

The News Reporter

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Whiteville, North Carolina

People, Places and Things

Schools leaving far too many children behind

The next 18 months should prove interesting for local education. For starters, there's the new early college high school at Southeastern Community College. A good start.

There's the new academy approach to high school education at Whiteville High School. That has a lot of potential if the teachers will warm up to it.

The Columbus Christian Academy has broken ground on a new high school facility and the Philadelphia School has built a huge, state-of-the-art private school in South Whiteville.

And then there's the possibility of a charter school, which will shake things up quite a bit and force some re-invention of our local public schools.

What do I say to these new developments? How about "Welcome. Where have you been?"

Today, I'm full of vinegar from years of frustration watching legislators and educators just not "get it."

Most of my stories have dealt with the success of students and teachers. My unique perspective is derived from my experiences as a former teacher, a parent and an observer.

My report card for the schools

Today, I get to issue a report card for education and it earns a "D."

Frankly, as an institution, schools are missing the boat. Kids

have changed. Times have changed. The schools haven't.

We're trying to fit students into a Norman Rockwell painting – some remnant of an education model created 100 years ago.

It's not working.

"Well, my kid did just fine in public school, thank you," says Mrs. J. Philmore Upper crust. "That's great, Mrs. Upper crust," I reply.

But if 25 to 33 percent of the children in America, North Carolina or Columbus County don't earn a high school degree, then the system isn't working.

"Well, it's the parents," says businessman Wentworth Woodpoppy. "They're not pushing their kids. Too many parents don't value education."

"That's true," I reply.

And I've harped on that for six years now. But guess what? We can't wait for parents to come around. Those parents who refuse to step in and actually raise their kids must be written off as lost causes. They're like uncollectible bad debts.

A new model

Our schools have to work around them and create a new education model that doesn't depend on even partial parental involvement.

Not only is there a huge chunk of kids quitting school, but there are kids who actually do earn a diploma, yet can't function in a job environment. They can't think for themselves. We've done that to them.

By FULLER ROYAL

A recent study of a big box home supply store revealed that many of its employees had no idea what the customers were talking about and depended on the customers to know exactly what they needed. The chain had just "filled slots with warm bodies." No child left behind – just the customers.

Many high school diploma holders are ill-prepared for college and must take remedial reading or math courses just to keep up in their classes.

Every year, the number of kids returning home from their freshman year at college to enroll at SCC grows. Many of the kids who stay in school are coasting along, unconnected, barely eking out a passing grade. Nothing excites them at school and they turn elsewhere – television, the Internet, "goth" friends, alcohol, sex, drugs or gangs.

When does it fall apart?

How did it get this bad? And is it really this bad? We see what we want to see until the problem rears up and bites us. So when do things begin to fall apart?

The most critical years are kindergarten through second, the grades that form the foundation for everything that's to come. Kids' minds are uncorrupted and ready to be molded. They are open and

fresh and enthusiastic. At this level, the very best principals and teachers are needed. There is no second chance with this age group. The level of personal and professional dedication must be the highest of all.

And you can't make those classes small enough. Detractors maintain that smaller class sizes don't make a difference. Sure, class size isn't a factor when all of the students are of like abilities.

Class size is important in grades kindergarten through second because classes are heterogeneously mixed, meaning that the students in a class come with different ability levels. The positive results from such a setup in the early grades can offer a mixed bag by the time students enter grades three through eight.

Heterogeneous grouping in the middle grades creates incredible workloads for teachers. They must plan five or six variations of the same lesson in order to accommodate every level of student.

The kids with lesser abilities can't keep up and the kids with higher abilities are held back and bored. The kids in the middle, well, they're stuck in the middle with little attention paid to them. Students on the bottom rung will likely stay there with no chance to be "on top."

Students who miss being considered academically and intellectually gifted (a homogeneous group for the most part) may find themselves in the same classroom as students with profound difficulty in reading or behaving. There has to be a better way.

Why do kids dislike school?

