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Hey Hey, Ho Ho, Pandering Has Got To Go

By Bob Sipchen (Monday's column, May 1, 2006)

My wife Pam bravely stuck her hand into our 16-year-old son's backpack the other day and pulled out something even more peculiar than usual.

Signed by the LA Unified School District's Executive Officer for Educational Services, and printed on Board of Education stationary in English and Spanish, the March 27 letter to LA Unified parents began:

"We certainly understand the sentiments and motivation behind the protests that have been occurring in the community and at many of our schools in the past several days. And, we respect the right of free speech.

"However, we would much prefer that students would limit voicing their protests to the school campus rather than leaving the campus, possibility endangering their safety and missing classroom time."

The letter concluded with this inane waffle: "We will do everything we can to ensure that those students who do leave the campus are supervised as they leave the campus."

This new weekly column will chart my quest to articulate and answer some key questions about how we educate our children.

The letter prompted me to plunge in with this one: How much responsibility does a student have for his or her education?

Today is May Day. For many high school seniors, it's the deadline for deciding whether to attend, say, UC Berkeley or Brown. It's opening day of the Advanced Placement testing season. And today, many students will find themselves again deciding whether to scale schoolyard fences in protest of proposals to toughen immigration control.

Which brings us back to the letter.

I can't be the only parent to wonder what young people, struggling with boundaries, discipline and accountability, are supposed to think when an official voice of educational authority speaks with such pandering equivocation. But let's put that aside for a moment.

Let's put aside too the question of why school officials would think it's OK to offer this wink and nudge of solidarity on a matter so purely political, let alone so divisive.

More interesting, I think, is the whole notion of walkouts.

The current wave of student demonstrations has been inspired at least in part by the release of an HBO movie about the 1968 Chicano student protests in Los Angeles: 'Walkout.'

The point of those mass demonstrations nearly four decades back was to protest the crummy education the school district was piling off on Chicanos. Students were angry that so many Latinos were dropping out of school and so few were being admitted to college. Their gusty strikes against these and other grievances caught a clueless school board's attention — in part because each absence cost the district state money.

Thirty-eight years later, the 40,000 Southern California students who abandoned their classes on that March Monday did so over immigration policy.

Whatever you think about that complex and sensitive issue, you have to acknowledge, I think, that Los Angeles' schools would be closer today to the excellence those Chicanos began fighting for in 1968 if tens of thousands of immigrants hadn't crossed the border illegally and then added their ill-prepared children to the founding system.

So immigration is problematic as a student cause. It's also the kind of ideologically amorphous movement that attracts political parasites.

A couple of weeks ago I attended an immigration rally, heavily hyped as student-led. This one was on a Saturday. Kids didn't have to skip algebra to protest. At least 39,500 of the students who had
I'm currently watching the movie "Walkout" and I cannot believe the actions of the police back in 1968. I mean all these students wanted was the same rights as non-Mexican students, but it seemed to me from the events of this TV movie (and from what I've read) that the schools didn't want this and I admire the students for taking the stand they took.

But, the police brutality on the second day of the walkouts wasn't warranted and was in breach of the constitution in my opinion, as was the eventual arrest.

If this is still occurring in 2007, then a stand should be taken in peace, not violence as was the case in 1968, particularly from the police.

Now I live in New Zealand, so I don't know what's going on in America today but I hope we don't have to see scenes like this because if something went wrong, it could turn out ugly than the peaceful protest seen in 1968.
I hate to break it to you Maria, but not liking Mexicans has nothing to do with it...the protest and the Day Without an Immigrant backfired. You want to know why? Because when American citizens pulled out of their driveways and onto the roads that day, they found wide open freeways and when they arrived to their jobs- in my case a teaching job- they found the D and if students nowhere to be found- they “walked out” as they so dramatically put it- leaving me with about 15 students eager to learn. So I pulled out a lesson I had planned for this day- a somewhat advanced essay by Howard Zinn that I had them analyze. We were able to do it because the knuckleheads weren’t there. One of the students turned to me and said “This is how school should be.” “Yes it should. And it was the least stressful day I have had in 10 years.

And Mr. Danzinger “better teachers” you ask? How about students who don’t ditch and constantly curse and say mf this and mf that? Stop blaming the teachers— you’ll be happy to know that things are changing...the gang bangers are moving out to the desert where crime is now skyrocketing and so far, every new student who has transferred in to my classes is passing and well-behaved. There have been 5 ethnically diverse students so far who have moved here in the last 2 months and have a high level of skill. This means teachers will be able to start teaching at a higher level. This is a sign that south central is slowly improving...the quality of student we are getting is ever so gradually improving...let’s hope the trend continues.

