

A Desensitized Culture: The Sexualization of Society

According to studies, children are exposed to an alarmingly high level and range of sexual activity through television content; this is determining the age at which children begin having sex. With the sexualization of our media culture on the rise with pornographic television series like *True Blood*, youth as young as eleven are being programmed to engage in sexual activity. Other shows like *Skins* and *Jersey Shore* portray teens as sexually experimental and obsessed; it depicts teens doing drugs and involved in risky sexual situations including threesomes and date rape. Other shows like *Fifteen and Pregnant*, *Pregnant at Sixteen*, and *Teen Mom* present young girls with a glorified image of pregnancy and motherhood. As a result, young girls across the country starving for affection are making pregnancy pacts with their friends. And what is the most frightening of all is that other series like *Toddlers & Tiaras* teach the lesson that ‘using your feminine wiles’ will get you anything you desire. Overall, according to research conducted by Melanie Roberts, a reporter for Lariat News, “raunchy shows make Reality TV look bad;” she pens, “Reality television has become a guilty pleasure in our culture. It taps into an animalistic desire for sex, violence, and emotional investment in the lives of others” (*Jersey Shore and Other Raunchy Shows Make Reality TV Look Bad*, 2011). Quite a Recipe for Danger!

Let us examine this true crime. Last year, a group of eighth grade girls confided in me and a colleague that, “As we are changing classes, there is a group of eighth grade boys surrounding us in the hallway and forcing us to touch their penises so they will get hard. They even tried to follow one of us into the bathroom.” When my colleague and I reported the incident to school administrators and guidance counselors as bound to by law, we were told, “That’s not our problem; there is nothing we can do about it until something happens.” This travesty continued for a few weeks and the only thing it taught the boys was that they can get away with anything. Now, were it not for our current media culture, would the boys in our scenario really be learning these lessons? I say, “NO!”

Unfortunately, the above scenario is only a mere snapshot of the reality for today’s youth. This scenario coupled with the negligence and reckless endangerment by school administrative personnel, and influenced by our media culture, is exactly what continues to place statistics of bullying and teen suicide on the rise. Add to this startling reality the truth that programs advocating for the teaching of adolescent sexual violence are far and few between. According to a report titled *Teen Dating Violence* put out by the National Conference of State Legislatures, “At least 17 states have laws that urge or require school boards to develop curriculum on teen dating violence” (<http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/health/teen-dating-violence.aspx>). However, there is no monitoring of this regulation. Even if there were monitoring, this regulation only accounts for 34% of this country’s state population.

Furthermore, 2012 survey results published by the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence report that, “Sixty-five percent of rape crisis centers have a waiting list for core counseling services while thirty percent have a waiting list for support groups” (www.naesv.org). The survey also reports a sixty-seven percent decrease in rape prevention and awareness as well as a forty percent increase in waiting lists for rape prevention programs.

When examining the above referenced statistics in conjunction with the reality that college campuses have a single crisis center staffed with a handful of personnel providing services to thousands of students, it becomes evident that society is not nearly as concerned about sexual violence as it should be, thus leading to a desensitized culture.

DIVERGING PATHWAYS

Last week, several teachers learned about The Other Wes Moore at a professional development workshop; it is a common story streaming across America regarding parental support and involvement. Throughout the year, as teachers become more familiar with their students, it becomes evident that successful students have involved parents, whereas a parent who doesn't put in sufficient time and attention tends to develop a child that struggles with social skills, chronic discipline issues, and inappropriate behaviors.

Just a few years ago *The Capital* newspaper printed an article about two male alumni from Annapolis High School; they were best friends, but their lives took separate paths. The article focused on mourning the murder of one boy, while highlighting the fact that the other boy was going off to college. In the 21st century the reality of the stories can be attributed to three main factors: the media culture, school culture, and parenting methodology. If we examine today's media culture, it becomes evident that television, music, internet, and movie culture our children are exposed to is much more sexually explicit than in the 1960's, 1970's, or even the 1980's. Teenagers are watching television shows and movies that portray a high degree of sexual content, inappropriate and vulgar language, and a general disrespect for peers and authority. Also, because of the advancement in technology that wasn't so prevalent decades ago, young people are playing highly violent video games and searching the internet for hours on end, to the detriment of their sleep patterns. Much of the music our children are listening to is filled with high degrees of anger and hostility, degrading people because of their age, gender, religion, race, and career.

