

Another Brick In The Wall

By Scott MacGregor

LAST FALL I attended the first Get Kids Paddling conference. There were representatives from the largest school boards, national nonprofits, international boys and girls organizations and academics from the most prestigious university outdoor programs. You get the idea. These people care. They would seemingly have the means to make change, if systemic institutional and cultural change is even possible in these overly protective and litigious times.

After a day of lectures, presentations and breakout groups we left the room agreeing to form a coalition to advise the development of policies implemented by regulatory bodies writing the physical education guidelines for school boards.

As this school year was coming to an end, my son, Doug, had the idea of organizing a canoeing day grade eight class trip.

I need to set the stage for you. Access to a quiet flat-water section of river is only 800 meters from the school. The Paddler Co-op, a nonprofit paddling school, is based three kilometers from Doug's classroom. It doesn't get any easier.

Doug knows money is tight in his tiny country school. He approached a vested corporate sponsor about covering the cost of the canoeing program. He called the Paddler Co-op for a quote and I agreed *Paddling Magazine* would cover the full course fees for the entire class.

Doug knew school buses would be a prohibitive expense, so he devised a plan and got his teacher onboard. The students could be dropped off at school early so they could walk an hour to the paddling school.

For the mandatory swim test, Doug had his teacher document swim test evaluations performed by life-guards at a wave pool during an earlier school trip. Clever little fella.

Armed with initiative, the support of his teacher and a list of obstacles already overcome he approached his principal with his slam-dunk proposal.

When he left her office he was fighting back tears. In his hands was a copy of the six-page physical education safety guidelines for elementary canoeing curricular. The very guidelines members of the Get Kids Paddling coalition believe is crippling their ability get kids on the water.

Doug was told he must satisfy all 132 bullet points in these guidelines before his principal would take his request to her superintendant—she wouldn't support this program and wouldn't sign off on the activity without school board approval.

I don't care what activity is being proposed, if a student comes forward with this much initiative, our administrators need to play ball. Self-starting student ambition like this needs to be fostered, not crushed by bureaucracy and risk-averse, lazy-minded administrators.

So, Doug and I set about satisfying the requirements. Except as written they are impossible to achieve. For example, the guidelines read: "Prior to canoeing, a prerequisite test must occur in a pool, shallow water, or sheltered bay for which students must demonstrate to the instructor canoe skills, including: pivots, draw and pry strokes, sweep strokes, forward and reverse strokes..." Etcetera, etcetera.

So, how the hell can students demonstrate strokes before they go canoeing, if they can't go canoeing until

they demonstrate these strokes?

As I write this, Doug is attending summer camp for his eighth summer. He's been canoe tripping and running rivers with me since he was in diapers. He grasped the fundamentals of canoeing long before he could spell canoeing.

A few months ago, Doug and I attended the East Coast Paddlesports Symposium in South Carolina. Doug enrolled himself in on-water clinics. He learned Greenland rolling skills with Helen Wilson. And he toured Charleston Harbor with ACA instructor trainer Josh Hall. He doesn't know these are respected paddlers at the top of their fields. To Doug these were just passionate and empowering role models.

Doug wasn't putting together the paddle day at his school for himself. Like the Get Kids Paddling coalition and his mentors at the symposium, Doug was hoping to get the other 19 boys and girls paddling. He has dreams of starting an outdoors club at the high school.

I have one more reason to get kids paddling to add to the list: So kids can get other kids paddling. We need to tear up the bullshit restrictions we are placing upon them, feed their dreams and stay out for their way. If we're lucky we'll get to go with them. At least until adult supervision is no longer required.

Scott MacGregor is the founder and publisher of Paddling Magazine.

YOU CAN'T HAVE YOUR PADDLING IF YOU DON'T EAT YER MEAT. HELEN WILSON TEACHING DOUG MACGREGOR THE FUNDAMENTAL GREENLAND LAYBACK ROLL AT THE EAST COAST PADDLESPOITS SYMPOSIUM. PHOTO: SCOTT MACGREGOR