

**HED:** Teachers Are More Than Just Educators

**DEK:** When it comes to education, the Progressive Conservative government misses the point

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More than anything else, Stephen Lecce is consistent. When Ontario's teachers' unions announced that they would begin job action, the Minister of Education found his talking points and refused to budge. Now, as the rotating teachers' strikes progress, it has become abundantly clear that Lecce gravely misunderstands the role that teachers play in the lives of their students.

Lecce has embarked on a months-long quest to convince Ontarians that only by clawing back compensation increases for teachers will the provincial government be able to make investments for students. When Lecce speaks of the investment students need, he speaks of new buildings, of mental health support workers, and of increased funding for school boards. Notably, he does not speak of teachers.

The Minister's reasoning is clear. To Lecce, teachers are just educators. While they may stand at the front of the classroom, they are no more than a vehicle through which the government imparts its curriculum onto students. Lecce's bargaining philosophy is rooted in his view that teachers are only instrumentally valuable. It is deeply problematic.

Teachers are not just empty vessels through which students are educated. They are not mouthpieces for the government or for parents; they do not simply recite a predetermined curriculum. Instead, teachers play a crucial role in guiding students through their non-academic lives. Teachers are mentors, counsellors, advocates, and pillars of support. In many cases, a good teacher is the only thing keeping a vulnerable student from falling through the cracks.

Consequently, teachers and students form sophisticated and meaningful relationships with each other. Teachers relate to their students as individuals, not just as pupils. Every day, these relationships play a crucial role in shaping the lives of students across Ontario. To understand the full impact that teachers have, one must understand the depth of these relationships.

I often think about the impact select teachers have had on my life. These memories serve as childhood milestones.

The earliest is of my first day in elementary school. I was young, but I could tell my parents were out of their depth. I am the son of Indian immigrants. My father did not complete elementary school. My mother completed high school but did not attend university. At the time, my parents did not speak English.

It was my first day of school and I was terrified. I was crying as my parents dropped me off. My first-grade teacher, Ms. Jessa, placed me on her lap, kissed my cheek, and told me everything would be alright. One of my favourite memories is of sitting there, on Ms. Jessa's knee, convinced that I was going to be okay.

The next milestone was in the sixth grade.

Ms. Jovich kept a chart on the chalkboard. There was a list of all the students in the class, along with a count of how often each student took initiative to clean up. I was usually last. I was a terrible student. I was easily distracted, I didn't understand the material, I was struggling to fit in, and the last thing I wanted to do was clean. At the end of each month, the top students would receive a prize. I was never a top student.

One month, when announcing the winners, Ms. Jovich called my name. I was nowhere near the top of the list. Ms. Jovich took the winners out for lunch. It was my first time eating at a restaurant, my family could never afford it. I remember ordering a plate of fries and sitting there, wondering why on earth Ms. Jovich would bring me if I wasn't at the top of the list. I never asked; she never said. She didn't need to.

The final milestone of elementary school was in the seventh grade.

Ms. Khairi pulled me out of class during sixth period. It was just after lunch and I was starving. I had not brought food to school all year. I had an eating disorder, and my parents struggled to find me food they could afford. Nearly every day, I went without a meal until dinner.

Standing outside of the classroom, Ms. Khairi passed me a menu for the school's lunch program. She told me to mark down what I wanted to eat on each day of the week and return the form to her. The pamphlet said to include a cheque. Ms. Khairi told me twice not to worry about it.

I have not seen or spoken to Ms. Jessa, Ms. Jovich, or Ms. Khairi since I completed elementary school. I will always remember what they did for me.

I can only hope that the Minister of Education will remember his own stories.