Editorial

Education: What’s It All About?

One of the greatest proponents of public education, Thomas Jefferson, believed that only an educated population could assure the survival of democracy. His Bill for the General Diffusion of Knowledge in 1778 attempted to establish an elementary grade of instruction in Virginia that would enable citizens to “understand their rights, to maintain them, and to exercise with intelligence their parts in self-government” (Jefferson, 1984). In a time when liberty, freedom, and democracy were a common concern, the purpose of education was to prepare individuals for civic duties.

The purpose of education has changed since the founding of our nation. The Cold War fueled the criticism toward public education. Americans did not want to be second to the Soviet Union, and the perceived blame was laid on public education. Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, education would be blamed for a multitude of problems, and blaming public education for the societal, economic, and security problems of the nation became almost a national pastime for politicians and business leaders (Graves, 2002; Schneider, & Houston, 1993). As a result, three major educational reforms have emerged over the last twenty-five years, A Nation at Risk, America 2000, and most recently, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

A major component of No Child Left Behind includes strong accountability and is based on the laudable goal that ALL children will be proficient in reading and math by 2014. Those who are honest know that no matter the efforts made by teachers or the pressures placed on them by external sources, some children will never be proficient in reading and math due to intellectual abilities, disabilities, language differences, or home environment. These, and far too many other variables in a child’s life are beyond the control of public education. If the No Child Left Behind accountability system were applied to other professions, eventually lawyers would have to win every case and doctors would have to cure every patient (Burroughs, 2007). The purpose of education has changed. Education is now about “investing” in human resources that can benefit industry and fuel the national economy. Accountability is not about the child; it is about economics.

For teachers, it is about the child. Teachers know when they go into the field they will make far less money than their professional counterparts. They also know that every child is different, with different strengths and needs. Each child is a snowflake, unique and different; not a uniformed part to be put together on an assembly line that makes each child identical. Teachers look at the whole child. They are not only concerned with the academic performance of their students, but the emotional, and social well-being of all children, which are factors that cannot be tested. Despite the education bashing, most teachers are good teachers who try to do their best to educate the ethnically and linguistically diverse children of their classrooms. They care about their students. They believe in their students. Their goal is to develop a well-rounded individual who will contribute positively to a society, and ensure the survival of a democratic nation.

It is time the nation let those who know about education superintend education: teachers. Doctors oversee their profession through the American Medical Association, and lawyers oversee their profession through the American Bar Association. Professional teachers need to oversee education through an American Education Association. They need to set educational standards, certification requirements, and a code of professional ethics. Teachers needs to be viewed in the same league as doctors and lawyers, and teaching needs to stand as a profession that draws the best and brightest into the classrooms. Only then can we have high quality teachers.
Teachers are the ones in the field. They are the ones who know what it takes to educate a child and they are honest about education. They know from experience and from their hearts what many politicians and business leaders only say in their rhetoric. The bottom line is not about economics; it is about the child.

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References