

Back to School

As a retired school administrator, back-to-school is still my favorite time of the year.

Back-to-school also coincides with the release of data which ranks how all school districts fared under the Board of Regents accountability program and the targets set by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Every time new data is released, there are always those who proclaim that “quality public education” is an oxymoron.

Critics of public education like to assert that academic achievement is stagnant, American students cannot compete internationally, or that vouchers are the silver bullet. Those who wax nostalgic about “the good old days of education” forget that the system was an exclusionary one that discriminated against children of color or those with disabilities. When someone laments the fact that the nation’s public education system is not what it used to be, I agree with them and say, “You’re right! And that’s a *good* thing!”

Our local school districts are responsible for educating every child who enters through the front doors—regardless of his educational, physical or mental need. This provides children the amazing opportunity to receive a free K-12 education in a diverse environment.

Yet public schools face the critical challenge of closing the achievement gap among students. NCLB holds schools accountable for eliminating the disparity in academic achievement between poor/minority students and those from higher social classes. Many Americans blame failing schools for this gap. As a former public school superintendent, raising academic achievement levels for every child in our school system was always my No. 1 priority. But just as two adults respond differently in the same situation, every child is unique and enters school at a different achievement level. These differences make for some very challenging opportunities.

Research shows that social class differences in health care quality and access, nutrition, childrearing styles, housing quality and stability, parental occupation and aspirations, and even exposure to environmental toxins play a significant role in how well children learn and ultimately succeed. School personnel need to look at how each individual child is learning and also take into account non-school factors that affect how he succeeds academically. We cannot achieve the goal of universal success for all children without focusing on the individual needs of each child.

Schools must continue to improve their organization, teaching and learning practices and leadership strategies to meet the needs of each student who comes through its doors. Schools must offer more personalized, individually tailored approaches that capitalize on what children already know, what their learning styles offer, what new brain research concludes about teaching and learning and what technology offers. One huge challenge is to do this at a cost local taxpayers are willing and able to afford.

Finally, we all must stay focused on the real goals of education: giving students the tools they need to succeed in life and preparing them to be good citizens—in our democracy and the world.

In some places these real goals get lost in the struggle for greater employee salaries and benefits and retaining the “status quo.”

We have an exceptional generation of children in our public schools today, and they should expect nothing short of excellence from everyone involved in their education.