



OCSAA AGM – Keynote Address
– “Challenges For Ontario’s Independent Schools”

Barbara A. Bierman – Executive Director – OFIS – May 7 2010

Well, this is weird – being here in front of this crowd today! As I look out into this crowd I know there are folks that taught me, folks I taught with, many folks I visited on behalf of the OACS on various projects and folks who I have worked for and who made significant contributions towards my career. I must admit, I feel like a bit of a fraud coming here to share my insights on the challenges for our schools even for just 45 minutes given the current company. It’s like that recurring dream – you know, the one where you go back to your high school to teach and get in front of your first class only to find the “students” are all former teachers and you are in your underwear! What! No one else has that dream?! I wonder what the experts would say about the psychological root of this dream for me then!

Despite the fact that it IS a little weird and I feel like a bit of a fraud, I am delighted to be here this morning. I have the greatest respect for Ontario’s Christian School Administrators as a former student, a former teacher, a colleague at the OACS for many years and now as the Executive Director of a sister organization – *The Ontario Federation of Independent Schools*. I credit the talent and commitment of people like you working in independent schools for the satisfaction I experience in leading this organization. One of the very first Christian school administrators I ever met is someone who demonstrated to me that independent school leadership is a high calling and that we should “never leave well-enough alone.” That administrator was Hugo Marcus who is now my colleague as the Executive Director at the OACS. Because of people like you, one of the main attractions of independent schools in this province is the belief that their students can make a difference in the world, that they can leave the world a better place in which they found it. I hope I am living proof! 😊

Of course, operating those kinds of schools – places that are interested in seeing students reach more than just their academic potential – has always been challenging. I know from listening to my own grandparents and parents tell tales about the history of the Christian school movement in the early days in Ontario about the struggle and hard work. Sacrificing to build, begin and populate those schools was full of challenges. But now, we have buildings, we have students (maybe not as many as we would like to see) and we have solid programs in place - thing should be easier shouldn’t they? This generation of Christian School leaders doesn’t “get to coast” – instead it must be acutely aware of the challenges that happen as this movement passes the 60 and 70 year mark and even beyond.

And that’s what I was asked to come and share about today – my perspective on the challenges facing Ontario’s more than 900 independent schools as we move forward. OFIS is home to about 140 of those schools and is the fastest-growing, most diverse independent school association in the province. Just this week we had 5 membership inquiries and those 5 schools

couldn't be more different from each other. One is new school which will be an academy for the performing arts (like a "Fame" school), another is a school that was once a member of OFIS and is returning only now because it realizes that the increasing government, legal and program expectations in operating that school cannot be done in isolation – there is a need for networking and association. The third school is a French immersion school that has recently begun adding Japanese and Mandarin with a goal of becoming the top language school in the province. The fourth school has a balanced focus between academics and character education that specializes in training children to become leaders. The final school is a Montessori school which seems to be the fastest growing category of independent school in Ontario at the moment.

Operating a school association like OFIS with all of these very different types of schools and their needs is enough to have me thinking about early retirement some days! In my first several months on this job I felt more like a firefighter putting out little after-burners all the time. But I finally got around to identifying the common challenges that these schools face and started anticipating some future challenges that will come our way as well. And that's when I understood why some people prefer to do their jobs like firefighters – forecasting the future, taking a look out into that horizon can be really scary! At least if I'm busy putting out fires, I'm busy, I'm helping people with their day-to-day issues. I feel good about that at the end of every day. Looking out into the future may reveal trends I am uncomfortable with or have no ability to navigate or worse yet no desire to navigate. But that's what good leaders do, don't they? They are constantly watching that horizon, looking for signs of threats and opportunities.

Some of you who spend time with me regularly know what I'm going to say next – I believe that a "perfect storm" is brewing for independent education in this province. Webster's defines a "perfect storm" as a critical or disastrous situation created by a powerful concurrence of factors. Gee, even the definition sounds scary – critical, disastrous – but it doesn't have to be. I'll explain to you in a minute about what I believe the powerful concurrence of factors are creating this storm but I want to first give you an alternate definition of this "perfect storm" – "the result of different elements coming together perfectly to create something altogether more powerful and truly effective."

