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Margaret Chase Smith Library 2013 Essay Contest

FIRST PLACE ESSAY

Improving the American Educational System

by Samantha Leiper

In the U.S. educational system, there is a certain quantity of luck associated with success. Undeniably, hard work, dedication, and a positive attitude allow students to obtain achievement from their instructions. However, there are too many factors that stifle the schooling of today's students, and therefore jeopardize their future. Aspects such as outdated educational methods, school-bred bias, and harmful government regulations contribute to holding the children of America back—and thereby restraining the future of this country. Young adults should not have to rely substantially on luck to get into the training programs or schools they desire. The American educational system can be improved by a new, fresh outlook on personal connections, the ridding of present bias in educational institutions, and the refining of ineffectual federal government involvement.

There is no doubt that many students establish beneficial connections with their teachers during their high school years. I am fortunate to be one of these students. Strong teacher relationships are something that I believe have furthered not only my education, but my desire and thirst for knowledge. However, in my school, strong teacher-student relationships are not only supported, but encouraged. Students and teachers are provided constant support and the opportunity to communicate through an email system

created by the high school. Every day there is time for students to meet with teachers face to face for any assistance they may need. Sadly, this is not the case for every high school. Often, these relationships are either discouraged, or not given the opportunity to flourish. I believe wholeheartedly that an increase in student-teacher communications is the first step to a positive growth of the current educational system in the U.S.

Many people assume that “hard to change factors such as class size, teacher experience, or availability of instructional supplies are crucial for predicting student achievement” (Rimm-Kaufman 2012: 4). However, these aspects, while important, are not as important as positive student-teacher relationships. According to Rimm-Kaufman, “teachers who foster positive relationships with their students create classroom environments more conducive to learning and meet students’ developmental, emotional and academic needs” (Rimm-Kautillan 2012: 1). Although students who already excel academically also benefit from a healthy relationship with their teachers, that benefit is greater for at-risk students. Often, positive relationships between teachers and at-risk students create a support system not present in the lives of these struggling students. Even more intriguing is that the fate of these at-risk students can be reversed by positive relationships with their teachers. In fact, it is not uncommon for students who are failing most of their courses to earn above-average grades in classes where they have a caring relationship with their teachers (Phelan, Davidson and Cao 1992). These close relations may also help students in other ways, such as improving their social skills and increasing their resiliency (Rimm-Kaufman 2012).

Each year, the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. This year, students were invited to propose what they would do to improve the American educational system. We feature here the top three 2013 prize-winning essays.

With such positive results, it seems absurd that student-teacher relationships are not emphasized more. While some institutions make an effort, it should be considered a norm for students and teachers to develop relationships that will better the students' education, social skills, and influential connections. It is important to note that improving student-teacher relationships is indeed possible to achieve, and students would value it. I conducted a survey, asking my peers the question, "In your high school education, would you rather have a teacher with whom you have a close, healthy relationship, or a laptop/other technology that is issued to you?" Ninety-three percent of respondents chose a healthy teacher relationship, while only seven percent chose technology. This small study indicates that despite the undeniable importance of computers, close student-teacher relationships are more important to students. Action should be taken in schools nationwide to incorporate more time for students and teachers to establish bonds that can help both groups succeed later in life. As a student, I have seen how a block of 20 minutes a day allowed relationships between student and teacher to blossom, so it seems both a simple and clever way to give American students the opportunity to be successful.

Although a strong connection between students and teachers increases students' confidence, that poise is instantaneously destroyed if students are undermined by factors they cannot control. Although many consider racism and its devaluing consequences to be an issue of the past, racism and bias are introduced into school systems through official legislation. Standards have been set in some states, such as Virginia and Florida, that demand higher grades and test scores from certain races of students. In Virginia, "45 percent of black students are required to pass the math state test, whereas 82 percent of Asian Americans, 68 percent of

whites, and 52 percent of Hispanics are required to pass" (Hooda 2012). This bias in American school systems is not acceptable, as it tarnishes both the drive of students and the reputation of the country. Every American citizen is supposed to have equal opportunity and expectations. This American precept is diminished as more states set up similar educational standards. As many school officials have expressed, "if a state expects less performance from a particular group of students, they will lose the motivation to perform better" (Hooda 2012). According to an article in the *Huffington Post* from October 12, 2012, similar standards have been set in Florida, where former Gov. Jeb Bush was concerned that the new "measures would send a 'devastating message' that black and Hispanic students weren't as capable as others."

In the same article Jeannie Oakes, of the University of California, Los Angeles, states that putting students in groups gives "them very different opportunities to learn—with strong patterns of inequality across teachers, experience, and competence. There was this pervasive view that Latino and African American kids can't measure up in a way that more affluent or white kids can and we can't do anything about it." Another concern is that if standards are set according to race, students and teachers will begin believing and fulfilling the prophecy (Hooda 2012).