If we examine our current educational system, we come to understand that school administrators are so overwhelmed with test scores and AYP status that they often don't put a substantial amount of focus into addressing disruptive classroom behaviors or inappropriate treatment of fellow peers. School culture is one of the major contributing factors to the success of our young people because it establishes standards of moral character and educational performance. If schools aren't taking their role of molding students, especially when parents are either too busy with their work schedules or merely absentee parents, then students are left to raise themselves. If those students are receiving inappropriate messages and schools or parents aren't negating those messages, then our young generation continues to fall by the wayside. This is exactly why schools across the nation need to implement mentoring programs and utilize community resources so that an effective parent, school, and student relationship can be established to foster self-esteem, promote academic excellence, and empowered youth to handle social issues impacting their success.

An individual's or couples' philosophy on parenting significantly impacts a child's success in school and the world beyond. When today's parents were being raised, there was a predominant methodology of parent-child communication, reinforcement of good moral character, and discipline. However, as society has changed so has its parents, and the truth is that many parents today have forgotten how they were raised and, therefore, lack that presence in their children's lives. This has created a culture whereby today's young generation has been given all the power and are quite frankly taking on adult roles while raising themselves.

When you examine the story portrayed in the link above, you'll come to understand that Wes Moore, the author of The Other Wes Moore, is a highly successful adult. On the other hand, Wes Moore, the subject of the author's novel has become a ward of the legal system. These two men grew up in the same city with similar economic and geographical backgrounds and were both raised by single mothers. However, upon careful examination of the video, you'll come to see that the author of the book had a mother who instilled in him discipline, focus, and care; she was a present figure in his life. However, the interview about 'the other Wes Moore' makes no mention of his mother, leaving the viewer to infer that she was an absentee parent causing him to make poor choices.

Therefore, parents and schools need to have the foresight enough to ensure that we are fostering the life success of all students. If we don't get this partnership firmly established over the next few years, we will all have to answer for our actions or lack thereof because two years from now all schools are expected to have a 100% pass rate on state-mandated tests, and we all have a responsibility to help re-build this country's economy and stop our children from becoming wards of our legal system as well.

Educational Effects on the 'Why-Worry Generation'

According to an article entitled The Why-Worry Generation published in a recent edition of the New York Times newspaper by Judith Warner, anyone “born between 1982 and 2002, have been depicted more recently by employers, professors and earnestly concerned mental-health experts as entitled whiners who have been spoiled by parents who over-stoked their self-esteem, teachers who granted undeserved A’s and sports coaches who bestowed trophies on any player who showed up.”

The unfortunate ramifications for today’s students is that many of them are graduating high school not have fulfilled basic requirements at a sufficient level for success, unable to read and write at a proficient level, and seeing little-to-no relevance of essential educational skills to their lives in school or beyond. This can be attributed to many factors including the reality that many schools are pushing students ahead to the next grade level before they are academically equipped for success, not providing adequate remediation programs to at-risk students, and not holding students accountable for their own success.

Though I firmly believe in the philosophy of No Child Left Behind, the truth is that schools have over-simplified instruction, causing the high expectations of academic success and integrity to fall by the wayside. Too many teachers, under pressure to receive favorable ratings are giving students full credit for merely completing assignments rather than being concerned about the accuracy of students’ work. For those teachers with strong moral ethics, it is a difficult lesson to teach today’s children that what they do has to be correct, or we are doing them a great disservice. Students have learned that they can earn a passing grade just days before the end of a marking period by making up ten weeks of past due assignments.

It is a sad reality that most students today are reading below grade-level and programs are not being implemented to address students’ needs unless they are classified as a special-education student. Also, too many schools have stopped teaching vocabulary, writing, and spelling instruction, leaving our students to ineffectively communicate or think on a cognitive level.