How many people here have seen the movie "The Perfect Storm?" It came out in 2000 and got Oscar attention which always gets my attention. Now "Oscar" and I don't always agree as to what's a good movie but I happen to be a sucker for movies that are based on "true stories" which I knew this to be. Besides that, it starred George Clooney as the fated Captain Billy Tyne and it is just a rule in my life to see any movie that has George Clooney in it!

If you haven't seen it, here's the plot in a nutshell. In the fall of 1991, the Andrea Gail leaves Gloucester, Massachusetts and heads for the Grand Banks. The crew is a handful of ragged, down-on-their-luck fishermen, led by Captain Billy Tyne, who head out at the end of the season for one final run, hoping to beat a streak of bad luck. They ignore warnings of weather systems brewing and keep looking for swordfish. Two weeks after putting out, an event happens that

has never before been recorded. They get their big haul of fish, but by the time they turn back, it's too late – literally everybody and his brother drowns and the Andrea Gail is lost 575 miles off shore – victim of this historical “perfect storm.”

The National Weather Service called this a “perfect storm” because it brought 3 fairly normal, on their own, kinds of weather patterns into play all at the same time. It had never happened before and it hasn't happened since. There was an enormous extra-tropical low that wreaked havoc along the entire Eastern Atlantic Seaboard for a few days. That was normal for that area and time of year. Late October and November are months with rapidly changing weather in the eastern U.S. You have heard of this phenomenon – storms called “Nor'easters.”

But then another weather pattern emerged. During those same few days, an extra-tropical cyclone developed along a cold front which had moved off the Northeast coast of the U.S. With strong upper air support, the low rapidly deepened and became the dominant weather feature in the Western Atlantic. And finally, Hurricane Grace, which had been cycling down and moving away, made a hairpin turn to the east because of the other 2 converging weather patterns, and started heading straight their way.

How many of you knew you were going to get the bonus of a quick crash-course in meteorology this morning? 😊

These 3 weather patterns collided on October 30 just 340 miles south of Halifax with sustained winds of 60 knots and wave heights up to 39 feet. Just to give you a frame of reference, generally hurricane sea surge waves are around 15 feet – so this would be way bigger 😊 People there still talk about the “perfect storm” and everyone knows they are talking about these 3 days in October back in 1991.

Just think about this for a minute – you're a fisherman, you've had a crummy season where no one made any money – in fact you've had a bunch of crummy seasons where no one made any money. You've got one last opportunity to get out and there are weather reports, but hey – there are ALWAYS weather reports in this line of work and most of them never amount to anything. Is the ultimate possibility of success a greater draw than the possible risks and threats? Is the future of the fishing company more important than the lives that are put at risk? Heck, people die falling on the bunny hill at Tremblant – everything is dangerous right? How do you, as they say, “know when to hold, know when to fold?”

I'm sure you've guessed by now that I'm now no longer just talking about fishermen facing the possibility of a “perfect storm”, I'm talking about us. I don't want you to leave here today thinking that a storm is coming that is so big you will surely drown and cease to be – educationally speaking. I do want you to consider the fact that circumstantial “weather patterns” exist that, on their own seem annoying but innocuous, may collide with such force that if we have not made preparations we may in fact ultimately not survive. So, first I'd like to share the “weather patterns” out there that are beginning to collide in what is shaping up to be “the perfect education storm” and then I'd like to offer a bit of a “manual for stormy seas” so to

speak, so that independent schools can be ready to weather any storms that erupt.

These “weather patterns” are economic, demographic and political – they are all present now and I believe could collide some time very soon to create a “perfect education storm”:

1. Depending On Who You Listen To, The Economy Has Crashed Or Is Crashing – Unless you’ve been under a rock or in complete denial for the last year, you can’t escape the sights and sounds of global economic panic. The number of home and business foreclosures, personal and business bankruptcies, lost jobs particularly in manufacturing, government bail-outs for major companies, stocks and mutual funds that have plummeted and slowed down consumerism has not been seen since the Great Depression of the 1930’s. People have lost confidence in markets and are being careful about spending. Credit isn’t as readily available which means some people need to change their entire methods of budgeting. We know now that most of those lost jobs in manufacturing will never return again because of the high rates of unfunded liability that existed in those industries. Some financial experts are predicting that the effects of this economic recession will be more drawn out and deeper than those of the Great Depression. And many of these same experts say that the business world, the financial world and the people of the world will never be the same again. New jobs and opportunities will eventually come but those things we knew before will never be here again.

