

Whom Should We Believe?

Education, and specifically K-12 public education, is increasingly the topic of conversation and debate in many arenas. Whether it is the presidential campaign mantra, the Governor's State of the State address, or just a friendly conversation among us common folk at the local coffee shop, the hands on the clock rarely move too far before the subject of educating today's youth enters the conversation. The economy and the war in Iraq may top the debate charts, but for many, education is not a too distant third.

I, for one, believe it is healthy for education to be such a frequent topic of discussion. After all, don't we learn by listening and sharing our ideas with others? Isn't our discussion and debate itself a form of education? What more impactful topic is there to discuss than the success or failure of our American educational system?

So during these discussions and debates whom should we believe? Should we believe the federal No Child Left Behind Act statistics that label far too many of our nation's schools as "failing schools"? Should we believe our state legislators when they proclaim that requiring all students to complete a more rigorous high school curriculum will set Michigan graduates apart from other states? Or does your local district actually have a more accurate evaluation of our educational system when we tout our rising MEAP scores as evidence of a job well done? My answer is - don't believe any of the above! That is, don't believe any source without actually doing your own homework. Especially if you are a parent with children in school, spend the time and energy to find out what type of educational experience your child is having.

By all means, listen to our national and state leaders, pay attention to how your district's students are performing on achievement tests, but don't forget to take a close look at the work your child is bringing home from school. Review the textbooks and other materials your child's teacher is using to help educate your son or daughter. Spend some time with your student doing homework, whether they need help or not. Talk to your child's teacher about your student's progress whenever you have an opportunity or feel a need to do so. And most importantly, talk to your kids. They will give you the "straight scoop" on what is going on at your school if you give them enough opportunities by consistently talking to them about what they are doing.

One of the difficulties in our approach to education in the United States is that we are attempting to serve too many masters! One example is the ongoing allegations that the United States education system is falling behind other industrialized countries in the areas of math and science. The criticism is that we are not developing enough scientists, engineers, etc. This appears to be a legitimate concern. A recently enacted solution in Michigan is to require all high school students to complete higher level mathematics and science courses. However, another "master" often criticizes our educational system for not providing relevant learning opportunities for students. Based on the relevance issue we have taken a backward approach to solving the math and science criticism. Instead of forcing all students to complete course work that may or may not be relevant to their future aspirations, why don't we offer encouragement in the form of increased college scholarships for those students who have proven their math and/or science aptitude, and who also see the relevance to their career path?

Test scores in reading comprehension and writing skills across the nation reveal that we should spend more time in language arts instruction. However, we certainly cannot reduce the time spent in physical education, art, music, etc. Certainly reading can be incorporated across the curriculum, but at some point something has got to give. Which master do we serve?

Our educational system has evolved into a structure that is expected to be all things to all people. It is not surprising in this context that successes and "failures to succeed" can be identified. The challenges are great. We have much work to do. Excellence in education must always be our goal. However, we must also realize that this educational ideal is a moving target that will never be fully achieved. While we continue to work toward "excellence" for our students, let's also work to better identify excellence in education in our communities.

Whom should we believe? As parents, students, educators, and community members we must believe in ourselves! We must work together to define what a quality educational experience looks like, and work diligently together to provide that experience every day for our students.

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