At some point between grades two and nine, the enthusiasm a child has for learning is snuffed out. What makes a child's love of school disappear?

Bad teachers for starters. There are some bad ones out there. Most of the educators I have talked to believe there is a higher percentage of bad teachers than 30 years ago.

Some of these teachers have axes to grind and scores to settle, real or imagined. They delight in belittling youngsters and ruining each day for them. An ill-placed comment can crush a child.

Bad teachers assign work well above and beyond a child's grasp, rushing through explanations to stay on a timetable and assigning 50 math problems for homework when 10 will do. And these same teachers think that no one else assigns homework, but when all is totaled, there's three or more hours of work to do. That's too much for a fourth or fifth-grader.

The bad teachers depend entirely too much on computers and pre-printed handouts that rarely fit the lesson at hand. They don't check homework or return it in a timely fashion.

Bad teachers will boil an entire chapter down to a lousy five questions on a test so that you either make an "A," a "C" or an "F." Miss one question and you score an 80. Miss two and you flunk.

Administrative problems

What else destroys a child's love of school?

How about inept principals who never leave their offices and who are scared to talk to parents? Principals who stay buried behind a computer screen all day or who don't know their curriculum. Principals who don't know the names of all of their students. Principals who are scared of their jobs and pass along their own fears and pressures onto the backs of their teachers.

I know principals who will not hire anyone they think might be smarter than they.

Since my own freshman year in high school, I've seen principals and administrators crush incredibly wonderful, highly gifted teachers – teachers who think outside of the box and who actually had their students excited about learning. I watched 10 years ago as a principal and a guidance counselor smeared a teacher and forced him out of the profession he so loved.

I know of another teacher who was run off from a local high school, who now has created a first-of-a-kind community college program in the state. Other community colleges want in on that program now.

There are many hard working teachers in our schools – unsung heroes who make a difference every day. And some of these teachers are miracle workers. Think of the loss to our children and to this nation that 50-54 percent of the Americans who are certified teachers will never again set foot in a classroom.

What else destroys a child's love of school?

Administrations and school boards that goosetstep with Raleigh and Washington will do the same for anyone else holding out a bag of money on the end of a stick. "We've got to have that money. We need more money."

The only thing that justifies more money right now is increased teacher pay so we can grab the best and brightest our colleges have to offer.

And I think it's time to start paying good math and science teachers more, before India and China eat our lunch. Those teachers are hard to find and harder to keep. If the other teachers don't like that then they can go back and get their own math or science degrees.

EOG & NCLB

But the ultimate killer of children's love of school is the North Carolina ABC's of Education and No Child Left Behind and the accompanying barrage of testing.

Schools are obsessed with End of Grade and NCLB. Principals think about little else. Teachers are obsessed with it. Signs throughout schools hang like harbingers of death reminding students every waking hour of the TEST TO COME.

I know of one young fellow, a former classmate of my daughters', who was left behind after EOG. He was a sweet kid, big for his age. His grandparents were raising him. He scored a dreaded "2" on his end-of-grade tests in reading and math, branding him non-proficient. He had passed his classes, but despite the pleas of his grandparents and the attempted intervention by other educators, the system refused to promote him. Where was his chance at summer school? It was gone because there weren't enough students to warrant such a program.

The school system couldn't hire a teacher for one month or less to work with that youngster one-on-one and bring him up to speed. I guess he should have played a sport.

By the time he did make it to sixth grade, his outlook on education was destroyed. The happiness he enjoyed in school disappeared. He is forever lost to his age-appropriate friends. This young fellow was certainly left behind.

Is anyone foolish or stupid enough to think that NCLB is helping? Not with one-third to one-fourth of our students failing high school. Not with students ill-prepared for college or life after high school with diploma in hand.

All we are doing is teaching kids to take a multiple-choice test. Our kids are no longer receiving a broad-based education. We ARE teaching the test. The test is what it's all about.

Some solutions

"So Mr. Blabbermouth," you say. "What can we do?"

