

## All Children Can and Should Learn at High Levels

By Lillie G. Jessie

I am in a social gathering and it is revealed that I am a principal and I think, "oh here we go again!" Eventually, one of two conversations takes place. There is the usual confession by an individual that he or she, no he (sorry guys), was often sent to the principal's office when he was a child but he was "innocent". However, some who have become very successful in their adult career endeavors will admit that they were guilty as charged and are actually proud of pulling the wool over the eyes of the exasperated principal. The second reaction to my principal title is one of pity and sympathy that I have to work with "today's students". There is an even deeper lament about "those parents that do not care about their children". Of course I realize that I am having a conversation with what I have now classified as the "the good parents", like you and me. Further in the conversation it is obvious that the reason they think children are not learning is a result of bad parenting. There are other myths that I would like to address in this article. They include:

**Myth 1- Parents' unwillingness to "value education" as a goal for their children**

**Myth 2- Students' inability to learn at high levels**

**Myth 3 - Teachers' inability to teach**

First I need to address my biggest concern. More and more I am hearing parents and teachers express concern about the amount of testing we are seeing in our schools nationwide. This article is not written to represent the views of every member of our school board but Dr. Walts and the board have been clear that they too want to eliminate testing that serves no purpose. I have been known to say that "one test is too much is it does not change teaching in the classroom." I equate teaching to the medical profession. We would not think of going to a physician who did not run some diagnostic procedures prior to prescribing a solution. Teaching is the same. One cannot just "look" at a child and decide how he or she learns best. More importantly as Americans we need to be concerned about what I call "The new gap in town, "The Skills Gap." Our children and grandchildren will need to be able to compete in the new global economy. There will always be tests in life but the new focus will be on creativity, thinking, designing, and communication. None of this

lends itself to fill in the blank kinds of answers. Thus our focus has to shift from “too many tests” but the “type of testing” that is being done.

### **Myth 1- Parents’ unwillingness to “value education” as a goal for their children**

Now let’s talk about those “Bad parents”. I am a researcher by nature but some time I find that the best degree I received was not my B.S or my M.S. My best degree was the one I received from my father, who had less than a full elementary school education but was wiser in some ways than many of my professors at Northwestern University, my alma mater. His greatest fear was that college would cause me to lose my “common sense” or what I laughingly call my C.S. So this thought is from my father’s university of C.S. I find it ludicrous to believe that a parent, and granted there are a few exceptions, would tell or intimate to his or her child that “ We don’t value education...we prefer you remain illiterate and lead a life of crime that will ultimately land you prison”. The research (U.S. Department of Education) shows that more than 60% of America’s prison inmates are illiterate and that 85% of all juvenile offenders have reading problems. In the recent high-powered talks about the budget deficit it is interesting to note that the cost of illiteracy to business and taxpayers is \$20 billion per year (United Way, “Illiteracy: A National Crisis”)

I can see how we conclude that some parents do not value education. Listed below are two perceptions that need clarification.

- **Lack of Participation at School-** I do not make excuses for any parent not being an active participant in school activities but I have also had events where the room was overflowing. During my tenure as a principal and Title I supervisor, I have seen it all. I have seen more than 125 parents transport their students to a Saturday Institute for more than 15 years. I have student authored book from the early seventies of a parent proudly holding his son’s published book while still wearing his hospital bracelet. Then, there were my personal parents who also showed up for the above celebratory event but were too embarrassed about their own illiteracy to attend personal conference confusion. The parents in this district are what I like to call “Beltway Parents.” They are the parents I met at the commuter lots during my campaign who leave home when it is dark and return to see darkness again. The timing for school programs has to take that into account. I understand those parents because I was also one of those “Dark to Dark” parents. They are the daycare parents I often dealt with. Then there are moms who chose not to work but home-school their children.
- **Parents Do Not Read to Their Children-** I was supervisor of a reading program and have had the pleasure of teaching reading. I know the value of reading with and to children of a daily basis. I read to my children while in they were womb,

when they came out of the womb and in the car. No long trip was taken without reading to my children. They were reading prisoners in the car. I have a picture of little Jessica Jessie holding our favorite book, “Goodnight Moon” at the age of seven months. It did not matter that she was not able to read it, I just wanted the picture to document that I was a “good parent”!

