

Banish the teach

By Shandana Minhas Ed

I COME from a long line of educators. For several generations now, the people of my family have been educating others about the best way to do things. Some of them have been teachers too. Seriously speaking, long years spent watching my mother and other family members work in schools and the few years I spent tutoring and then teaching have made me all too familiar with some of the issues teachers in this country face on a daily basis.

Sadly, most of them are small things. The problem with small things is the way they grow up to be big and ugly and bite you in the rear end. How can teachers nip the issues that plague them in the bud before being nipped in the derriere? Here are a few of the smallest, and a few suggestions for making them smaller still.

One of the most demanding aspects of being a teacher is the need to communicate with parents. If you don't have exchange of notes on a regular basis, you are basically depriving yourself of a valuable ally in the battle for the development of a child's heart and mind. Communication does indeed work both ways but sometimes teachers need to take the initiative. Keep parents up to speed with the requirements of your class and they won't be able to play the 'but we didn't know' card at PTA meetings.

The problem with this card is that the short time allocated to each parent at PTA meetings which should be spent discussing more important things is then wasted working out a foolproof (read childproof) way of getting in touch. Set a schedule or format at the beginning of term outlining when, where and how to get in touch with you, including timings and numbers. Ensure it goes out to all parents, either through a circular or a diary note that needs to be signed and returned to you. The timings and numbers should be set after consultation with the administration, so they can indicate when or whether you're available when fielding calls.

Ever since the word 'streamline' caught on everyone is in a rush to jump on to the efficiency bandwagon. Unfortunately, efficiency is often considered synonymous with paperwork. Improperly handled, paperwork can suck the life out of a profession that involves a whole lot of give and very little take. Eliminate some of that imbalance by organizing paperwork so you aren't a slave to it. Invest in a big cardboard box and a few file folders (recycle if you



Illustration by Ahyo

can). Use (hopefully employer provided) highlighters to label them according to 'have to do' dates such as daily, weekly, monthly, updates etc. Stick your head into the box at least once a day, with new additions to your paper stack in hand, and file them. Tackle as and when needed. Once you are faced with an orderly regiment awaiting orders rather than a ragtag mob threatening attack, you'll find it easier to be the general.

Paper work can also be self-inflicted. Assigning written work that will then need to be corrected can be the most masochistic part of teaching, in that we know it will hurt but we continue to do it nonetheless. Principals often make it worse by demanding a certain number of written assignments. They in turn are driven by parents who need inky evidence of learning (perhaps as compensation for their own absence?). When faced with a syllabus to cover though, you should always ask yourself "is there a way to do this without paper and pencil?" And sometimes there is. If you want to take a pop quiz, use the blackboard and class participation. Not only will it make it more interesting for the children (competition rules), you'll also be able to do a spot check of how much they really know. If you want to revise key lessons pre-

exams, use the blackboard, make teams, or use cards. Thicker journals do not mean more effective learning.

Use school time to work and not to socialize. If you can do an hour of corrections at school that means an hour of corrections you don't have to do at home. If you have to be in school early because your husband or driver will then drop the kids off to their school, use that half hour to catch up on paperwork, plan lessons or do corrections. Resist the urge to pop into the staff room for a snack of thick, juicy gossip and head for an empty classroom instead. If there are no empty classrooms, find a quiet corner of the staff room. If there isn't a quiet corner, make one by putting up a small sign asking for a little bit of peace and quiet, or simply alienate everyone with rudeness till they leave you alone (can be fun but generally backfires in the long run).

Faced with a new school year and unfamiliar lesson content, work with others in your department who have already taken that route. Pore over their old lesson plans and review a couple of students' journals. Ask them questions if you have any. Brainstorm with colleagues about the most effective way to make a point or deliver a lesson. Don't be