And to the person who wonders who is teaching the teachers classes because they seem to be posting during school hours? Well we have a nutrition and lunch break and a conference period....obviously you know very little about schools.

Posted by: bob.sipchen | November 24, 2006 at 10:04 PM

I think that the walk out thing really worked in a way but people still don’t like us mexican americans and it makes me mad to see all those people get hurt by cops every one has a right to every thing!!!!!!!!!

Posted by: Lloyd Kajikawa | November 24, 2006 at 07:28 PM

Beloved Readers: Let’s carry on this conversation in the comments section of the May 8th column, where I’ve already posted a final thought on this (May 1) discussion of the walkouts...

Mr. Sipchen, you certainly do sound “new” to the world of education. I’m not sure of your background but I do not sound like it is in education. After hearing and writing what Paula Craciumo said about “poor Latinos still drop out at a terrifying rate...” you still put the blame of the plight of Latinos on the backs of immigrants and “their ill-prepared children.” The fact is if you are poor in this country, immigrant or not, chances are you will have “ill-prepared children.” And have you heard about the “Williams cases” in California? 50+ years after the Brown decision we still can’t get things right and I would bet that some of the blame might fall on newspaper columns that are “ill-prepared” to intelligently talk about the issues of education in the state and/or the nation. Lastly, you are wrong in your assumption that “the most efficient way to change attitudes, change schools, and change the world” is to do all the things you suggested. That only creates a docile and apathetic people which is another reason things are the way they are.

Posted by: Lloyd Kajikawa | May 04, 2006 at 11:16 AM

Comments:

I’m humbled by the thoughtfulness of your responses (well, most of ’em). Launching the column has kept me moving the last few days, and now the evil editor people are telling me I have to write another one. At the same time, Janine and I are plodding ahead in our effort to make this blog a worthy destination, a cool clubhouse for smart people who care about schools.

If I knew how to solve all education’s problems I’d do so. Then I’d ask everyone with a kid in school to send me $1.75 in gratitude, and I’d use the money to retire to a nice little shack on a remote beach in Baja.

But School Me really is a vehicle for exploration. I’m going to wrestle with questions about how we educate our kids. I reserve the right to opine pointlessly. But that’s not to say I won’t change my mind. Let me ruminate on what’s been said here and I’ll post again with some thoughts. Thank you all!

Posted by: bob.sipchen | May 02, 2006 at 08:15 AM

While I understand the confusion about the latter and some of the sentiments in your column I want to share my view as one of the usual staff members who “escorted” students who walked out on March 27th. Over 300 students from Marshall walked out that Monday. Many I had seen at the March 25th protest. We had learned from previous walk out that to lock students in school only servies to incite them more and makes the protest about that restraint instead of the issue itself.

So that morning an Assistant Principal and I were assigned to “escort” with the students as they walked miles down Sunset Boulevard to City Hall. Along the way we made sure that streets were safely blocked off and meditated several conflicts that I felt were caused by LAPD untils harassing student protesters. I must admit that I also cleared out a 7-11 where students, more thirsty than they thought they’d be starting grabbing water and more. No one was more surprised than me when they actually listened and left the store without incident.

7-11 aside, I’ve rarely seen students better behaved than they were on that day. And anyone who says the students don’t know what they’re talking about and just want to get out of class, hasn’t talked to them. Later that day, I led a delegation to meet the mayor. The students who spoke with him were more articulate than any politician I’ve heard on the issue yet. The Marshall students reached City Hall largely without incident. The supervision that you mock in your column facilitated that.

Today, I “escorted” a much smaller group (almost 1,000 Marshall students stayed home today) Again, they were responsible and determined. They even decided as a group not to try and get
For those who did not see the ABC News special on education in the U.S. titled "Stupid in America" (http://abcnews.go.com/2020/Stossel/story?id=1500338), I'd like to point out that unlike your blanket statement about the children of undocumented aliens being "ill-prepared" is about as accurate as saying that the marches and boycotts are only about immigration.

I've known many children of immigrants who come to the U.S. only to find themselves reviewing material they have already learned in their countries in earlier grades. The only difference is that they do not know the language being used in the schools; however, once they do learn English, it's a totally different story. I was one of those kids.

The LAUSD school I went to when I first came to this country thought that sitting me in front of a TV to watch channel 2B all day was all that I deserved. Luckily, my mother was not about to buy into this sham and eventually found a school, and teachers, who were willing to do their work and believed I deserved an equal opportunity. Instead of acquiescing to a mediocre school, my mother sought out a better school in another part of the city. She did that again and again until we moved out of L.A., and to another school district, until I graduated from high school and went on to college. Not all families can do that.

