



OFIS AGM – Barbara A Bierman – Executive Director’s Keynote Remarks – November 12 2008 “Travelling To Where We Have Not Already Been”

In the last week, we have all witnessed a history defining moment and of course I am referring to the US electing Barack Obama to be its new president. It is one of those moments that have so much promise that we will forever remember where we were and what we were doing when we heard Obama make his acceptance speech in Grant Park in Chicago on Tuesday, November 4 2008. These defining moments don’t come along all that often unfortunately and they make such an impact on us – for my grandparent’s generation they remember where they were when they hear World War II was over; for my parent’s generation they remember where they were when JFK became president and then again when he was shot and taken away before he could accomplish the things he promised. We in this generation will remember Barack Obama.

It got me to thinking – what makes a particular event a defining moment, something that we mark and remember? I believe there are certain influential people who come along with a message that is so full of hope and change that it causes us to raise our faces out of a stupor of complacency and perhaps even a stupor of cynicism about the world that we live in. During those defining moments, we believe that the world really can change and that we can all become part of bringing about that change. For those brief moments, it feels like we are all on the same page.

Barack Obama is one of these influential people already and he hasn’t kept one campaign promise yet. In fact, the jury is out on whether or not he will be able to bring about the change that he championed during the campaign or whether he will leave the presidency exactly as he found it. By this time next year, political pundits and coffee-house junkies may be completely over their “Obama-rama” and will be criticizing Obama the same way other presidents have been criticized after taking office. But the way we feel today? Say it ain’t so! ☺

As America’s closest neighbours, we’ve had “ring-side seats” to the “Obama-phenomenon.” Aren’t we here in Canada suffering from a bit of “Barack-envy?” After all, we have just had a federal election too where we had the lowest voter turn-out in Canadian history and the media is leading the way in saying that it’s a big waste of time and money because nothing has changed – “Canada is business as usual.” Whether or not you think this is a good thing, our recent election did not see us rally around a leader or a cause the way that America embraced Obama. I don’t know about you, but I’m wondering where the Canadian Barack Obama is – I am a little envious of Americans who have a leader who has caused them to regain such pride in their national identity. Now, granted the American economy is in far worse shape than ours and they are up to their neck in 2 wars that they arguably caused and more people are going bankrupt due to health care costs than for any other reason there. But still, don’t you dream about finding a Canadian leader who has that special charisma and idealized vision for liberty and justice for all?

I want to make this just a little more personal for you – how many of you are secretly (or maybe not so secretly) hoping for a “Barack-Obama-like” movement for independent schools in Ontario? During the last provincial election we all listened to the premier of our province talk about private religious schools being a “threat” to social cohesion. We heard him imply that families using independent schools are somehow elitist and intolerant of others. We watched him fear-monger the Ontario public into believing that support and acknowledgement of

independent schools in Ontario would lead to moral and financial bankruptcy of public education and a breakdown of society as we know it. I don't know about you, but I can't decide what was more disturbing – the fact that our premier, the top leader of this province, made so many stereotypical, prejudicial statements or the fact that the public let him get away with it. In fact, the Ontario public endorsed it by giving him another majority government. Oh, what I wouldn't give for a little Barack sometimes (deep sigh).

There's a temptation to become jaded isn't there? 50+ years of trying to convince the government to fulfill its obligation to provide for the education of every child in the province and not just the 90% or so who attend public schools. 50+ years of helping to produce high quality graduates who go on to become successful, contributing, active members of Ontario society even without government acknowledgement for those contributions. 50+ years of giving parents real choice and serving children with great education on a shoestring budget most of the time. 50+ years of commitment to children, families and education over systems, unions and bureaucracy. So much time, so much effort and it doesn't feel like we've made much progress at all!

Now before you go getting yourselves all excited because you think I'm about to claim that I'm the "Barack Obama of the independent school movement" or before you go getting yourselves all worried because you think I'm about to claim that I'm the "Barack Obama of the independent school movement" I want to set the record straight. There are things to learn from this time in history. There is a wave to be ridden here! We need that kind of unity around a vision, that kind of hope and belief in a more inclusive future and that kind of greater engagement of independent school stakeholders – all very Obama like notions. And, if we can see it happening with the first black American president being elected in a time of serious, multiple crises in America, we too can make it happen in Ontario!

That's why I came to work at OFIS.

The provincial election in Ontario last year deeply affected the independent school movement. I have heard and been part of big debates about whether or not the campaign events helped or hurt future efforts to bring about parental choice in education. But there are two outcomes that no one can dispute and are important moving forward:

1. There is now no one living in the province of Ontario who isn't aware that an injustice exists between public school students and independent school students. Fuller awareness is the first step towards understanding the injustice which is the necessary step towards bringing about justice. Not convinced? Look at the convoluted pathway women took to obtain the right to vote in this country or look at how long it took to elect the first black president in the US!
2. The lack of unity on the important issues of educational justice among the independent school stakeholders is wide and vast. There were so many people speaking on behalf of independent schools during this past election with so many different opinions and solutions that I believe it was too hard for us to be taken seriously. We were so busy arguing amongst each other and jockeying for political favour and recognition that we were not a force that the government or the public felt they needed to reckon with.