Things may seem OK economically in your community but remember that business and industry in your community is dependent on other communities, other countries and the world. The trickle-down effects of this historical economic shift will be evident as tuition-paying parents continue to lose jobs or experience cutbacks – can our rising educational costs be kept in line with what parents can and will pay? Donations may dry up from sources that had always been dependable – have some of our donors needed to cash in savings to cover debts or investment losses leaving little to give? Depending on how long it takes to pull out of a global recession, big purchases like independent school tuition that cannot be subsidized as well by donations as they once were, may feel out of reach for a growing number of people as everyone feels the need to hold off on spending. And the temptation to make household cuts for current families may prove irresistible depending on how long this recession lasts. This is our first weather pattern – an economic weather pattern.

This first “weather pattern” – an economic weather pattern on its own could be ridden out and endured. But this is the worst economic weather pattern of this sort to be seen in almost 80 years. In previous recessions, like the early 90’s here in Ontario, we held the line on tuition hikes, we instituted pay freezes and held off on major purchases. But this one is bigger and has lingering effects that will leave the economic landscape looking different than it was before it arrived. Those same tactics will only work for so long and there’s another “weather pattern” on the horizon to consider.

2. National Birth-Rates Are In Decline – that’s right, we are all just having less babies which means that eventually there will be less students to educate. Between 1960 and 2005 the

public school system experienced enrolment increase of 52%. In that same time, independent schools grew at a rate of 357%! Between 2000 and 2005 independent schools experienced a 9% increase – which means growth but far less growth than what we had been accustomed to. During that same time, the public school system decreased enrolment by 1%. So, while independent schools are mostly still increasing in enrolment, their growth is significantly slowed and looks to follow the same trends as the public school system which is now experiencing negative growth. This translates into 90,000 less children in school in Ontario since 2002. Looking ahead, *Statistics Canada* predicts that the number of students in school, in Canada, will decline by as much as 500,000 in the next 10 years. And *Statistics Canada* is not predicting ANY school-age population boom in the foreseeable future.

Less students to educate means that all schools will increasingly compete for a healthy portion of this shrinking market share. Notice that I said that less students to educate means that ALL schools will increasingly compete for this shrinking market share. Publicly funded schools in the province receive their government funding allotments based on enrolment. If enrolments are nose diving, that funding declines as well. Independent schools have always lived with the limitation that revenues are based on enrolled students. The difference between these two groups is that one is forced to live within that limitation and the other is not (I'm sure you can figure out which is which ☺). From 2002 to the present, public school funding has increased from \$9.4 billion to \$13.8 billion which is a 47% increase despite the declining enrolment numbers I've given you. 172 public schools are facing closure in Ontario under the accommodation review process which means that funding allotments would decrease for those closed schools and teachers, administrators and board employees would lose jobs. Ontario's *Working Group On Declining Enrolment* founded in May 2008 has voiced an urgency not previously experienced in public education – they must find ways to maintain funding. To them, maintaining funding means finding more students. While international students and distance education students are being pursued, so are independent school students.

You've probably noticed that publicly funded school boards are advertising for students. There's been an increase in radio and print ads for these schools as they attempt to distinguish themselves as being able to offer greater options for families. More advertising campaigns are in the works with \$600,000 being put aside for this purpose in the next year alone. Independent schools, many of which have always advertised, will now not only compete with each other for this public attention, they will compete with a bigger machine that has more money and that is feeling desperate for this first time knowing that the government well of money is drying up (this evidenced by deficits and increasing taxes – sooner or later this will be unsustainable).