Things have gotten so bad that even schools that were good at some point are now floundering. High turnover of teachers because of low pay and district red tape are the reason why, not "ill-prepared" children of immigrants.

Economics is a huge factor in both issues you mention in your column, and yet it is the one that is least mentioned by everyone that has access to a bullhorn or blog. Everything from foreign policy, globalization, immigration, to education is deeply rooted in economics. When we remove race, ethnicity, legal status, religion, etc. from the formula, we realize that it's all about money. After all, isn't that what the American Dream is all about?

I cannot agree with you more. While not a teacher, I have worked with LAUSD in creating teacher preparation programs in schools whose populations were majority Latino and with some of the lowest performance scores. I applaud the students finding a voice and using it. A sense of worthiness and awareness of their ability to create change may lead to a greater investment in their educations. The key word is maybe.

This self-empowerment will lead nowhere without educational standing. We live in a world governed by education, which in turn creates power. I have attended private school for both elementary, high school and college. The secret taught at these institutions was the importance of learning and academic achievement at all costs. Parents complained if the school even thought of reducing classroom instruction. I am currently in law school, preparing for finals. No one is not studying. There is a lesson to be learned.

My remarks are limited to the cynical idea that LAUSD doesn't care about anything but the money from student attendance. While it is true that schools obtain revenue through attendance, might it not be equally true that educators want students in school to learn?

As to the "waffling" regarding the prevention of students from leaving campus, the options are a "lock-down" or escort of the rebellious students. Having experienced a lock-down, which is really a response to a dangerous situation in which no one may leave the classroom, the escort is a better choice. You can't force students to stay in a classroom or on campus if they insist on leaving. Unless, of course, you are willing to risk charges for making physical contact with students in the effort.

Teaching is not an easy job. The problems in education are multifaceted. Administrators, educators, parents, police, community agencies, and churches, at the least, all need to work together to resolve the problems. I've watched the fingerpointing go on for ten years without a single positive result. Let's stop telling others what they need to do, and start asking ourselves what each of us needs to do.
Dear Mr. Sipchen,

I second the motion for you to add (rather, to have Jahine Kahn add) a TrackBack feature; if you had one, I could just trackback, rather than posting a comment that I published a post about your column!

http://biglizards.net/blog/archives/2006/05/sibob_sipchen_sup.html

Dafydd

P.S. Yes, I know, it looks weird, but that really is my real name. Really. Just ask Matt Welch.

Posted by: Dafydd ab Hugh | May 01, 2006 at 10:19 AM

In response to Ms. Williams,

Remember, overpopulation at many Los Angeles schools cause them to go to a year round format. Thank you for your concern though, retirement must be nice.

Posted by: Justin Howard | May 01, 2006 at 02:09 PM

I would like to add several observations to this "blog" and to the column in today's paper. 1. All the educators who have responded, to date, seem to be writing to you during the instructional day. Who is teaching their classes while they e-mail you? I suggest many of these people check their grammar and spelling before hitting the post button.

2. It is common knowledge that Mondays and Fridays are low attendance days in high school because many students think they have 4-day week ends.

3. Watch students leaving as school ends at any high school. Who has backpacks indicating homework? Check out the public libraries after school hours (Arcadia is a good example) and see who is studying. Then tell me how important education is to many of these young people.

The issues surrounding education are just as complex as the issues surrounding immigration, so I won't begin to tackle that aspect of your column. However, to call the children of undocumented workers "ill-prepared" is unfair and reeks of a prejudiced mind-state. My job as an educator is to notice and mold whatever comes to me into a productive citizen. I cannot assume that a child is ill-prepared simply because he or she is from a different country. Just because a child comes to school with a foreign educational ideology doesn't mean they are stupid. It would do us some good to look at different educational structures, because what is in place now isn't working. Our politicians are making decisions based upon an educational system that no longer exists. We cannot expect our children to remain in rank and file seating and listen to hour long lectures anymore.

In addition, our Mayor seems to believe that people who haven't seen the inside of the classroom since they were in school themselves have the expertise to make decisions for people who are actually in the classroom everyday. He also believes that keeping students in school longer will improve their education. Believe me, I can hit a rock with a feather for a long time and not make a dent until I change the way I'm trying to break it up. More instruction is not the key, better instruction is the key.