For starters, when students score below proficient in the third, fourth and fifth grades, they should be in a school within a school, where every lesson is geared around reading and math with the emphasis totally on those two subjects. The best reading and math teachers need to be there and the class size needs to be small.

If a child is going to be held back, then restore summer school for the kids who need it. In the past, we spent tens of thousands of dollars on high school slackers who goofed off all year long and had to grab a few "easy courses" in the summer to catch up. Now, when we have children who really need the help, it's not there.

We need to group students according to their ability levels so that teachers can focus on a specific group. Why should the AIG students be the only ones enjoying that concept?

Can AR

Accelerated Reading needs to stop after kids begin reading. It has become a crutch in many classrooms and libraries rarely have enough books, especially at the middle school level.

Speaking of libraries, they might as well not exist. Their books are ancient and lacking. School libraries

are a disgrace. The state, as well as the local systems, should be ashamed of how little they have done. Low-performing schools have been given additional Title I funds to help bring test scores up. Instead of spending all of the money on computers and software, the schools should be investing in a few thousand books to put in each library.

Fix the high schools

The biggest changes need to be at the high school level.

We need to redesign the schools so that students who have no aptitude for or interest in college can earn a "craftsman" diploma by age 16 and immediately enter SCC. By age 17 or 18, they will have a two-year degree and can enter the workforce.

"Well, students need to be well-rounded, able to grasp the concepts of history and civics and art and geography and science," says teacher Hilda Higgenbotham. In Fantasyland perhaps.

The fact is that the only kids interested in those longstanding concepts are the ones shooting for college. For far too long, we have centered our high schools on the college-bound youngsters. "Aaah, our babies heading off into the world."

But that's the problem. They're heading off and we still have one-third of their classmates here in Columbus County – going nowhere and doing nothing.

When the less-than-proficient kids get to high school, they don't need college

prep or honors courses and they don't need four years of education.

They need to be in a track called Survival 101 where they can learn skills for a job, how to hold onto that job and what to do with the money from that job.

This isn't rocket science, folks. We don't need to plant lofty goals and unrealistic ideas in students' heads because no one is going to hold their hands after high school.

Plumbers, electricians, mechanics, brick masons, carpenters, beauticians, cosmetologists, nurses, police officers, deputies and EMTS all make good livings. We need to put the deserved dignity and respect back into all of those jobs and more.

Our schools need to look at each student, one-on-one, and design a plan for him or her. Meet with the students and parents on their home turf and map out their two or four-year degrees.

School competition

If the schools don't change, then we will soon see vouchers and competition from private entities and more charter schools. I might even start my own specialized school.

And speaking of the proposed local charter school, I have to say that, after a lot of thought, I welcome it. It will shake things up. I can't begrudge any parents for wanting their children in a school free of discipline problems and heavy-handed rules and programs.

It will make educators think outside the box and try to compete. We need competition in education. That's the only thing that will make it better.

If a child wins the lottery to attend a charter school any parent worth his or her salt will find a way for that child to get there.

If the public schools want success then create it. Make it happen. Require minimum grade point averages for all extra-curricular activities.

"Yeah, I scored the winning goal. Will that be paper or plastic?"

Provide real after-school and in-school tutoring. Involve the community more (and that's more than asking for yearbook ads and trophy donations).

Businesses should be proactive and only hire students who are still in school and who are making acceptable grades.

Hire the best for every job in a school.

There are too many hangers-on in the schools, especially at the high school level. The number of mediocre staff members with the high schools is alarming. Some are kept around because they can coach or be an assistant. That's a lame excuse for having any personnel on board.

Now or never

Until we redesign our schools in radical ways, our country is doomed. The chasm between the haves and the have-nots will grow. Columbus County will have four prisons instead of two.

This affects all of us, those with or without children. Show up at the next school board meeting. Raise a little sand. Ask questions. Volunteer. Help Communities in Schools of Whiteville. Visit the schools. Share your talents and expertise. Do something.

Or sit back and wait ... until it's too late