The key to crossing racial lines and fully desegregating schools involves heterogeneous grouping and a method known as detracking. This is simply the mixing of students into the same classes to ensure they have the same opportunities for growth. In a school outside of Chicago called Evanston Township High School, detracking resulted in desegregation and a reduction of bias, and also improved percentages for honors curriculums. In 2006, new superintendent Eric Witherspoon entered a math class with only black students. As he walked in "a

young man leaned over ... and said 'this is the dummy class'" (Halpert 2012). Prior to Witherspoon's appointment, students in the honors classes were primarily white. However, by September 2011, a majority of Evanston freshman were completely integrated in more rigorous courses, where they met in small, heterogeneous groups to discuss their learnings. In 2006, only 19 percent of minority students were in honors classes; by 2011, it had jumped to 39 percent. The goal of the school is to "establish honors classes across the curriculum because [Witherspoon] believes that the achievement levels of minority students will remain low if they aren't placed in more rigorous classes" (Halpert 2012).

As a student who has attended a detracked high school, I wholeheartedly believe that it propels many students into academic success. At Nobel High School, students are separated randomly into one of three academies, where they stay for the duration of their high school experience. With their own set of teachers and peers, each academy forms a small, heterogeneous community, which creates support and a sense of family. Students are admitted into advanced placement classes based on completion of a summer project, not test scores. This brings a diversity of students with a variety of interests and perspectives into a small, strong classroom environment. The detracking method and heterogeneity of Noble High School exposes its students to new opinions and ideals, while preparing them for the outside world in terms of listening skills and teamwork.

In 2001, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act, a reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The purpose of the Act is to ensure "that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic

achievement standards and state academic assessments.” Though these goals seem beneficial, the way they have been executed in the classroom has diminished the education of students and their test scores. According to a blog by Grace Rubenstein on Parenting.com, test scores have gone down after lecture-style teaching methods for third graders were implemented at Hillside Elementary in Lorenzo, California. As teacher Krista Sokolsky says, “the program doesn’t really allow for variation,” therefore, kids have “nothing they get to look forward to when they come to school.” These enforced methods do not seem to be working at this school, as “scores actually dropped in the 2007-2008 school year, when teachers had to start sticking closely to the new reading program.” With practical expectations to be reached by impractical means, No Child Left Behind has been dubbed by many as “a classic case of good idea, bad execution,” according to Rubenstein’s blog. To ensure national academic success, No Child Left Behind must be refined, with individual needs being addressed by state governments and schools.

President Barack Obama’s administration has begun to reform the No Child Left Behind Act. As President Obama (2012) himself stated:

Standards and accountability—those are the right goals. Closing the achievement gap, that’s a good goal. . . . We’ve got to stay focused on those goals. But we’ve got to do it in a way that doesn’t force teachers to teach to the test, or encourage schools to lower their standards to avoid being labeled as failures. That doesn’t help anybody. It certainly doesn’t help our children in the classroom.

With this reform, more power is being given to the states to determine the standards for their own schools. The importance of local influence in education is one that should not be undermined. After all, according to President

Obama “what might work in Minnesota may not work in Kentucky—but every student should have the same opportunity to reach their potential.”

America has been dubbed by many people as a “melting pot,” a mixture of ethnicities, backgrounds, and cultures. It makes sense that learning styles and educational needs and implementations are also included in the melting pot. Education should continue to be handled close to home, so success can be defined and maintained by people who are directly involved. In 2009, President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan introduced the Race to the Top, which grants funds for innovative and creative reforms in education by state and district governments. This has created a healthy competition between schools and states for specialized, successful education. Because state and local governments are more able to clearly determine what school goals should be, they, using input of each school, should be the ones to explain how goals will be attained.

The education of America’s youth should be held to certain standards. However, these standards should be established by the states instead of a national government, which cannot understand each area’s specific needs. President Obama started his reform by telling states directly that the national government will grant flexibility in meeting the standards in ways determined by the states themselves.

Despite the success of the American education system, there are still key issues to address in regards to strengthening the country’s academic structure. There are certain aspects of education that may have been established with good intentions, but have either not adapted to changing times or have not been executed in a proper manner. To improve the educational system in the U.S., I believe we need to redefine student-teacher relationships, rid schools

of bias that hides around country, and refine certain government educational initiatives. It is now time to establish a truly equal footing for all American students to preserve the notions on which America was founded. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are indicative of a democratic society, which grants this country the right and ability to move forward as a nation into times of intellectual prosperity and the true achievement of the American dream. 🌊

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