

“ Their Parents Don’t Value Education” ...Dispelling the Myth

By
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I cannot tell you how often I have heard the above phrase from parents, politicians, and yes, educators themselves. Parents, usually those with formal education, like me, expressed sorrow for me during my principal era saying, “If only parents did their jobs!” My response, “Most do.”

During my tenure as a principal I dealt with many students who had attendance issues. One child in particular had missed the bus several times and was brought to my office to do what principals often do...“Give him the business!” I asked, using a very authoritative tone, “What time do you get up?” In the back of my mind blaming both him and his mother for his tardiness. His response was, “Which time?”

Puzzled, I asked for clarification. He said, “Do you mean the time I get dressed by my mother in the bed or the second time when I get up for the bus?” He explained that his mother (single parent) had to leave for work at five in the morning, so she woke him up at early, dressed him and allowed him to go back to sleep. It became his older brother’s job to wake him up later for the bus. Then he said, “Mrs. Jessie you really need to bring _____(brother) instead of me, to the office because he is not doing his job!”

Part of being a leader is having the ability to put yourself in another persons place so I have never bought into the notion that “Parents do not care” or that they do not “Value” learning. My school was what I called a “Beltway school.” I dealt with parents who worked in Washington, and others who dropped their kids off at daycare centers as soon as they opened, and picked them up at the latest hour possible. Many of these parents were middle class. I also had the parents whose older child became the sitter when they were old enough to meet the social services guidelines for overseeing their siblings for a couple of hours.

There was also a third group of parents. These were parents who were hourly wage earners, some of whom stood in front of 7-11 and competed for temporary jobs. They were the parents that you were careful about scheduling during working hours since every hour at school resulted in a lost of earnings.

All of the above groups have one thing in common: their desire to provide a living for their family and for their kids to get a quality education. My staff and I never scheduled activities before 7:00 p.m. We knew our parents were probably on Interstate 95 and would have a challenge attending before that time. Sometimes parent activities planned without the availability of parents considered. I have been guilty like other principals. Even worst when they did not show up, we blamed them and accused them of “Not caring” about their children’s education.

There is a fourth group of parents I encountered in my career. While working at Dixon State Hospital, an institutional setting for what was then called “Retarded” Adults. We never met most of the parents. They placed their children in these facilities and often never came back to visit. Since I was immature and in the

“Judging business” I found that to be “uncaring!” Then I met my now husband, Richard Jessie (“Jessie”), who had lost both parents by the age of eight and had a sister with Downs Syndrome. I met him during one of his many tours to Vietnam. He had returned to Dixon to bury this very sister. He had institutionalized her because he knew that their guardian was dying when he enlisted, so he had to place her in the institution. Their guardian passed away while he was in boot camp. He and I later discussed how much of his entire childhood was spent taking care of his sister. Many sacrifices were made before he made this difficult decision.

Jessie and I were married and I moved to Woodbridge, and worked at Muriel Humphrey School. Again the word “Retarded” was used at that time. These parents had chosen to keep their children at home. There were no public school provisions at that time. One of them told me that she missed the little things in life. She said, “my husband and I have not been to the movies in ten years...we cannot find anyone we trust to take care of our child.” Muriel Humphrey, under the direction of the dynamic Karen Smith, whom I worked for in the early 70’s, continues to provide respite opportunities for parents. Be careful before you judge parent caring if you have not walked in their shoes.

I later became a Title I Supervisor. Teachers found the federal requirement of parent home visits daunting. They would lament, “ They do not support their children at home.” Finally I asked, “ What is it that you told parents to do that they are not doing?” They were actually stumped for a while. Finally we agreed that early literacy was it. We then realized some of our parents lacked literacy skills themselves. We began by focusing on environmental literacy during our visits and developed a set of cards called “Reading is Everywhere.” We reminded them to read cereal boxes, road signs, etc. We even had billboards on each end of the county that displayed that slogan with a mother and child walking while she pointed to a stop sign.

If you build it, they will come! Frequently, I have heard the phrase, “if you want parents to come, feed them!” My experience has been you feed them “Relevant knowledge” about their kids they will come! Recently, I attended the Parent Summit at Hylton High school on how to get your child ready for college, obtain scholarships and financial support. Last year was the first year for this summit and over 600 showed up in the pouring rain. This year it was sold out with more than 900 parents attending. The event had two things working for it, timeliness (Saturday morning) and relevancy.

Approximately, 15 years ago I had an idea to have a Six Week Saturday Institute for parents and students. Students needing remediation and those needing acceleration were asked to attend. Students received two hours of intensive, uninterrupted instruction. Parents were required to attend three sessions (Reading, Math and Test Taking Strategies and/or classroom observations). I lacked funding for transportation. Parents of 125 students provided transportation, coffee and donuts, every single year. Parents expressed “Gratitude!” I witnessed the same gratitude expressed during the recent Hylton summit.

Caring is manifested in different ways. I have written that my own parents lacked the literacy skills or confidence to participate in school decision-making activities.

They did not have jobs that allowed them to come to school. Did they value education? In the words of Sarah Palin, "You betcha!" All you have to do is look at the kind of menial work they were willing to do. One author wrote that sometimes low income families take their children to work with them so that they can see first hand what will happen if they do not get an education. My mom took me to the home where she was a maid. It was then that I decided, I was not going to be a maid in "South Carolina" because I had to go through the back door. I had a higher goal to be a maid in "New York!" Summers maid work in New York allowed me to get a degree. A teacher became my surrogate parent and helped me set a higher goal.

College was beyond my parents' dream. In fact when I received a promotion from the classroom to supervisor, my fathers' response was, "You didn't lose your teaching job did you?" Teaching was it for him. So I responded, "No daddy, I didn't lose my teaching job." When I went home the neighbors came to see "Lillie Mae, the teacher!" I took my 5th graders to Virginia Tech (VT) because I knew that I had to plant the seed of college in their heads. I knew some had parents like my father. Researchers call it a "College-going Identity!" My girls grew up knowing they were going to college, for others the school has to plant the seed. We are the surrogates.

Finally, I want to explain something others have heard me say that may be a bit confusing. I have been known to say "It is not a parent's job to educate their children...It is our job as educators." High performing schools do not blame parents. Lorraine Monroe, a successful teacher in an urban school in New York told an audience of teachers "Stop blaming the parents, they are not even in your classroom!" I am not giving parents a pass. Consider this medical analogy. It is not the patient's job to conduct the surgery; his job is to follow the physician's instructions.

Similarly it is parents' job to support their children by providing parenting skills, and responding to recommendations. Teachers like doctors are the experts. I have met hundreds of expert teachers in my lifetime. Don't get me wrong, parental involvement works! Both of my girls were reading when they entered kindergarten. I had the skills. However, when they reached a certain grade level in math, I announced, "I'm out" and hired a tutor. Then I asked myself, "What do parents do if they cannot help with the math and lack the resources to hire a tutor?"

Annual Anticipated Earning Levels

- College diploma: \$56,788
 - High school diploma: \$31,071
 - No high school diploma: \$20,873
- Over a lifetime, the difference in salary between a high school graduate and a college graduate amounts to nearly \$1 million!!!!

Parents really do care! They all want their children to earn the million!