Unless the educational system makes a quick turn-around and parents begin reinforcing the need for a strong education, I fear this economic depression will take even longer to recover from. After all, how can an economy recover from such economic hardship if our future generation is unable to contribute to its’ rebuilding.

Resources Avail Themselves to Stamp-Out Bullying

In the interest of improving the way schools address reports of bullying, and the knowledge that the vast majority of school bullying incidents begin online via social network sites and text messages, and the reality that until the law changes schools do not have legal authority to scan students' Facebook or MySpace pages without parental consent, I advocate for the open communication between parents and school administrators, and urge administration to immediately act upon reports of bullying. Everyone who understands education is aware that even the slightest suspicion of child abuse is required by law to be report to Social Services. In my professional opinion, bullying is just as serious and cannot be taken lightly, especially given the rise in adolescent suicide rates and depression/anxiety.

School personnel and parents must become more proactive. Unless we begin taking serious action, our youth, by default, will not self-advocate for their rights to a safe learning environment. That said, parents need to be aware of additional resources for monitoring child safety online. Refer to the attached link:

http://weblogs.baltimoresun.com/news/education/blog/2010/06/new_tools_to_monitor_bullying.html

Specifically, we need to improve upon the education of real-world consequences for our bulliesand provide our victims with a voice that will be heard. An effective place to begin is to read Middle school students writing a book about bullying, an article published in the Orlando Sentinel (<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/education/fl-broward-bullying-book-20100718,0,1487914.story>). In addition to reading this article, one should also read about a phenomenal young girl in Florida who wrote a letter to President, Obama; her plan should be instituted as well. Read the article Bullied 5th Grader Inspired by Letter from the President (<http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local-beat/5th-Grader-Gets-Obamas-Support-Against-Bullying-98797139.html?yhp=1>), published July 19, 2010 in a Philadelphia newspaper.

Discrepancies in What the Law Requires and What Schools Practice

Case Study: Maryland v. Connecticut

To become more proactive in reducing incidents of bullying, Stratford Public Schools in Connecticut in 2008 revamped their referral process specific to reports of bullying and/or harassment. It is a policy, given today's national reality, that every school system across North America adopt this Action Plan. Stratford Public Schools has a 100% zero-tolerance policy on bullying; their Action Plan is in perfect alignment with their philosophy and practice. Specifically, it mandates all school personnel to immediately respond to a report, whether formal or informal, in the same written format, and the schools' principals are mandated to do a full and formal investigation and respond to the incident within a twenty-four-hour period. Stratford Public Schools has had a tremendous drop in incidents across the district. Read the attached PDF file to find a plethora of information and resources available for use to appropriately address incidents of bullying; it was found via <http://stratfordk12.org/Content/Policies.asp>.

According to The Safe Schools Reporting Act of 200, the Maryland State Department of Education mandates county boards of education to report incidents of harassment or intimidation (bullying) against students attending a public school. The law further specifies procedures for reporting these acts, including specific guidelines for a Harassment and Intimidation (Bullying) Reporting Form. Read the attached PDF file to learn how Maryland schools should be addressing incidents of bullying; it was found via <http://www.aacps.org/html/press/bully.asp>.

I urge all parents, students, and school personnel to study what I have outlined in this article because as a Maryland teacher since 2004 I have never seen the Anne Arundel County documents in practice in our schools. And, being an avid follower and supporter of this issue, I don't see evidence that all Maryland county schools are following proper legal procedure either.

Call to Action

July 2010

As an Anne Arundel County educator and student advocate, I am aware that our schools are under pressure to become more proactive in eliminating and/or reducing incidents of school bullying. Unfortunately, we have been working to create a plan for the past two years due to an unfortunate event within our community; it seems that school personnel need to research methods that model schools are incorporating. Specifically, we need to improve upon the education of real-world consequences for our bullies and provide our victims with a voice that will be heard.

An effective place to begin is to read Middle school students writing a book about bullying, an article published in the Orlando Sentinel (<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/education/fl-broward-bullying-book-20100718,0,1487914.story>). In addition to reading this article, one should also read about a phenomenal young girl in Florida who wrote a letter to President, Obama; her plan should be instituted as well. Read the article Bullied 5th Grader Inspired by Letter From the President (<http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local-beat/5th-Grader-Gets-Obamas-Support-Against-Bullying-98797139.html?yhp=1>), published July 19, 2010 in a Philadelphia newspaper.

