

COMMENTARY

Take it from a teacher

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If you like Latin and Latinate words, “education” is a lovely one. Well, maybe no Latin words are lovely — that’s arguable, I suppose — but many of them seem elegantly or usefully designed.

Education means to *take from*. And isn’t it true? Nearly everything we are, and almost everything we say, and just about everything we believe, is taken from a distinct source, a source identified (usually by a parent or teacher) somewhere in the culture or the course-of-study or the world.

Since I’ve had occasion this year to watch a great teacher or two in action — up close, Diane Chernow at Alva Elementary School, and at a distance, Sarah Huge (pronounced Hugh-gee) at Lee Middle School — I’ve rethought the word and its meaning.

I’ve rethought what it means to teach every single day, too. And since I was a teacher once briefly, for a couple of years, and my father was a teacher in public high schools in the West for a decade, I’ve also thought once again about what it takes to teach, not just what it means.

From the education system’s bureaucrats, it takes decent salaries for teachers, affectionate and practical support of teachers, and a sense of levity. It takes stepping out of the way most of the time, and stepping in to help when necessary, especially by putting money where motivated teachers can get at it to make something lovely happen.

From the teachers, first of all, it takes energy: massive amounts of it. If you think you work hard, and you have never taught, then you have

a weak basis of comparison.

Teaching also takes the cheerful willingness to work hard at a given discipline (reading, writing, arithmetic; the trivium, the quadrivium, et cetera) in the company of hormonally-challenged hordes who sometimes resist the work, so that when they leave the classroom they take with them some of that discipline. Or they take away something like that discipline. Or the mere habit of discipline. Or even just the memory of a discipline, if not the information that distinguishes it. All of it educates them, according to their desires and abilities.

Another thing: teaching takes generosity, along whatever given talent teachers have. It takes the talent to focus from early to late in a day, every day. The talent to remain tolerant and affectionate toward their students. The talent to avoid seeing young people as adults, even when they challenge adults with an adult’s obfuscating and resistant skills.

Teaching takes the talent to be tough enough to demand effort from those students, even when they’re sad, scared, humiliated, angry or despairing. And it takes the talent to be gentle enough to recognize those states of being, and to care.

Finally, teaching takes knowledge, but we all know that.

Being a teacher is sometimes like being a chef to adoring and talented food lovers who appreciate anything you serve them, when you try to serve your best; and more often, it’s like having to feed a squad of hunger strikers.

You can save a life with teaching, which is good enough. But you can also create an angel with teaching, which is heavenly, the best work in the world.

In the case of people like Diane Chernow, who teaches five-year-olds everything (she’s a generalist), or Sarah Huge, who teaches middle school students science, teaching appears to be an act of joy. And since the world is a mixed bag, no act of

joy ever comes without some suffering.

On some level, the suffering of great teachers will spring from failures. And so will the suffering of bureaucrats who care and try and do the job well. I call them educators, too, in a general sense.

The other ones, whether teacher or bureaucrat — the complacent, the lazy, the resentful, the tired, the malicious — are content with failure, which these days is the status quo in Lee County schools.

One of Lee County’s school board members, Robert Chilmonik, defined those failures cleanly and sharply in a letter printed early this week in the daily newspaper here.

Here’s what he said: Since 2003 in Lee County schools, “we have spent over \$5 billion of taxpayer money and borrowed more than \$600 million. But what have we gotten for our money?”

You probably don’t want to know, but bear along.

In the standard test for students, the FCAT, “almost all grades scored below the state average,” he reported. “The most recent 10th grade reading scores, the highest grade taking the FCATS, showed that there was no increase since 2005, and only 32 percent of these high school students read at grade level.”

So one out of three 10th graders can read at the 10th grade level. And if you can’t read beyond the 12th grade level by the time you’re in 10th grade, you’re having a hard time with school, in my experience.

Here’s what else Chilmonik said.

“On FCAT math, almost all of the grades scored below the state average. Lee County also scored below national and state averages on both SAT and ACT college entrance exams and ranks in or near the bottom 1/3 of the state on these exams.

“Lee County Schools also failed to meet the Average Yearly Progress Standards under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.”

Isn’t that just great? It’s not the teachers’ fault, though, not if Chilmonik’s further remarks are true.

“Per student spending for regular students was lower in our district than in the state, ranking 45th out of 67 schools districts, even though operating revenue was higher than the state average. And, spending on exceptional students was almost at the bottom of (the) state, ranking 58th out of 67 districts.”

He mentioned other things that create immediate concern, too (or is the feeling nausea, or rage?): A school board auditor resigned, and pointed to “a significant lack of controls in purchasing, contracting and construction, as well as destruction of public records.”

So *that’s* where the money is going. And like some savvy old escapee, after those pisanant bureaucrats make tracks, they hide them, destroying public records.

I know from experience that shenanigans by men and women who manage the school system is still just what it is: a bureaucracy in operation.

And I know that every teacher is obligated to do something magical, or at least honorable, in the classroom. It comes down on their shoulders, and they have their weak-links, too.

In my 12-year-old’s seventh-grade math class first semester, for example, a math teacher named Rex Hughes failed to respond to several e-mails and even phone messages from us, as my son slid slowly into the D and F range in his grades, and the semester waned, and we tried futilely to help him.

And just before the boy transferred out of the Hughes class, he came home and reported this inspiring comment from his teacher: “Workman, the sooner you’re out of my class, the better.”

That’s MR. Workman to you, Hughesy.

Not all the money in the world, or the inventive, responsible bureaucrats, would change the nature of things with that kind of teacher.

But he’s rare. The magic-making ones are everywhere. So why aren’t our kids doing better? They can, you know.

By the way, Mr. Workman is running an A average in his new math class this week, four weeks or so into a second semester. ■

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