You've probably also noticed that public and catholic school boards are looking to offer public education in a greater variety of alternative programs so it looks like more choices for families. They've recognized that independent schools' rate of decline is still in the positive domain and are taking the best ideas from those schools and attempting to duplicate. Consider the Afri-centric and Waldorf public schools in the Toronto School Board that opened this past fall. The

Toronto Sun reported that “42% of the applicants for the new Afri-centric school came from independent schools in the region. Consider Eden Public School in the Niagara School Board which offers a Christian program in a public school. Forget about the fact that this school’s very existence flies in the face of the current premier’s record on “religious schools” from the last election, it is successfully challenging other independent Christian High Schools in the area for annual enrolment. As these “free choices” continue to emerge in public education, independent schools will be challenged to compete with similar looking programs with very attractive price tags sometimes right around the corner.

Finally, the 2 largest public school boards in the province, namely Toronto and Hamilton have hired marketing directors in the last 18 months whose jobs are to deal with the findings of the *Working Group on Declining Enrolment* and figure out ways to maintain funding allotments and “attract private school students back to the public system.” That’s a direct quote – and you can be sure that the budgets that these people will have to work with will be higher than the 1 to 3% of total school budget that OACS recommends be spent on marketing and advertising.

Things may seem OK demographically in your community – perhaps you’ve even benefitted from an independent school that hasn’t survived enrolment decline or a public school whose doors have closed but remember that Statistics Canada is predicting further decline for school-age people which won’t flatten out until 2016. The trickle-down effects of this demographic shift will be evident as greater choice seems to be available to parents from public schools – are our schools eagle-eye focused on a distinctive education niche that is appealing to parents in the face of the other choices? Student achievement and growth is important to parents and is the biggest criticism of the public system as they spend more money for less results – are we willing to explore new ways of measuring that growth and achievement with things like *value-added assessment*, which is revolutionizing education in more than 21 American states? According to The Fraser Institute, parents have chosen independent schools because of teachers (91%), academic program (80%) and school safety. Parents were equally likely to select as “very important” features such as: a) educating the whole child, b) setting high expectations, c) directive administration, d) graduates who are accepted in the universities of choice, and e) catering to special needs children. This is our second weather pattern – a demographic weather pattern.

3. The Political Climate Towards Independent Schools Is Frosty – When I was describing the previous demographic weather pattern, you might get the impression that I believe the Ontario government has a subtle plan to compete for the independent school demographic by simply squeezing us out of existence through slick, consistent advertising, offering more alternative public education programs and increasing regulations and expectations on independent schools to untenable levels. While I can’t comment with any authority on whether this is actually an official plan, I cannot help it if you are intelligent people who can put 2 and 2 together and see a subtle plan taking shape for yourselves! 😊

Let me give you a few more examples and you can decide for yourself:

-Last year, then Education Minister Kathleen Wynne, announced during a press conference that Ontario would begin flagging private school high school credits on transcripts with a letter “P” to warn colleges and universities that the government could not guarantee the validity of those credits. She also said that secondary school inspections would have to increase in frequency and expectations so that the government could ensure the credits were legitimate. This action was supposedly required after the ministry received several complaints about such schools. But even their own website had not listed a school with a revoked credit-granting privilege since 2005. Even then only 3 schools were listed. She later acknowledged that the schools in question were few in number and more the store-front type tutoring services which offered summer school courses and upgrade courses. However, the press conferences and subsequent news articles ensured that all private schools were painted with the same dubious paintbrush leaving the public with questions about the integrity of independent schools everywhere.

-Last year, the Ministry of Education issued a schedule of increases for independent secondary schools for ministry inspections to take place over the next 3 years. The cost of these inspections will increase 100% in that amount of time which causes further budget constraint for some secondary schools. Couple that with the suggestion that these inspections should be held more often to ensure the validity of the credits being granted. More and more schools could find themselves being unable to afford to grant the Ontario Secondary School Diploma which would put them at a deficit when competing with their public school counterparts, which incidentally, are not inspected and whose credits are never questioned.

