

# Feeding the Wolf

"The legs feed the wolf". In today's world of school reform, that saying is more valid than ever. Books, commentaries, and articles are published almost daily about how the world is "flattening", how global competition is accelerating, and how public education is failing.

In this context children need the educational "legs" to survive and thrive successfully facing this challenging future to them individually and to our society and nation collectively. Just force-feeding students the rote "kibbles and bits" of drill and tests is insufficient. The major issue boils down to this: are we well-schooling children or well-educating them? There is a difference.

Certainly, children need to learn how to read, write, and compute well. But education is more than literacy, which is the educational aspiration of third world countries, not a goal of a nation that prides itself on leadership, creativity, and innovation. Schools should be safe, nurturing sanctuaries where children learn and explore new and challenging ventures. They should not be competitive mills.

Today's schools are becoming pressure-packed places strictly focused on standardized tests. The idea seems to be that only what is testable and measurable is important. Educational goals essential for the future can be missed because of this emphasis on metrics -- test scores, rank in class, grade point averages. While appropriate skill tests are helpful to teachers in making sound instructional decisions, they can also limit the scope and depth of a child's education.

Narrowly focusing on measurable skills alone will not fully educate our children. Our challenge is to develop and strengthen children's academic, creative, and affective educational "legs" to ensure their future individual and collective success. Several things are essential.

First, mastering skills and concepts in reading, writing, speaking, researching, mathematics, reasoning, problem-solving, questioning, analyzing, synthesizing, and thinking provide a necessary foundation for children to become well educated. These essential skills enable children to learn the significant concepts that under gird communication, mathematics, science, social science, and the arts. Concepts and ideas in these academic areas, however, are not discrete. Children need to see connections between and across content, concepts, and theories and be able to think critically and imaginatively about them.

Second, fostering creative thinking and cultivating children's inspired spirit are essential. Schools need to fan the creative sparks in children because we need innovative citizens. Historically, the standing of the United States, way of life, and economy rests on innovation and the creativity of individuals. To prosper in the global economy and to flourish as a culture, children's innate imaginative heart must be nurtured and developed. The arts and other programs that encourage imaginative thinking have for too long been stepchildren in our curriculum. Keeping the American dream alive depends on our children's ingenuity and originality.

Look at China. *The New York Times Magazine*, April 1, 2007, reported "Even as Americans seek to emulate China's test-centered and math focused pedagogy, Chinese educators are trying to promote a Western emphasis on critical thinking at home." Creative problem solving is what an intricate and changing world demands, not simply rote test-taking and basic literacy skills.

Third, children also require the attitudes and values to energize the "legs" to persevere in the face of obstacles and complex problems. Trying and failing is a part of learning providing children learn from those failures and not lose their natural curiosity. Scientists experiment and fail regularly as they learn and generate new knowledge and find solutions.

In public schools, however, failure is stigmatized and competition and winning are extolled. The failure stigma can deter children, by disregarding the impact of attitude, resolve, hard work, and commitment on achievement and success.

In addition, educated people have the ethical foundation to do the "right" thing. Changing times require understanding the ethics and values that underpin our democracy and civil society. Strong ethical and moral frameworks are essential for wise decision-making, otherwise the common good dissolves, corruption blossoms, and tyranny takes root. Unfortunately in schools today, we seldom talk about wisdom.

Wise people see connections beyond fragmented knowledge and understand the interconnectedness of economics, politics, ethics, science, and art. Well-educated people meet their obligations and act beyond self-interest to do what is right for the common good. They stand up for principles that enhance the development of a highly cultured society exemplified by "goodness".

Society needs well-educated people who act on principle, who can think linearly and divergently, who can use reason and apply sound intuition, who can define problems and issues clearly, and who can make wise decisions. All of this goes far beyond basic literacy.

In our interdependent and changing universe, we need to develop different approaches to thinking. While linear, Newtonian thinking has merit, so does holistic approaches to examining problems and seeing the integral dynamics of the "big picture". The universe is not a machine and fragmented thinking will not solve the intricate problems that face us.

Our schools must educate children to become highly honorable, adaptive, and curious people, who can fulfill their creative promise and meet their obligations as citizens. They must contribute to others, and celebrate the wonder of life.

Being well-educated is fundamental to approaching life optimistically and joyfully. From a personal perspective, children deserve to live completely with their head, heart, and spirit, maintaining a sense of wonder and energetically seeking the fulfillment of their potential. The promise of children's lives cannot be reduced to a set of test scores.

Creativity and innovation are the markers for the greatness of our country. Imagination, joy, ingenuity, wonder, and idealism must not be wrung from our schools by our obsession with short-term metrics. Our future as a nation depends on more than basic skills. Just being well-schooled is not enough.

The fruits of well-educated people are seen in their character, behavior, and contributions over time. Our nation cannot afford to squander talent and limit originality – our children deserve better. As Einstein said, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

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*George A. Goens is the author of **Soft Leadership for Hard Times**, a book about principled leadership and education.*

George A. Goens, Ph.D.  
71 Litwin Road  
Litchfield, CT 06759

Tel: 860.567.1974  
[gagoens@snet.net](mailto:gagoens@snet.net)