

Apple Core

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A few weeks ago the United States lost a soldier, Vernal lost a hero, friends and family lost an incredible role model, and most devastatingly, a mother and father had to bury their son. The war in Afghanistan has taken many young men and women who have sacrificed their lives fighting for our freedoms. I am truly thankful that there are courageous young people who are risking their lives so that we can enjoy the freedoms of Democracy. I am also extremely thankful that I live a community like Vernal. The outpouring of support for Sergeant Daniel Gurr and his family filled me with pride. We truly live in an outstanding place and I'm thankful to be able to raise my children here.

Of the many freedoms that Sergeant Gurr was fighting for, one is the freedom for every child to receive a free and appropriate education. The public education system in the United States has taken many hits in the media over the past decade. Politicians stand on the pillars of education touting the "failure of our public education system" as a way to get elected. Ironically, most of those same politicians are successful graduates of the same public education system they say is a failure. The United States is very unique in its desire to educate all of its masses. In public education we don't discriminate on the basis of race/ethnicity, color, national origin, sex, disability, veteran status, age, home language, social economic status, or intellect as to who may receive an education. That is the underlying beauty of our nation—we believe that an educated populace makes a better democracy. Our public education system has helped to mold our system of democracy and should be celebrated around the world.

Is public education perfect? Of course it's not. There are obviously flaws that need to be addressed. Most profound in the flaws is the status quo system that hasn't changed significantly in over a hundred years. The traditional system of education, one where the teacher can work in isolation, lecturing to a largely homogenous classroom of mostly middle class children, is not an effective system in today's world. However, I don't believe that dismantling the entire public education system is the answer. Nor do I believe that vouchers, charter schools, or on-line school systems offer solutions to the problems of public education. I think the fundamental question that we must grapple with in public education is this: Is the purpose of public education a place where we send our children to "ensure" that they learn, or is it merely a place we send our children so they may have the "opportunity" to learn?

Those who believe that public education is merely here to offer an opportunity for children to learn are of the school of thought that there are children who because of their parents, their work ethic, or their intellect, will not or cannot achieve at high levels. I hear a number of arguments that we are teaching children to be irresponsible by accepting late work or not allowing them to choose to fail. It is absurd to think that a child will learn to be responsible by allowing them to act irresponsibly. Rather, to learn responsibility, we should require and insist that they complete the assignment—just like any responsible adult in the "real-world workforce". The consequences for allowing children to choose to fail in academics are like the consequences of allowing a child to jump off a cliff, drive a car recklessly, or allowing them to choose to do drugs. We would never stand to the side and say, "You shouldn't do that, but it's your choice." Academic failure has a profoundly negative impact on a child's life and future.

Those with this philosophy of education will never work to change public education because the status quo has worked for them.

I, however, argue that public education is a place where we send our children to ensure that they ALL learn at high levels. If the license we have earned in order to be considered professional educators is worth more than the paper it is printed on, then we need to take that responsibility with the reverence and significance that it carries. We are professionals and we have the power to change peoples' lives. If a doctor were to stand by and allow his patient to die because his patient didn't follow through with his instructions the first time, the doctor would most likely have his license pulled and be sued for malpractice. If an attorney failed to defend the interests of her client with integrity and with every available tool in her "lawyer toolbox", she would be disbarred and possibly sued. In both of these instances the professional would be considered negligent in his/her efforts to fulfill the expertise they were licensed to practice. I don't think any jury would agree with excuses from the doctor about his patient not taking the antibiotics that were prescribed, or that they weren't trying hard enough to get well. If the doctor could not show that he made and documented every intervention available to the best of his knowledge in order to try to help a patient, then he certainly could be held responsible for malpractice. Why is it okay for some educators to believe that we don't hold that same level of responsibility to our patients--our students? If we believe that all students can learn at high levels, then we can change our system from one of isolation and low accountability to one of collaboration and intense accountability. We are seeing evidence that collaboration on student learning is effective and efficient. This positive change in public education has the power to positively influence the political atmosphere of public education.

I absolutely believe that all students can achieve at high levels. I also believe that this country is unique and wonderful in its pursuit of an educated populous. The public education system of the United States is one that absolutely should be celebrated. Our soldiers are at this moment fighting to protect our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I will always believe that a free and appropriate education for every child in our nation is the keystone to quality life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness for all of our citizens. I thank every soldier for standing up and fighting for those rights.