

The Portland Press Herald

EST.
1862

Maine Sunday Telegram June 2, 2013

Teach preparation for life, not just tests

By Joseph W. Gauld

If schools focused on each students' growth instead of test scores, we all would be amazed with the results.

America is slowly transforming into an aristocracy. The culprit is an obsolete educational system that fails to respect human development our democratic society absolutely requires.

America's reverence for the individual and equality created a "melting pot" nation, yet we continue to mindlessly educate this diverse population with a "one size fits all" system. Consider the goal of the No Child Left Behind Law, enacted to ensure that 100% of American children be academically proficient by year 2014—thus treating them like a herd of cattle.

Clearly this system:

- discriminates against Blacks and Hispanic students while favoring Asian students;
- favors the rich and discriminates against the poor—according to the research of eminent Harvard social scientist Robert Putnam, roughly one third of America's children are now growing up with limited opportunities, while feeling "pessimistic and detached;"
- favors girls over boys—only about 40% of college students today are males; and
- feeds the worst instincts in our kids—consider the cheating, cliques, bullying and school shootings.

This system puts the cart before the horse. By focusing on test scores and how our students compare with those of other nations, the primary concern is not our children, but a particular and questionable construct of America's future.

It says, prepare children to out-test peers

around the world and that preparation will take care of America's future. I say: properly prepare America's children for life, and they will properly take care of America's future.

If we were to truly put the growth needs of our children and their preparation for life first --granting that this more individualized approach would be a revolutionary challenge -- an amazing transformation would occur.

Kids are not stupid.

Once they realize teachers and administrators are seriously committed to their individual lives and growth needs, they, in turn, will get their trust and their motivation.

This also requires dealing with their parents and family—the primary teachers and primary classroom of kids. This comprehensive individual attention to each student can sometimes be very difficult work, but it is ultimately much more effective than much of the work presently being done in schools.

As one reaffirmation, consider that the top academic students in America by far are home-schooled students. Clearly, they are not motivated by competition, but more by a focus on their individual preparation for life. This reflects the school focus I'm proposing.

There is a lot going on with growing kids. If teachers can be effective in helping them deal with their lives—while learning to listen and show concern as they help kids realize some of their unique skills and abilities—they will take on a mentoring role with students, which kids desperately need – and often crave.

Right now, no matter what a child's unique potential, background, home situation or environment, our "one size fits all" system basically seeks to mold him/her into an academically proficient adult.

This system simply ignores the greatest skills and potentials of the vast majority of American youngsters, as well as the major growth issues they are experiencing. In essence, adults have constructed a system that fulfills their needs and what they believe are society's needs, not the needs of kids and the need to develop their vision for America's future.

The tragedy is, if we constructed a system that truly addressed the lives and growth of each student, academic growth would become a natural part of the process. As the great educator Horace Mann wisely said, given a year to teach spelling, he'd spend the first nine months on motivation.

As a teacher in 1951, I set out to make a difference in the lives of kids. In 1962, I realized both we teachers and students, alike, were stuck in a system that made this very difficult. So I founded the Hyde School in Bath, ME to find a better way to prepare kids for life.

Today there are seven Hyde private and public schools serving more than 2,500 students, with 97 percent matriculating to college. Teachers are trained to work with individual students and their parents in a preparation for life. Parents and family are an integral part of the program.

It's a more comprehensibly rigorous process, but it pulls students, parents and teachers together into a united team—and it works.

America is becoming a very unequal and divisive society.

Creating the educational system I propose will be a challenge, but one we are capable of meeting, and one that will fulfill America's exciting promise.

Joseph W. Gauld of Bath is the founder of the Hyde Schools.