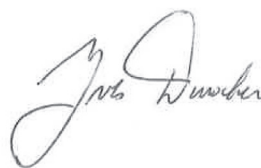




A message from the OTF President



Yves Durocher

Dear colleagues,

We are witnessing, in our teaching environment, a reconsideration of ideas and values surrounding the privileged place that rights hold in our society. Provincial governments acting on so-called parental rights. Privatization threatening union rights. Intellectual property rights being challenged with the use of Artificial Intelligence and Generative AI. We are seeing rights being debated in a way that is new and can be somewhat uncomfortable. There are those who would rather actively stoke the fires of division than seek to bridge divides when it comes to rights we hold dear.

We have groups of students who feel that their right to live and learn peacefully is being threatened by others who feel that their right to express themselves supersedes the former. We have fellow colleagues, fellow teachers, who don't feel safe at work and who are worried about speaking out against the violence they experience. It's making some of our members feel anxious about doing or saying the wrong thing. Teachers are showing up, but don't always feel they can be the best version of themselves.

All this is happening in real-time, in real-life, in our streets, stores, parks, homes and indeed in our schools. The sharp and un-nuanced invective being spewed on social media platforms translates into less forgiving and more threatening words and actions in our classrooms. It seems sometimes unmanageable and as teachers we may feel less than equipped to deal with it all, even though the wider public expects it of us.

So, as teachers, what are we to do? We can listen and act with empathy. It seems like an intrinsic approach for teachers. After all, we come into this profession with the aspiration to care for the students in our charge. However, sometimes we actually have to make a conscious effort to act with empathy. It is the best way to ensure that our students feel safe and supported. In the classroom, holding opposite convictions needn't lead to conflict: it can lead to respectful conversation and dialogue.

We can speak intelligently, with pedagogical authority. We are the experts in the classroom. With our knowledge and lived experience we can help to contextualize things for our students. We can invite open-mindedness to help students see issues in tones of grey instead of what they might wish to see as black and white. We can create conditions and climates to help our students tolerate and even accept ambiguity.

We can remind ourselves, as Federation members, that OTF's first listed object in the *Teaching Profession Act* is to promote and advance the cause of education. It means encouraging our students to look beyond the confines of their horizons, to use those critical thinking skills they've been building since Kindergarten to come to their own conclusions that are hopefully rooted in empathy, care and compassion. The same values we model in our classrooms. As teachers, we certainly have the right and responsibility to create safer spaces for ourselves and our students.