To bring local awareness and empowerment to Anne Arundel County's anti-bullying initiative, I have established a Stamp-Out Bulling Facebook page. I invite all parents and students to become involved in the project; the sign can be accessed by typing Leonovichkathleen@yahoo.com into the Facebook search box.

The Role of Teachers as Mentors and Educators

In modern day society, because families are required to run and maintain a more viable household and raise children with high moral values, the field of education has a greater sense of responsibility. Teachers in today's classrooms are expected to serve students by teaching more than academics.

The traditional role of educators was to teach the three 'R's.' Aside from those expectations and keeping students disciplined, teachers faced no extreme worldly challenges. Today, however, there are more demands upon our youth. As a result, educators are required to prepare students for survival in a world of personal, professional, and moral challenges.

In America's earlier economy, the role of parents was gender specific, providing financial flexibility. Men worked while women fulfilled the role of homemaker. In the few situations where women established careers, mothers were allowed the option of working from home. Today, there are more financial demands upon individuals and families raising children.

The societal influences over children are immensely multitudinous and can be overwhelming. As a result, it is a teacher's responsibility to arm students with strategies to fight against challenges and negative influence. Amidst a generation of national and international tensions, incidents of school violence, and the multimedia industry challenging one's convictions to his/her beliefs, children need to be taught how to function in an ever-changing world. Students need a strong basis in character education, social skills development, conflict resolution, and self-advocacy.

Since, children learn through patterning observed behaviors, today's educators must be models of strong conduct according to the pillars of good character including trustworthiness, tolerance, responsibility, citizenship, and respect. We can model such behavior by advocating on their behalf for education and services necessary for future success. In the confines of educational curriculum, we as teachers can do this by offering such lessons as critical thinking skills as well as Preparation for Life and Character Education classes. In addition to teaching academics and survival skills, educators may need to feed, clothe, and find appropriate shelter for their students.

As you realize, the field of education is a very special calling. Hence, today's teachers must exhibit specific competencies. First, they must function as coaches and mentors. Second, they must build student self-esteem and encourage each child to achieve their dreams through academic excellence. Third, teachers must build educational partnerships between themselves, parents, students, and administrators. Finally, they must be change catalysts, exploring and implementing new ideas to achieve continuous improvement, in school and beyond.

Students are entitled to, and should receive from all teachers, a maximized educational experience. I plead with all teachers, parents, administrators, and students to demand and ensure receipt of the following rights.

One, equal opportunities in education and a Least Restrictive Environment free of distractions. Truly disciplined educators know students are unable to learn effectively unless all aspects of the environment are conducive to learning.

Two, ensure your child receives educational or supplemental services necessary for success. Without such accommodations success is not achieved.

Three, expect teachers to be professional and objective. Educators are not doing students a service by attempting to be their friends or demeaning their less than expected performances. In my experience, students want discipline because it is important to them to make something of themselves. If educators are befriending their students, they are not providing the services students are entitled to under the articles of education. Also, we are being detrimental to students' self-esteem by telling them their individual successes are insufficient if that success falls below a peer's level of achievement. We are also being detrimental to students' self-respect by comparing them to one another, as everyone has a unique set of talents and abilities.

Lastly, open, and regular communication between parents and teachers is essential in the life of a child if he/she is going to be successful. If we don't communicate with one another, how are we going to help the children? Also, parents need to stop trusting only their children and have faith in the educational system. If we don't trust each other, the child loses, and becomes at risk for shutting down educationally. We must work together; our children don't have enough time for parents and educators to fear communicating with one another.

Children spend more time in school than at home, therefore, teachers and parents have a higher level of responsibility to ensure positive impacts upon our youth. I wouldn't take the job of raising my own child lightly. Why should we as a unit be lackadaisical about what is in the best interest of our children?

