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Editor's Notebook: Some Lessons of Education Reform

Michael J. Kryzanek

Bridgewater State College, mkryzanek@bridgew.edu

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EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

Some Lessons of Education Reform

It is now some ten years since the Carnegie Foundation issued its scathing attack on American education in its study *A Nation at Risk*. Since the release of the study, this country has been engaged in a seemingly endless debate over how to improve the education of our children. There have been national commissions setting targets of excellence, state reform movements restructuring curriculum and funding formulas, and local school districts trying desperately to deal with the wave of new ideas and new demands that rise with great regularity from superintendents, principals, parents, politicians and teachers. Almost everyone, it appears, has a solution to the problem and is intent on voicing that solution.

Having three children in public schools and a wife who is a public school teacher, I have been forced over the last ten years to pay more attention to the state of education and the proposals for reform. Although I don't want to be one of those knee-jerk education experts who simplify the problem and provide general solutions to complex issues, there are some observations about the state of learning in this country and this state that I feel need to be presented. Unfortunately, most of my reforms are not easily codified in law or implemented as a bureaucratic regulation. Rather, they are reforms that strike at the heart of our contemporary value systems and behavior patterns, and as a result may be the most difficult changes to bring about. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that when we talk about education reform, we are really talking not only about what happens in the classroom but also what happens at home, in the community and in our hearts and minds. With this in mind, here is my ten point proposal for education reform:

- 1 Money does make a difference. Those who claim that school systems can get by with less if they work harder and revamp the way they teach are simply wrong. Money buys more and better teachers, more and better equipment and more and better facilities.
- 2 What happens at home is a critical ingredient in a successful education. The argument that parents must be involved in their child's education is valid, but involvement may be most helpful as a means of encouraging the completion of homework, stimulating the learning process and supporting the professional objectives of the teachers.
- 3 The best education reform is to give teachers what they need to do the job, free them from the grind of all the administrative minutiae and demand only one thing - that they teach children.
- 4 Respect for teachers is a basic building block of a successful education. When students, parents and citizens recognize that teachers are vitally important to a thriving community, schools will begin to prosper.
- 5 Teachers must take that extra step to enhance their skills, try new techniques and develop a classroom environment that stimulates thinking and exploring. Every teacher need not be a candidate for the Teacher of the Year Award, but the classroom should be a place that students want to come to in the morning.
- 6 Students and parents must be in control of television, not vice versa. Television, used properly as a learning device and a means of entertainment, is a positive development in a society, but it has become a tool of passivity and diversion from the essential requirements of a solid education.
- 7 Work outside of school may be a necessity in some cases, but it should be only a last resort. Hours committed to schoolwork have been replaced by hours committed to earning power and consumerism. For reform to succeed, education must be valued above a new car or new clothes.
- 8 We should stop comparing our education results with those of the Japanese. Few people in this country would like to live like the Japanese. We can compete with the Japanese without losing our own identity and culture.
- 9 Going to school must be viewed as akin to having a job. Students should be reminded on a regular basis that what happens at school is serious business, essential not only for their well-being but for the advancement of their community.
- 10 The history of any institutional change points clearly to the fact that overarching "mega-reform" usually fails and that changing institutions on the local level - school by school - is the key.

Much has changed for the better in our schools over the last ten years, but as my list suggests, the drive for successful education reform depends to a large degree on how we as a people redefine what is important and how we intend to make our cities and towns truly livable communities.