

Education vs. Schooling

By George A. Goens

The debate about public education misses a critical issue. Are students attending the public schools becoming well-educated or well-schooled? There's a difference; one that is seminal in determining almost every other discussion about public education.

The current emphasis on test scores to determine whether a child is getting a good education has narrowed the definition of education. The assumption is: if children do well on standardized tests, then they are well educated. But that assumption may be false. Here's why.

There's more than a critical difference between being well-educated or well-schooled. Take a look at Enron, where individuals with degrees from highfalutin colleges and universities cooked the books, were deceitful in reporting their metrics, and bilked employees out of their retirement funds. All of them passed standardized tests and demonstrated acumen in reading, math, business and finance. The question is: were they well-educated?

Or take politics. There are many examples of administrations packed with the "best and brightest" individuals with law degrees and doctorates who have demonstrated their knowledge of facts, concepts, and theories. The Nixon, Reagan, Clinton and both Bush administrations have had smart people make foolish decisions and, even, unethical and illegal ones. Members of Congress, the vast majority with college degrees, succumb to the allure of financial influence and pressure from lobbyists and political insiders. The question is: were they well-educated or well schooled?

Certainly in these examples, individuals are working in complex and high-pressure situations that call for more than literacy and simply mastery of facts or concepts. But all of us live in an increasingly complex world that requires more than "smarts" or "shrewdness". What is necessary is wisdom, a term seldom heard today in discussions about education.

Today's schools are pressure-packed places narrowly focused on producing results, specifically in reading and math, on standardized tests. The emphasis on test scores, rank in class, grade point averages, or other numeric indicators has caused teachers to prepare students for these tests. Sometimes an inordinate amount of time is spent on teaching test format familiarity, test-taking skills, and drill. Other subjects – history, science, and the fine arts – are being squeezed out or curtailed as a result.

Appropriate skill tests are helpful if they assist teachers to make sound instructional decisions for individual students. But one-time, high-stakes test events can compromise time for creative and imaginative lessons and projects that promote reasoning, problem-solving, questioning, analyzing, synthesizing, and understanding.

Consequently, we are teaching students the “game of schooling” as if it were a short-term competitive exercise – do what you must to get the number you need. Hence, many high school students are concerned with passing, not learning; short-term grades, not in-depth understanding; and building résumés, not following their bliss.

We are teaching that competition is the only approach to reaching excellence, as if passion, commitment, and hard work over the long-term do not matter. And, we emphasize that human worth can be quantified by a set of numbers, discounting the intangibles of “heart”, perseverance, and long-term commitment. The recent admission of scoring errors by test companies on high stakes tests should send a shudder through us all.

The idea also seems to be that what is not metrically measurable is not important. This is a cousin to the idea that if you cannot see it, don't believe it. But that flies in the face of the very concept and principles under which this country was founded.

The great philosophical questions of life – truth, beauty, justice, liberty, equality, and goodness – cannot be assessed through a computer scored test. Searching for these

answers to these issues is at the very core of our society and the essence of becoming well-educated.

These great ideas should be studied in school and understood by our children if they are to live a life of depth, understanding, and principle. This requires a broad education in the academics, fine arts, and culture. An education is more than simply getting a job or meeting a career goal. There is a difference, too, between education and training. Chasing the brass ring without a strong foundation in principle can be corrupting. One only has to look at the business world or professional sports to see obvious examples.

All of our children, rich and poor, should be educated so they can contribute to the common good, be responsible and active citizens, and adapt to changing times. Being able to think critically, to pose questions as well the seek answers, and to understand and develop an ethical and moral framework are a part of being well-educated. Educated people have strong academic skills, but they also have the values and principles that form the foundation for their life's decisions.

Unfortunately, some of our schools are becoming too narrowly focused and our competitive society has pushed some of our high school students to say "I have to cheat" to get ahead. Cleverness, cunning and cutting ethical corners are not standards of an educated person.

Well-educated people revere knowledge and apply values and principles to guide them as they seek a meaningful life of purpose. They try to make "wise" decisions premised on strong ethical and moral ideals and broad academic understanding.

Education is a lifelong process of continuous learning and examination. Being well-educated means having a sense of stewardship and a concern for the common good, not simply tending to self-interest and ego needs.

Parents frequently say they want their children to attend a "good" school. A good school is not one between excellent and poor. For children to grow, develop and prosper they need a place of "goodness"; a sanctuary for learning filled with respect for individuals, reverence for principles and ideas, encouragement of talent and dreams, and preparation for a life well-lived.

If we ask ourselves the fundamental difference between being well-schooled or well-educated, maybe we can turn our schools into sanctuaries for our children to become not only highly literate but also wise so they can fulfill themselves and pursue their happiness with a sense of stewardship.

Creativity, imagination, joy, ingenuity, wonder, and idealism must not be wrung from our schools. These intangibles are the foundation of the success of our country and are the basis for a well-educated and civil society.

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