-Recently, all of Ontario’s independent elementary schools have received notice from the Ministry of Education regarding its intention to begin inspections for these schools to ensure that they are in keeping with *The Education Act*. My first instinct was to laugh since the only real stipulations in the act are for a private school to have 5 students school aged that operates between the hours of 9-4pm. The Ministry however, has additional policies for independent schools to ensure control of the program content, having a principal in charge, having a school-wide assessment and evaluation process for staff, having a procedure for reporting to parents, operating a school-wide attendance process and having a central office for maintaining student records and they could based new inspections on these items. And while the initial proposed inspection will be free, there is no doubt that regular charges will be levied once additional inspectors need to be hired and inspection protocols need to be established.

-Wonderful resources like the *Ontario Educational Resource Bank* which provides thousands of digital learning resources for K to 12 and were developed and shared by Ontario’s teachers to be used to foster greater e-learning opportunities is not available to independent school educators even though it would cost nothing extra for the province to provide access. Additionally, the Ministry just signed a 3 year agreement so that the 2 million students in public schools will have access to *Learn 360* a database that offers more than 7000 digital video titles as well as speeches, images, articles and audio files from top educational publishers. What would have been the big deal of extending that license for 2million public school students to

include the 120,000 independent school students?

-Until 2 years ago, independent schools in Ontario received grants from the federal Heritage Fund for bilingual instruction. The provincial government distributed those grants to independent schools on behalf of the federal government and the Heritage Fund. Education Minister, Kathleen Wynne, a former public school teacher and trustee, decided to no longer distribute those federal French grants to independent schools. The reason she gave? She said that the schools were not inspected so there was no guarantee the grants were being used to actually teach French. She said that the money would be given instead to the public schools where that could be proven. To date, public schools haven't received those additional funds either. So where did the money actually go?

-Finally, many independent schools are holding their breath waiting for the fall-out of the government's proposed all-day kindergarten plan. Will parents see the "free lunch" opportunity and give their children over to these programs? Will the proposed parent user-fees be comparable to costs in independent schools for similar care? Is the expansion of early learning opportunities a method to bring in more student numbers thereby increasing per student funding to public schools and to further debilitate independent schools already successfully serving families with similar services. The jury is out on the conflicting social science research on the benefits and drawbacks of early institutional care for children. And Ontario's troubled economy has people wondering how the province will fund this expensive plan. Experts say that if the money that will be spent on full-day kindergarten would be sent directly to parents instead, it could amount to an annual amount up to \$10,400, depending on staffing arrangements!

There you have it. One can only wonder how many more hits like this will happen before it becomes too difficult to own and operate a private school. Associations like OFIS and OACS vigilantly pay attention to these government moves to figure out how to respond. Regardless of whether or not you are in favour of getting government funding of some type for independent schools one day, we cannot ignore the many other resources available to which our schools should be entitled nor can we ignore the activities that threaten our right to reasonable self-definition. And we must work together to protect even the current privileges and benefits that seem to increasingly be in jeopardy.

So, if you're now so depressed by the magnitude of these "weather patterns" over which we have no control that seem to be lining up into some kind of "perfect storm for education" that you're ready to go home and hand over your resignation and your keys to the school building, take heart! I have no intention of leaving you in this place!

We all know that in a storm situation, sooner or later the weather will break. It does us no good to complain about the "weather" – blaming the unjust government or the "non-child-bearing" parents or even all those OTHER companies getting big bailouts and bonuses. We don't know WHEN the weather will break so sitting around doing nothing or pretending that

there's nothing to address isn't a good idea either. So, what should we do?

1. Invest in "Watching Weather Reports" – we've heard significant information and facts about these 3 "weather patterns" that are already affecting us – economic, demographic, and political. Your stakeholders will want to know that they are part of a crew that is constantly reading the weather signs and that you as a leader or captain are prepared to navigate these stormy times. I have a poster in my office that reads..."the pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects the wind to change; and the realist adjusts the sails." We simply must accept these "weather patterns" and adjust our plans accordingly.