Thanks to the hard work and vision of OFIS leaders before me, this organization is the most diverse, broadly-based independent school organization in the province. And at the moment, it is the biggest! These two factors make OFIS the best positioned organization to become a province-wide, single, strong voice for independent schools at both government levels and in the public arena. It will take intentionality and effort to build consensus between the many and varied independent school groups in the province (I have seriously lost count 😊) encouraging them to unite around the areas of common groups and to allow for liberty on the areas that divide us. The good news is

that we have time – the current provincial political climate, while it may seem hopeless for independent school supporters, actually gives us the time and opportunity to find and make partners as well as properly prepare plans together for making lasting change in the future politically.

And while OFIS is busy leading the charge in consensus building among the independent school groups in the province, it will also be busy providing valuable resources and assistance to member schools; helping them in their commitment to be the best schools they can be. Independent schools face tough realities. Despite their desire for choice, many parents have increasing difficulty affording the schools of choice. Conversely, schools have an increasingly difficult time setting tuition prices that are affordable and yet allow for excellent education to be offered. Uncertain economic times may prove to further impact these difficulties and many are “holding their breath” waiting to see what happens. And of course, birth rates are in decline which means that independent schools are trying to justify their niche in an ever shrinking market.

Independent schools are busy places. Without all of the resources that many public school competitors have available, administrators often need to balance between the pressures of operating an educational institute and running a business. OFIS needs to continue offering resources and assistance that helps schools be the best they can be – things like policy development, marketing and promotion planning, fundraising and financial practices, leadership and governance development.

So, there’s lots to be done and the challenge is before us – keep independent schools an excellent alternative choice in Ontario for parents, persuade the public and the government to endorse these choices and recognize them publicly and finally unify the independent school stakeholders for greater effectiveness. Whew! It feels like we need a Barack Obama!

And now we work. We’ll need to take calculated risks, make and execute solid plans and build consensus among stakeholders, all the while ensuring that we don’t lose ground or become stuck. We need to keep our eye on the goal and not travel forward only to discover we are back where we started or that we are going to leave the presidency exactly how we found it despite our desire to do differently.

So how will we go about this? The board, your elected representatives at OFIS, and the OFIS staff are committed to the OFIS Strategic Plan which includes these goals. When I was hired during the past summer, these goals were at the top of the job description and my interviews with the hiring team. OFIS is serious about making a dent in these things and you will be hearing much more about this in the coming year as we take some of those plans from concept to implementation. We look forward to consulting you, the OFIS members, along the way to bring about growth in the OFIS family and to make sure we achieve our bigger provincial goals which will benefit education in the province generally.

So what can you look forward to hearing about this year?

1. Working towards creating a single, strong voice for independent schools in the province with OFIS as the base for that voice – we’ll be meeting with other school groups, other associations and begin recording the ideas and issues that we have in common. We’ll develop a plan for communicating those things publicly and to the government.
2. Establishing Standard Setting Leadership For OFIS Member Schools – the board will be figuring out the best system for helping schools meet their targets and even mentor other schools. We’ll be establishing other levels of networking with regional sessions where we discuss the possibility of how membership

levels within OFIS might encourage greater school success and further establish provincial credibility necessary to any future funding solutions that will guard independent school autonomy.

3. Working towards creating a web presence – many are exploring whether or not Barack Obama’s use of the internet and its associated resources was what increased the voter turn-out, the fundraising potential and the hugely popular buy-in of his campaign messages. We need to figure out what kind of web services will make OFIS the “go-to” place for government, independent schools, parents and media.

One step at a time, one project at a time – this is how all great movements happen. Even Barack Obama in his acceptance speech pointed towards that. He didn’t talk again about all of the planks of his campaign and the promises that he would keep. He said, “Yes, we can.” Yes we can. Maybe the reason people have hope is because they feel included in his dream. It takes everybody.

Bringing about justice in Ontario, keeping the independent school movement alive and well in Ontario is a dream and it takes everybody. Each one of us together makes a movement. Its schools helping each other succeed instead of seeing each other as competitors. Its schools helping kids reach their potential no matter the kids’ abilities or background. Its OFIS members inviting others to consider OFIS membership and enjoying the community this membership affords. It’s each of us regularly reminding government and neighbours and friends about the choices we make in education and why. It’s celebrating the successes in schools and sharing the lessons in tough experiences. It’s each of us being people of integrity in every area of our lives so that we can be seen as providing benefit to the public good. Each of us can do that – yes, we can.

Maybe we don’t need a Barack Obama after all – maybe there’s enough of that spirit inside each of us that together we make it happen.