Thoughtful Grading and Immediate Return of Student Assignments

Researchers have known for years that student learning needs to be assessed on a continual basis, formally and informally, so that teaching can be appropriately adjusted, learning monitored, and academic success be optimized for every child. Additionally, researchers and educators have known for years that students perform best when they have a clear understanding of each aspect of any given assignment; therefore, teachers should provide students with a clearly definitive explanation of assignment and grading criteria via a rubric. Rubrics should be presented with every assignment, yet too many teachers fail to do this resulting in student confusion and insufficient success.

According to a 2001 document Enhancing Literacy in Ohio publicized by the Ohio Literary Resource Center, “Rubrics are tools that formalize the process of evaluation. Rubrics keep us honest by keeping the focus on the criteria established to begin with. By agreeing on the criteria up front and by stating the criteria explicitly in the form of a rubric, the person being evaluated knows exactly what he or she needs to do to achieve excellence. Moreover, the person being evaluated has the tool (the rubric) needed for self-evaluation throughout the entire process. A constant self-evaluation can be taking place throughout the process (<http://www.mankatoareacatholicschools.org/pdfs/Utilizing-Weighting%20Rubrics.pdf>). That said, educators, administrators, and researchers should not be surprised that too many of our students are failing when they know they are dropping the ball by not utilizing learning tools with their students, and a rubric is as much a learning tool as is an assignment, quiz, or test.

Another method of significantly increasing student performance and staying on top of data analysis is to do thoughtful grading of each assignment, not just grade them based upon completion, this lowers students’ expectations of success. In addition to thoughtful grading, teachers across the board need to return to immediate feedback by grading and returning student assignments with a twenty-four-hour period. It astonishes me that schools who are failing do not realize that by their teachers holding onto assignments for days or weeks at a time this is a major contributing factor. There are many colleagues in my building that don’t give students their work back for lengthy periods of time, if at all. How will our students ever feel like what they are asked to do is relevant to their lives if we don’t model that behavior?

In a study published by S. Jay Samuels and Yi-Chen Wu, members of the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota, analyzing The Effects of Immediate Feedback on Reading Achievement, http://www.epsteineducation.com/home/articles/research_article.aspx?id=17) their research found that students who received immediate feedback were far more successful and motivated students than those who had to ‘wait and see’ how they performed on a task. Specifically, they looked at research conducted by J.A. Zahorik, G.D. Borich and M.L. Tombari, and P. Eggen and D. Kauchak. Zahorik’s 1997 research (Reacting. In M. J. Dunkin (Ed.), International encyclopedia of teaching and teacher education (pp. 416-423). Oxford: Pergamon Press.) concluded “that when students are told about the correctness of their answers, it helps them to alter their studying style which then leads to improved achievement. Furthermore, immediacy of feedback provides students with information about how well they are doing. If the behavior is incorrect, the immediate feedback allows the learners to make corrective modifications and prevents continued practice of the incorrect behavior. On the other hand, if the behavior is correct, immediate feedback can motivate students to continue.” He was supported by Borich and Tombari (Educational psychology: A contemporary approach (2nd ed). New York: Addison-Wisely Educational Publishers. 1997) as well as Eggen and Kauchak (Educational psychology: Windows on classroom (6th ed). Columbus, OH: Prentice Hall. 2004) who concluded “feedback gives learners information about the progress they make towards their goals.”

Given what educational researchers have proven as best practice, every child should receive immediate feedback from every teacher, and the work needs to have been graded for accuracy not merely effort.

Critical Learning

The four key components of literacy instruction adapted by the Common Core Standards Initiative speak to addressing communication skills across all content areas. Specifically, with Reading/Language Arts and English Instruction, those four key components include reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Knowing the four tenets of communication, it is evident that every lesson in content classes should incorporate an opportunity for students to learn, study, and effectively apply knowledge in each of those skill areas. This would mean that every teacher's daily lesson plan includes a reading activity, a writing activity, a listening activity, and a speaking activity.

