

FROM WHOM DO OUR KIDS LEARN?

One of the most gratifying experiences is to go into any school in this country and talk to kids. There are a vast array of talented people in the world practicing law, medicine, accounting, working in state and local government and doing many other things who have an enormous amount to share with the students of America.

Think about it from the perspective of the teacher. Class after class the teacher has the same material to cover, changing the focus and subject as the class year goes on. Even the most inspired and dedicated teacher may have trouble being exciting everyday and even the most energized student tends to drift and wander in our educational system. The situation is no better in elite private schools.

While politicians and religious leaders like to attribute many reasons for the lack of interest students show in society, part of the reason for a lack of commitment to citizenship is that all the rest of us have failed. Usually it is not the teachers or administration whom have failed and frequently is not even the students. More often than not, the rest of us go about our daily routine completely oblivious to what is going on in the schools of America.

We are captivated by exciting fights concerning creationism versus evolution, but that is really only an issue to agile newspaper reporters and to only a tiny minority of the school districts in this country. The daily routine in the schools is how to keep kids interested, occupied and educated in a society that surrounds young people with the immediate gratification like that which comes from instantly “IM-ing” one’s friends. The Internet has become a substitute for television where chat rooms, games and quick searches humor replace books, parental guidance and the challenges offered by dedicated teachers.

Many solutions have been offered to this problem. Religious people say we need prayer in the schools. Secular people say we need smaller classes and more tolerant attitudes. Most of us do not have a clue and run from one extreme to another in looking for blame.

One solution often ignored is to have parents involved in teaching. There is no reason why a core of parents could not be established to go in the classroom to work with kids on everything from reading, writing and arithmetic to civics and biology problems.

I came upon this rather non-shocking solution to our schools' educational problems many years ago when my oldest daughter brought home the curriculum for the gifted program. I was shocked by how little the program addressed about the current problems of the day. Kids are more concerned about whether the authorities can search their lockers than whether "comity dictates an acquiescence in or a repudiation of state's rights". How many adults could figure that one out?

In the years that followed I conducted moot court in classrooms occupied by two of my other children. The response of the children and the teachers to having real life situations played out in the classroom where the kids played the jurors, the lawyers and the judges was enthralling. The teachers relayed to me that never before did the kids having any appreciation about the role of the courts, the seriousness of criminal behavior or what it might really be like to become enmeshed in the legal system. More recently, I was given the opportunity to talk about federalism and the evolution of the modern constitution as it relates to modern disputes such as abortion, school searches, prayer in the schools and other issues that kids know adults are arguing about. I do not espouse particular points of view in the classroom but rather I try to remember the lesson of my father that school is a place to learn how to think. We want citizens who learn how to think and are not preprogrammed by the Internet or those who would manipulate their emotions for reasons antithetical to our hard won freedoms.

I am always amazed by how receptive our students are to hearing about how principals learned in school apply to the real world. The biology lesson taught in 10th grade is dealt with by the pathologist at the hospital everyday. The difficult math problem that seemed useless may be addressed by accountants on a regular basis. I have always had a seething irritation with the legal profession for not going into the classroom and talking to kids about the law and its significance in guaranteeing an orderly and free society. Not too many bar associations have cared to become engaged in the schools although that diffidence seems to be improving with each passing year.

So look at yourself in the mirror some morning, whether you have kids in school or not and ask yourself what you can offer to the educational system in our country. The teachers would love the break of having you in their classroom so long as you are not there to sell some particular political point of view. The kids will be amazed that real people work with the concepts that they are taught in school and more importantly you will be building a citizenry better able to cope with the problems of today.

The schools need and should be demanding our support in more than just financial ways. While we can talk, complain and moan about the worthless lazy loafers that we think most schools produce, there is also something we can do about it. For most hardworking people, time is difficult to come by, but when we think about all the time we waste in front of the boob tube or other marginally worthwhile activities perhaps as citizens we ought to be offering our time and attention the American classroom!

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