I do not make excuses for parents not reading to their children but there those who do not have the literacy and language skills to read to them. The research from the U.S. Department of Education, indicates more than 44 million adults in the U.S. can't read well enough to read a simple story to a child. So the question is, who reads to those children? The Jessie girls and other middle class students come to school enriched by their experiences but it does not mean that they have more ability than those who come to us with limited reading skills. I agree with President Obama when he says that parents need to do homework with their children and read to them. My question is what do we do for those children who do not come with that advantage. Do we cast them aside and blame their parents.

A friend and colleague of mine, Mike Mattos, responded to an audience of educators when one said teachers could teach if the children had “better parents” Mikes’ impassionate response was, “I get so tired of hearing how bad the parent are...it is not their job to teach their children...it is our job as educators”. Again from the University of C.S., how do we explain the fact that many of us, including me, came from homes where we *were* the readers for our parents but yet were taught to read by persistent and phenomenal teachers who did not hold the lack of literacy at home over our heads. I often refer to a quote I heard from Lorraine Monroe, the very successful Principal of Frederick Douglas Academy in Harlem, Her response to teachers who complain about “those bad parents” was, “Stop worrying about those bad parents, they are not in your classroom, you are not teaching *them*, you are teaching their children”. High performing schools do not use lack of parental involvement as an excuse not to teach children. They see the intellectual powers of children who need more support and practice than their middle class (car book prisoners) counterparts. They do not believe there is a correlation between income and I.Q. Dr. Jeff Howard, of the Efficacy Institute writes, “Smart is not what you are, it is what you become”

**Myth 3- Students’ inability to learn at high levels**

**Myth 4 - Teachers’ inability to teach**

**Myth 5- Schools’ inability to obtain sustainable high performance for all students**

You need go no farther than Prince William County Schools in Manassas Virginia to see the schools of many of my colleagues that are high performing diverse, low-income schools, to debunk these myths. These schools house some of the most dedicated and committed teachers you will ever find. I referred earlier to the research of Ron Edmonds

and Larry Lazotte on Effective Schools. They found numerous schools in areas of high poverty, low income and high minority populations where students are learning at higher levels than schools in middle class America. Dr. Ron Ferguson (Ferguson, 2010), Senior Lecturer in Education and Public Policy at Harvard University highlights numerous public schools that perform at a 90% pass rate. The YES Academy in Houston Texas boasts a 90% college attendance rate for students from homes where 90% of their parents did not attend college. Everyone is amazed at the results of Englewood Prep Academy in Chicago where virtually 100% of the African American males attending are college bound. Many of the students entered this secondary academy reading at an elementary school level. The most startling is the results of what is called the “Providence Effect.” This school in the middle of urban Chicago has had a 100% college-bound rate for thirty years. More than fifty percent of its students are selected to attend colleges in the higher tiers.

Lack of parent educational skills, interest, and or support should serve as a catalyst rather than an excuse for those of us in this profession to establish higher goals in the minds of the children we are honored to teach. We cannot control what happens at home but we can control what happens at school. Our job according to Lorraine Monroe, principal of Frederick Douglas Academy is to “Train the brains” (Monroe, 1997) of children. Every student at the academy is expected to go to college. We began a project called Kindergarten to College at Vaughan Elementary two years ago. We cancelled our usual kindergarten field trip to the pumpkin patch and chose college instead. During our first year, we collaborated with Virginia Tech University and took more than 125 fifth graders to their campus. Parents were asked to take their children to college during spring break. The school under the leadership of Glynis Taylor, expanded this Virginia Tech project with other universities this year. As a result, every student at Vaughan will set his or her feet on college ground this year. Our vision statement is “We want them to see what they can be”. Instead of planting pumpkin seeds we wanted to plant the seeds of hope for these children and their families. It is our job as educators to *make what seems impossible, possible in the eyes of children.*

## Bibliography

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