

IF I RAN THE SCHOOLS

IF ONLY IDEALISM WERE NOT DIMINISHED BY REALITY

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Last night I dreamed that I was placed in charge of all the public schools. I was to run the schools in the manner I thought best, and I quickly decided that there would be some big changes.

Buildings

If I ran the schools, school buildings would be smaller, and some would include more grade levels. I would embrace the old notion that neighborhoods should have a small kindergarten through eighth grade building. Junior high and middle schools would be scuttled as a failed attempt to restrain groups of hormonally charged early adolescents, and they would be replaced by my Community Schools. Every building would be attractive and well furnished. Teachers would come to know all of the students in their building, and students could become familiar with the same staff for several years. Older students would serve as mentors and leaders and helpers to younger students. Parents would be welcomed visitors and would feel a sense of ownership for their school.

All of my high schools would be limited to no more than 1000 students. They would be marked by a unique combination of high achievement expectations and the academic support to help students reach those expectations. All students would be taught and held accountable for displaying good work habits, age appropriate social interaction skills, and effective communication abilities. The focus would be on developing solid citizens who use high school as a launch pad to their next life adventure.

A new sense of stewardship and service would keep my school buildings open more often. Before and after school programs would be offered to students of all ages. Additional academic help would be offered along with a menu of recreational activities. Health Clinics would have offices in many schools. And my schools would remain open and in session throughout the summer.

Curriculum

If I ran the schools, students would be grouped by age but taught by ability level. Education would be based on the simple notion that the best teaching begins at a student's current level and moves along as fast and as far as the student can master. Rigid grade based standards would be ignored, and what used to be called "Individualized Education" would be rediscovered. Grade retention would be abolished and replaced by remedial services for students at all levels.

I would reign in the current fascination with digital technology. Early elementary students would not have access to computer labs, where computers are more likely to serve as video screen opium than as an important component of the curriculum. Instead, my elementary schools would emphasize the foundational basics of reading, writing, mathematics, and reasoning. Computers would be gradually introduced to students in late elementary school as tools to enhance learning and communication. More advance computer literacy would not be taught until high school.

Special Needs

If I ran the schools, the diversity of abilities at all grade levels would be welcomed and accommodated. The rigid distinction between special education and general education would fade. Schools would embrace the notion of inclusion while also making certain that there was relevant teaching to all ability levels. There would be less concern about a student's special education label and more focus on the educational needs of special students. The natural variability of student abilities at every age would be understood, and schools would be equally comfortable serving students bound for college, vocational school, work, or other adventures. My schools would require attendance of all children until graduation or age 19. Alternate educational programs and within school programs would be developed with individual intervention plans to meet the varying needs of all students.

My school system would offer preschool programs for all of young children. Using a Head Start model, young children and their parents would become involved in a stimulating and enriched program of early education and family support.

State Support

If I ran the schools, schools would be financed more equally. The shameful injustice of spending more money on rich suburban schools than on poor urban schools would be reversed. No longer would we feed the satiated and starve the hungry. Instead, we would rebuild and rejuvenate urban and poor school districts and treat them with exceptional care. Communities would realize that building and supporting excellent public schools is essential to our future and that uniformly excellent schools serve as the greatest means to offer equal opportunities for all of our citizens.

The misuse of group achievement tests, such as the MEAP, to measure school effectiveness would cease. These tests would be replaced with annual individual assessments of every student's core academic skills. Results of those more meaningful tests would lead to specific plans of education for each student, and would offer a genuine measure of students' academic progress.

The misguided attempt to improve high school achievement by increasing course requirements would be sent back to Lansing. The illusion that everyone should be preparing for a college degree would be tempered with the reality that most jobs now and in the future will not require one.

Control of my schools would rest with the state, and they would all offer a similar curriculum and comparable programs. Rather than bleeding urban schools through the artificial competition of charter schools, the state would insure that all schools have adequate funding, excellent teachers, and a uniform and strong curriculum.

School Rules

If I ran the schools, the hallways and classrooms would be infused with parents and grandparents and numerous caring adults from the area. Schools would not be a place where parents send their children as much as a part of the community where children and adults participate in the important enterprise of education. Community leaders and volunteers would serve as hallway monitors, mentors, tutors, and encouragers.

There would be clear standards of appearance and conduct in all my schools. Older students would come to school attired in dress pants and shirts, and younger children in uniforms. They would be greeted at the door by teachers and school staff who would reinforce a clear message: "This is school, a safe and friendly place where you are expected to learn and behave yourself." Curiously, children readily understand this when we dress them up on the Sabbath and walk into church. Children generally do not strut into their place of worship sporting exposed cleavage, sagging pants, headphones, or even Sponge Bob t-shirts. My schools would be a holy learning place that would expect nothing less.

In my high schools, athletic competition would be balanced with activity participation. There would be more emphasis on peer groups that are inclusive and welcoming and less focus on competitive sports. One hundred percent of students would participate in extracurricular activities. Our motto would be, "No student left out."

Teachers

If I ran the schools, hard working and effective teachers would be recognized and rewarded for the professionals they are. But underperforming and disengaged teachers would be quickly dispatched. All teachers would be given an annual review that included assessments by every student in their classroom and their parents. Relevant continuing education of all teachers would be required and supported.

In my schools, the need for teacher unions would no longer exist. Teachers would be inherently valued for their immensely important role with our children and their positive impact on our society, and they would be compensated accordingly. School improvement would progress unimpeded by those with conflicting interests. Contentious and unproductive relationships between teachers and school boards and administrations would no longer be cultivated, and would be replaced by a new sense of teamwork and a unified vision of educating children.

And just as I was passionately putting the finishing touches on my dream schools, a long and annoying recess bell, or actually my alarm clock, brought me back to wakefulness and reality.

But dreams and fantasies are a wonderful retreat from the frustrations of real life. And perhaps they are also a nursery for new ideas and solutions.