This practice is highly attainable if each teacher is effectively utilizing Bloom's Taxonomy of Higher-Order Thinking (<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html>) and including objectives which address each of the three essential learning domains, cognitive, affective, and social within each lesson plan. According to a study conducted by Carol Booth Olson and Robert Land, published in *Research in the Teaching of English*, Volume 42, Number 3, February, 2008, (<http://www.ncte.org/journals/rte/issues/v42-3>) "A Cognitive Strategies Approach to Reading and Writing Instruction is essential for Secondary English Language Learners." The model consists of scaffolding, tangible outcomes, high expectations, and cognitive strategies intervention.

The cognitive domain has students using mental skills (knowledge) and performing tasks including comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation skills. The affective domain (attitude) has students work with feelings and emotional areas; students would be utilizing connecting strategies. The social domain allows students to apply and hone their communication skills in listening and speaking; group discussion, talk alouds, and think alouds would be performed in classrooms.

This can clearly and easily be accomplished through authentic assessments that have students synthesize and apply the knowledge they have acquired through the learning of essential skills. For example, a highly effective, cognitive reading strategy is DRTA (Direct Reading Thinking Activity) which employs the frequent use of three essential questions: (1) What do you think or what do you think will happen next? (2) Why do you think so, and (3) Can you prove it? These questions, according to Elizabeth BiFuh Ambe in her analysis of effective strategies for use with reluctant readers (*Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 50:8, May 2007), "prompt students' responses through interpretation, clarification, and application. They foster critical awareness and move students through a process that involves prediction, stimulation, and thinking as they use the questions for verification and ultimate extension of thought." Two tools to assist teachers in the utilization of the DRTA Strategy can be found online; a detailed explanation of the strategy is at <http://www.deafed.net/PublishedDocs/sub/961007k.htm> and a template is at http://forpd.ucf.edu/strategies/DRTA_Student%20Sheet.pdf.

Two highly effective cognitive writing strategies include Dialectical Journals and RAFT. Dialectical Journals have students read beyond the text and make authentic connections between the assigned text and related texts, the text and themselves, and the text and the outside world. This is a strategy whereby students identify important and/or relevant quotes from a text and

explain why that quote is significant? An example of journaling can be found online at www.cerritos.edu/scrawford/shared/one_dialect...... The RAFT Strategy is highly effective for structuring writing assignments; it ensures students understand their role as a writer, their audience, the format of their work, and the expected content. Role of the writer, Audience, Format, and Topic are the key ingredients included in every writing assignment. A step-by step explanation of how to use the RAFT Strategy can be located at the Project CRISS website (http://www.projectcriss.com/past_publications.php). Upon further study, you will see that this strategy, like all CRISS (Creating Independence through Student-owned Strategies) can be used in all content area classes and improve student performance.

A highly effecting Listening and Speaking Strategy is that of the Socratic Seminar. “The Socratic method of teaching enables students to think for themselves rather than merely fill their heads with "right" answers. Therefore, pupils are regularly engaged his in dialogues by responding to their questions with questions, instead of answers. This process encourages divergent thinking rather than convergent. Students are given opportunities to "examine" a common piece of text, whether it is in the form of a novel, poem, art print, or piece of music. Open-ended questions allow students to think critically, analyze multiple meanings in text, and express ideas with clarity and confidence” (http://www.studyguide.org/socratic_seminar.htm).

Again, given the new national educational standards, teachers and administrators need to begin incorporated higher-order reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking activities in all their lessons, and do so utilizing tangible cognitive, affective, and social domain objectives.

Higher-Order Learning: Acquisition, Analysis, Synthesis, Application of Knowledge

The federal government has recently completed and published their new national education standards document via the Common Core Standards Initiative (<http://www.corestandards.org>). They clearly focus on cognitive thinking processes which help to bridge the gaps amongst elementary, middle, high school, and college skill levels so students are successful in all venues. They also more effectively mirror the NCTE/IRA Standards for English/Language Arts (<http://www.ncte.org/standards>) and develop strengths in all content area classes.

Prior to this paradigm shift in educational practice, each state had their own standards and standardized assessments causing an increase in education gaps among various subgroups of students. Now each state can support the need for high academic standards for all students, interdisciplinary instruction, and a culture of literacy in every school throughout the nation by incorporating reading and writing strategies across content areas to ensure students are performing according to the newly required high academic standards for every child. Because these standards speak to the four basic tenets of effective communication including reading, writing, listening, and speaking, educators should also begin implementing additional educational strategies and technology into their classrooms to also ensure high levels of success for special education and at-risk students as well as English Language Learners.

