the curriculum] is

wrong," Ian told me, referring to the cancellation of a planned rewrite of the province's overall curriculum that would have boosted the amount of Indigenous content.

"Canada's done some good shit," said Zoe, "but Canada's done some bad shit, too." It is always important to learn about the bad shit.

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Like virtually all protests, the high school walk-out was a balance between ambition and what is actually possible.

If the Ford administration thought anything about the protests, they didn't do so publicly. When education minister Lisa Thompson was pressed on the subject by reporters at Queen's Park ahead of the walk-out, she simply said that she was "very, very much looking forward to the rolling out of this consultation" with parents and stakeholders on the new curriculum.

By 3:00 p.m., the protest began dissipating. And then Ottawa was hit by a tornado, and thrust into a weekend of chaos. Reporters and cameramen were scrambled to the scenes of natural destruction taking form in the city's west end, and the focus of everyone's attention shifted away from the high school students.

But for the students, the walk-out was a transformative experience. An entry into the civil arena of politics and resistance.

"This walkout changed me and so many people," said Jeffery-Off in a message a day after the walk-out. "And it will continue to change us as we understand our power and voices."

[From left to right]

1. Students at Glebe Collegiate were out in large numbers on September 21 - some there to vocally protest, others there to support their classmates.

2. A stop sign, emblazoned with "Stop Doug Ford!!" is hoisted above the grounds at Glebe Collegiate Institute during the student walk-out.

3. A female student (unnamed because school admin asked your intrepid correspondent to stand on the public sidewalk shortly after taking this picture) from Glebe Collegiate writes on a felled stop sign.

All photos by Kieran Delamont