2. Lift Anchor And Put Out Into The Deep!

In times of storm, the shore is NOT the safer place to be! In fact, the shore is the most dangerous place to be in the midst of a storm. While the world is raging with gale-force winds and waves, there's a tendency to hug the harbour and wait out the storm. All that happens is that your boat gets bashed up against the rocks on the shore. Independent school folks should instead lift anchor and head out into the deep waters. The school of the "perfect storm" is a place that is wisely looking and lurching forward, not a place that is stuck in nostalgic, glory day poses.

a) Take the time to determine whether your current school culture meets the needs of the people you are trying to attract and don't be afraid to make adjustments – are you eagle-eye focused on the distinctive niche you inhabit? Are you worth the investment to parents because you offer something so different or so radical that it simply can't be had anywhere else? Are you irreplaceable? Do you know what the number 1 area not being satisfactorily addressed by public schools is right now? Special Education Needs – how could YOUR school meet those needs?

b) Spend as much time running an excellent school program as you do running a strong business – Communicate safety by tightening all necessary policies and staying current with required new policies. Communicate financial health to all audiences by being seen as a good value in these uncertain financial times. Determine whether your leadership team has the necessary skills to take your school into the future, not simply maintain the present or preserve the past.

c) Begin advertising and/or keep advertising in places where prospective parents and supporters are really "listening." Consider the new arenas of social networking. Barack Obama arguably won the presidency because of social networking.

3. Steer Into The Wind!

Just as you can't escape the storm, you can't outrun the storm either. Once you're out on the high seas, the worst thing you can do is try to flee a storm. The turning tides of the economy, changing demographics and unfriendly politics cannot be outrun, turned back or turned off no matter how "storm-phobic" we are! Once we learn the truth about what is happening in our

world, whether we like it or not, we must learn to be at home in the strange times we're in.

a) There are nearly daily opportunities to speak up for independent schools in the public arena. The media is forever presenting inaccurate information or reporting some politician or special interests group's take on independent school issues. Education is arguably the number 1 political portfolio so there's always some kind of study going on about which independent school leaders have an opinion. And now, with Twitter, Facebook, Blogging and email, it is easy to speak up often and all of us should. No educational issue should go by without a wave of independent school response that follows. I suggest that each school have one person be solely responsible to look for and respond to these issues on behalf of your school. Imagine the increase in public credibility if 1 person from each of the province's 900 independent schools did this regularly.

b) Find ways to be involved with your local community and not isolated by your independence. Participate in community events where you're not asking for anything. Join the Chamber of Commerce and then attend events, sponsor doorprizes, nominate your leaders for community recognition and host events. Be known and appreciated, not unknown and misunderstood.

c) Discover new ways of looking at educational improvement. Parents are very interested in test scores and academic outcomes and public schools are very wary of test scores and academic outcomes because they insist the results are always flawed. Value-added assessment is being used effectively in more than 21 American states and is a new way of analyzing test data that can measure progress in both teaching AND learning. Based on a review of students' test score gains from previous grades, educators can predict the amount of growth those students are likely to make in a given year. Using the same methods, one can look back over several years to measure the long-term impact that a particular teacher or school had on student achievement as well. If we're brave enough to discover the results, this kind of information can revolutionize a school culture.

4. Get Rid Of Excess Cargo And Toss Heavy Burdens Overboard!

In the movie "The Perfect Storm", part of the reason the Andrea Gail did not survive was because Captain Billy Tyne refused to abandon his mother lode of swordfish. Sometimes these "weather patterns" require us to part with those things that are not essential to the mission, vision and values of our school to focus on the things that will bring longevity. Perhaps you've heard the saying that "sacred cows make great burgers." Sometimes we have to throw some ancient cargo overboard and get viciously surgical about enhancing the things that could sink our ship.

a) Take inventory and put most of your resources – time, money, people – behind your most successful programs

b) Temporarily dump your ineffective, money-draining, non-growth programs

c) Streamline your staff for efficiency and effectiveness – watch out for the "loyalty trunk" – can you really afford to hold on to staff who may be wonderful people but who aren't hitting targets?

d) Check your policies for growth inhibiting practices, language and inconsistencies – be really brave and allow an outsider to come in and give their feedback to those policies.

