

Apple Core

April 2010

“Give me *Autonomy*, or Give me Death!”

-- Patrick Henry would probably understand the spirit of the statement and forgive my literary *Liberties*.

One of the first major milestones towards coming of age for adolescent youth in America occurs when the driver's license is finally issued. This license has meaning for every young adult beyond merely being able to drive a car. The driver's license symbolizes autonomy from the oppressive authority of parents. I believe this feeling of freedom is fairly universal for American youth. As I think back to my sixteenth birthday, I find it amazingly irresponsible for the state of Wyoming to have issued me such a license. I also believe my parents should have been court-ordered to undergo a fitness for parenting psychiatric evaluation for allowing me to drive the car out of their field of vision. I was so far from being responsible it is scary to think about. The really scary thing is that I would consider myself a fairly typical adolescent male. My cognitive and moral judgment skills were at a developmental level such that I believed I could justify all the poor decisions I made while driving. I felt justified in breaking the speed limit because my friends and I were in a hurry to the mall for no apparent emergency. I felt justified in driving across Ms. Henderson's corner lot because the road was torn up and it would inconvenience me to have turned around. I felt justified in driving through the mall parking lot with my best friend, Jim, standing on the roof of my 1980 Dodge Omni because there were cute girls watching and cheering us on. I felt justified in showing up at 2 a.m., when curfew was 10 p.m. because I was at the City Park talking about really important life issues with a friend (weren't all our life issues at sixteen REALLY important?).

Thankfully, my autonomy was given within certain specific parameters. The state laws, municipal regulations and parental dictates were all supposed to guide me in a responsible direction. When my parents intervened in my behavior, I was furious and felt like they were selfish dictators of the worst kind. Today I understand that every decision they had to make was made with MY best interest in mind. We had many “family meetings” for my benefit those early driving years to discuss, as a family, what would be the best way for me to survive my decisions. My father was not the kind of man who really wanted to collaborate on my fate, but my mother's influence, thankfully, won out. Mostly, my parents' directives and not-so-subtle influences were what eventually molded me into the independent, responsible, American citizen I am today.

I tell this story because I was reminded of it by a teacher who recently told me that the “District Office” was taking away his autonomy in the classroom. As he was describing his feelings of frustration and anger, I could relate because I have felt those feelings—most clearly when I was sixteen and was told that I could no longer drive the car that I bought with my own money! Many of the elements of this story do not parallel the issues of a school system, and I do not tell the story to downplay this teacher's frustration. Yet, I believe the emotions surrounding a perceived revocation of autonomy are much the

same as those felt when people perceive that their freedom has been trampled upon. I believe that we are most strongly motivated and happiest when we feel a sense of autonomy.

I also, fundamentally, do not believe that there is a conflict between autonomy and collaboration in the education profession. As I explained to the frustrated teacher, in every profession people must have autonomy in doing their job, but that autonomy does not preclude the necessity of a common culture and common procedures for “how we do business around here”. Autonomy cannot be allowed to become counterproductive to the overall goal of increasing EVERY student’s learning. Through our collaboration we need to determine common timelines and common assessments in order for us to establish, across the district, baseline data for student continuous progress. We are establishing common Walk-Away Skills/Power Standards based upon the Utah State Common Core through our vertical alignment teams. These decisions provide the framework and parameters that we all need to work within in order to accomplish our goal of ensuring that every student’s learning increases.

The argument that the frustrated teacher makes for his autonomy is an argument for systematic isolationism—where every teacher teaches whatever he or she wants, in whatever order he or she chooses, without any accountability to others. There is not a shred of evidence that shows students learn more when teachers work in isolation, yet because some teachers have survived and taught their entire careers in isolation, anything that challenges that familiar structure poses a challenge to their perception of what they believe is true and right. Yes, there are parameters we all must work within in order to avoid chaos, but those parameters are not robbing us of our ability to creatively teach. We still must find creative ways to engage our students in the classroom. We have the autonomy to find engaging ways to ensure our students learn the curriculum.

To collaborate with a team of other like-minded professionals is not synonymous with Communism—which this frustrated teacher freely connected several times during our discussion. To the contrary, working together as an effective team requires the most democratic processes I can imagine—everyone has a voice and brings their individual talents together to better achieve a common goal. That is what I have always believed American culture reveres—the Great American Past-time (I’m talking baseball here—not watching television) is driven by this philosophy.

There is no desire to have a workforce of automaton robots marching through the classrooms of our schools. Rather, I hope to foster a culture of collaborative teams of teachers working together to find the best ways to increase the learning of every one of our students. Collaboration is critical in our attempts to answer the four critical questions: What do we want students to know and be able to do? How do we know when they know it? What do we do when they don’t get it? What do we do when they do get it? Collaborative teams must clarify the standards, establish their walk-aways, develop common formative assessments, and participate in the analysis of student work. These collaborative endeavors have clearly shown to be highly effective strategies for improving student learning— isolationism has not.