It seems that now, given the recent reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, along with such tremendous achievement gaps and a growing English Language Learner population that schools need to stop working as separate entities and begin forming local, state, and national partnerships to establish a true Learning Community.

Many school districts, such as Maryland, for example, are now realizing that they need to re-align their standards and state assessments to begin more concentrated work on closing achievement gaps. That said, individual counties also need to begin adapting to the polished system and re-evaluate their curriculum guides, specifically by throwing away the current pacing guides, racing guides as referred to by many teachers, and provide thoughtful and appropriate amounts of time for instruction.

Optimal Success for Every Student

Over the past several years, the educational system has implemented new policy and revised current education laws including IDEA and Title I to ensure the success of No Child Left Behind. However, it seems that so much effort, as it should be, has been focused on the success of at-risk and special education students. I find this an appropriate course of action; however, it also seems to have been to the detriment of many regular education students who are falling behind as well.

As an educator, I believe that each student should be given every opportunity to excel academically. That said, I believe the best strategy to ensure optimal success for each student is in taking the time to thoroughly assess each child's academic strengths and weaknesses via a variety of assessment tools, formal and informal. Once in-depth information is gathered on a student, then an Individual Education Plan needs to be constructed to play off the child's strengths to build-up their areas of weakness.

As part of an Individual Education Plan, educators should establish a concrete plan of action including an understanding of the child's learning style(s), appropriate notetaking and study strategies for that particular student, and an Interest Inventory. In addition, that plan of action should incorporate a variety of learning strategies including pre-reading, reading, and post-reading strategies, and CRISS Strategies (<http://www.projectcriss.com>). Reading strategies are essential to optimize a student's retention, comprehension, and application of knowledge. CRISS Strategies are essential to helping students organize and study information for specific content areas; there is a difference in method for each content area. Graphic organizers should be used in compilation with reading and CRISS strategies.

Finally, another major component of ensuring optimal success for every student, in addition to teacher modeling, academic interventions, and enrichment activities, is the basic understanding that students across the board achieve best when they have a thorough understanding of all assignment requirements. This can be achieved very simply by providing a grading rubric for each assignment presented to the student. There are several reliable website resources available to teachers concerned about the time element including Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators located at <http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schrockguide/assess.html>. Two additional and valuable sources include RubiStar's rubrics for project-based learning activities located at <http://rubistar.4teachers.org> and Teacher Planet located at <http://www.rubrics4teachers.com>. Educators and school administrators need to take greater responsibility in acquiring and utilizing all available resources because we are all being held accountable for leaving no child behind. And there is no excuse as there is certainly no shortage of resources and research at the touch of a finger.

Ensuring No Child is Left Behind

In a recent Associated Press article Forget grade levels, KC schools try something new by reporter Heather Hollingsworth

(www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5iakmp8oLWlhbmx0dpv5ltOD7guYQD9GNNCN00), rather than labeling students as below-average, average, or above-average, Kansas City schools in Missouri are focusing on teaching each student at a proficient level as they master an academic skill. This system, according to statements from school professionals, works exceptionally well by addressing the individual needs of each student, minimizing discipline, and holding students accountable for their own learning. According to Superintendent John Covington, "The current system of public education in this country is not working. It's an outdated, industrial, agrarian kind of model that lends itself to still allowing students to progress through school based on the amount of time they sit in a chair rather than whether or not they have truly mastered the competencies and skills."