5. Lash Yourself to the Mast Of Your Values – Steady As She Goes!

The more a storm whips up, the more the need for a fixed point and the more we need to lock our hands on the tiller of truth – our core values. Ancient mariners would sometimes instruct helmsman to lash themselves to the helm so that they could pilot ships through the worst storms. “Steady as she goes” is the phrase the captain used to get everyone, including himself, focused, not on staying the course, but on steadying the wheel to better manoeuvre into the storm. Staying the course, especially courses that were set before a storm came, is a decision for death.

a) If you’re following a strategic plan or a business plan, have you altered it to consider these weather patterns lining up to create a perfect storm? Maybe the weather patterns weren’t all in place when the plan was created. Trying to hold tight to it, may mean death. I have a school who consulted me about a capital campaign about a year ago. After hearing their plans and reviewing their campaign timeline and materials, I urged them to delay the campaign – no shovels were in the ground yet and the public portion of the campaign had yet to begin. I encouraged them instead to streamline the school as an organization, keeping true to their core values and preparing the school for a stormy season. I told them that a delayed campaign was better than a failed campaign. They decided to go ahead with the campaign schedule that had been created 2 years earlier and now the campaign is stalled and there are other financial pressures to do with operations, perception problems amongst supporters and leadership issues. The jury is still out on whether they will survive this.

6. Enjoy An Epic Ride!

We need to ride the waves, even when it feels like our schools are in trouble. We need to lash ourselves to the mast of our school’s core values for it is why you came to be at your school. Be an inspiration to the students and families who stick with you through the “perfect storm” and take seriously the responsibility of preparing young minds for public service. Take time to enjoy the “wins” with students and share those stories liberally with everyone! The legacy of independent schools cannot be ignored or underestimated – it is the reason many of us are in the business – it must be ‘cuz it certainly isn’t for the great hours, great pay and great coffee! ☺ How we each spend our days and our lives is our legacy and there are few things more ultimately rewarding than influencing future leaders!

a) Take Openings When They Come – We at OFIS have been encouraged by recent successes in gaining influence at the Ministry of Education. Politicians come and go with elections but many bureaucrats remain in their jobs as governments change hands. We have put significant energy into establishing positive relationships with the ministry staff that can help us gain greater access to resources for our member schools. 2010 brought a new Private Schools Coordinator

as well as a new OnSIS coordinator. Both have shown unprecedented cooperation as we work to ease the strain of OnSIS reporting on independent schools as well as agreements on working together to provide better communication and support to private schools. This is like a sunny break in the “weather pattern” – you know it’s still going to storm but you have hope that it will pass. This is an opening that is too good to pass up!

b) We Need To Work Together Better And More Often as Independent Schools and Associations – we have many resources to share with each other, particularly with respect to professional development. We also need to work together to approach the government and pursue fairer treatment of students who attend independent schools. Now I know that there are people in this room who are feeling burned by these efforts in the past, particularly during the last provincial election. And I believe that trying to pursue any of those previous ideas again will meet with the same failure. But there are other ways to get the job done that would be politically viable and publicly palatable. Something like Claudia Hepburn’s (senior fellow at *The Fraser Institute*) idea of establishing an Ontario Scholarship For Special Needs Children where the definitions of “special needs” could be ever widened to include students who can’t be served effectively by public schools.

In these times, there are storm clouds not just on the horizon, but directly overhead. This is more than simply making heavy weather about the weather. An unblinking conversation with history reveals that the transformations taking place economically, demographically and politically are without precedence in recorded history, just like the “perfect storm” that sank the Andrea Gail was previously unrecorded in history. We have every reason to doubt and be afraid but we also have reason to hope. In the movie, “The Perfect Storm”, the boats did not all sink – there were many that made it safely back to harbour once the storm subsided. There were obviously boats that did “the right things” when faced with the perfect storm.

John W. Gardner, the great American education reformer said, “We are all faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems! What will you do as you see the coming storm through the telescope – discover the great opportunities or be mired down by the insoluble problems?”

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by independent school graduate Derek Miedema!)
http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/IMFC_MAY_2010_PUBLIC_EDUCATION_AND_PARENTAL_CHOICE_FINAL.pdf