As an eleven-year veteran of the educational system, I must agree that this is an appropriate course of action and that more schools across the nation should consider implementing the change. I can tell you, firsthand, that I have been growing increasingly disturbed over the past five years to discover that I am working with a tremendous number of students who are two, three, or four grade levels behind where they should be in reading. This is a direct result of schools being so much more concerned with AYP status that they merely push students ahead to keep state departments of education from taking over their system. If schools aren't pushing students forward before, they aren't developmentally ready, it is because they kowtow to parents who are more concerned with their child's social development than their academic preparedness. College professors are growing more frustrated over the number of freshman unable to write at an appropriate college level, graduation rates in this country have dropped in many geographic areas, and countries that we once surpassed in education now surpass us. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education publication Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress (Volume 10, No. 12) dated June 14, 2010, the nation's current graduation rate is "at 68.8%, representing a drop of .4% from the 69.2% graduation rate reported for 2009. Further, the report, Diplomas County 2010: Graduation by the Numbers—Putting Data to Work for Student Success, cited in the AEA publication, "there were only 2% of seventeen-year-olds who possessed a secondary level education in 1870." Also, according to the analysis, "it was not until 1940 that the graduation rate surpassed 50% and continued to climb, reaching a high point of 77% in 1969." The graph included in the report will continue to show that "while progress was made between the late 1990s and 2005, students are now graduating at approximately the same rate as in the early 1960s."

(http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/straight_as/06142010#Diplomas)

School systems, due to the 2013 expectations outlined in No Child Left Behind, need to become more progressive and return to educational research to accrue a plethora of proven Best Practices. If this doesn't happen, I fear our educational system will lose even more respect that it already has, as our schools will be failing their students.

Addressing Gaps in Learning for All Students

In response to Putting the ‘Boy Crisis’ in Context, an article published by Michael Sadowski in a recent Harvard Education Newsletter publication (Volume 26, Number 4), I am in agreement that school districts and educators need to be concerned overall about the educational development of each student, regardless of race, socio-economic status, or gender (<http://www.hepg.org/hel/article/473#home>). In compilation with performance data across gender groups, researchers and educational professionals need to consider the reality of county, state, and national funding for education. If, for example, we look more closely at the two-state comparison between Massachusetts and Mississippi cited in the 2009 NAEP report on reading scores analyzed by Mr. Sadowski, one relevant piece of information stands out as missing from his analysis. Obviously, Massachusetts testing data reveals higher test scores than Mississippi; it is a far wealthier state with a much higher percentage of students not at-risk. Furthermore, every educator, including myself, who has ever worked in schools whose communities are lacking sufficient educational funding knows that, though unfortunate and unjust, teachers and administrators can only implement programs that are able to be funded. If schools in certain areas don’t have comparable educational funding, then their students will perform at lower levels than other students. We as educational professionals will never acquire fair and accurate data if we continue to compare students whose demographic information fall at various ends of the spectrum.

In addition, if educational researchers are to attain flawless accuracy in their data analysis, they need to examine much more documentation than one report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Data analysis needs to include data compiled from research examining similarities and differences in school curriculums across the nation, various state standards for English, Language Arts, and Reading, and state-mandated tests in specific content areas. I can tell you from personal experience, having taught in New York, Connecticut, and now Maryland, that each state has their own standards for teaching English/Language Arts skills, their own approach to teaching those standards, and different assessments of those skills. The HSA exam in Maryland, for example, is written on the same level as the grade eight ELA exam in New York. Connecticut’s CAPT exam for students to meet graduation requirements is much more extensive in nature than Maryland’s HSA exam, consisting of four parts in comparison to one part. Let’s delve further and examine disparities within specific states. It goes without saying that Howard County schools will have students who perform at a higher-level on the High School Assessment than students in Anne Arundel County; this is simply because curriculums differ. Howard County schools teach writing instruction whereas Anne Arundel County schools do not teach writing. There are also schools within a county that will have better results than another school; this is because of parental involvement and educational philosophy.

Another concern not addressed in Mr. Sadowski’s article which deserves mention is the well-known reality that educational researchers have been examining standardized tests for over a decade, only to determine that they are inaccurate indicators of students true reading abilities simply because they are biased against various sub-groups of students depending upon ethnicity and linguistic culture. Specifically, students from different areas in the country will have learned different, but correct, definitions of words according to how those words are used within the context of their people, and most answers sought on standardized tests are traditional.

My point is simply that before any educational professional begins disaggregating data, they must be sure to have a complete and accurate compilation of information to back their findings, analyses, and recommendations.

<http://www.examiner.com/education-in-baltimore/kathleen-leonovich>