As far as recruiting better teachers is concerned - PAY US COMPETITIVE WAGES! Everyday I see qualified professionals leave teaching for a more lucrative profession. For the amount of work a qualified teacher does, to stay based solely upon what little salary they receive is asking a lot. Yet, for every highly skilled professional that leaves this profession, there is a completely unqualified person ready to take his or her place. If education in this country is to change we must start listening to the people who live it every single day.

Bob,

How about a trackback feature?

Good to see you writing.

Posted by: Rap | May 01, 2006 at 10:15 AM

awwwwweee, I can't believe all these "reasoning", "logical", "adult"-sounding excuses for suppressing voice of protest and dissent! I bet the 'adults' in 1968 Chicano protests also tried to 'reason' with their children that it is better to stay in classes and let the authorities, teachers, principals, ... address the issue of bad educational system; people who 'know better'. Better certainly than more 'students' who are after all, lets face it, just 'kids'.

But those 'kids' protested and voice their concerns in an affirmative and forceful way and the society benefited from it.

Same thing here. Why are we scaring them so much from protesting and voicing their opinion? Of course, they understand that they have to miss a day of instructions and classes but obviously they are willing to pay that price.

Posted by: Sevak Khodaverdian | May 01, 2006 at 09:54 AM

Mr. Sipchen.

It's refreshing to read an education columnist who actually sends his kids to the LAUSD. Of course, expending students to ask principals for better teachers and for teachers to give them for more work is like expecting you to go to your editor at the Times and asking him/her to assign you more work for the same pay and then going to your publisher and asking him to hire better writers so that the quality of your newspaper improves. Don't think it's going to happen.

http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/schoolme/2006/05/mondays_column.html
My guess is that if a student asked a principal for better teachers, the student would be blown off or considered a malcontent. You’re expecting that in our overcrowded schools adults actually listen to students. Maybe that’s why 1/4 of my students (I teach in the LAUSD) are at the rally today. Maybe outside of class, someone will listen to the students.

I wonder if anybody with actual education experience in the classroom can help me out...I worked in a couple of L.A. schools—with some of the lowest performing students. I was not a classroom teacher, but ran a career education program. I found—and teachers confirmed—that the Mexican immigrant children who had attended primary grades in Mexico were far ahead of the U.S. born children in most subjects, just not English. An eight grader in Mexico had been better trained in math and science, etc. than our students. If this is so, I wonder whether we might need to rethink our "contemporary wisdom" about the strain these students put on schools.

Perhaps we may find that its not "them" who is dragging us down?

In the educational enterprise, the engine is the ‘learner’. The educational apparatus (staff, plant, curriculum, etc.) is the fuel. No question that most present-day schools are geared to transmit the culture’s fundamentals to a learning-ready subject; not to the flood of non-English speaking, non-motivated, non-achieving. Efforts to create a system designed to deal with this latter difficulty have to date not been very successful. There will be little progress until the engine can function on the fuel available.

I started with the first Title One (ESEA) efforts forty years ago, and the only ‘new idea’ that proved helpful was the headstart program—‘preschool’ in today’s vernacular. The jury is still out on charter schools and other such departures from traditional schools. I served as principal in two different very large urban high schools with large ESL programs (not very effective) and a stable of traditionally trained staff working in a hostile environment consisting of neighborhood parents, students and staff who resented the imports and the bussed-in clientele unhappy with their status. You can guess at the results.

Your solution is too simplistic: A whole different system of staffing, curriculum, plant, school environment, and political climate is needed, and the cost will be enormous. (Even traditional school systems live on a starvation diet.) If and when public education is given more than expedient lip service by the populace and especially the political structure of this country, give me a call. I have 39 years’ service as a teacher and administrator in a big city in CA behind me.

I very much appreciate the word "adult" in this article.

I have met a number of people who have pulled themselves up from difficult "impoverished" and "disadvantaged" situations to become far more than day laborers, hamburger flippers, or unemployed (and unemployable). They have come from LA, Dallas, Iowa...a lot of places.

The common theme among these people was an "adult" attitude to take care of themselves and seek education, in and out of the classroom, as a means to that end. It was not necessary to have a big-name education, or advanced degrees, or go to college. What was necessary was an attitude to become a fully functional adult and contributor to whatever effort they were involved in.

This attitude sometimes arises from within, but seems most often to come from parents who take a strong interest in their kids, set boundaries and sort ideas, broadly, into the useful and the silly.

These people also seem to understand the difference between emotion and real thought. They have a set of values inside them, and apply those values in deciding how to manage their lives. In fact, that is a difference right there: they accept the challenge to manage their lives and not rely on someone else to feed and care for them.

One of my most rewarding experiences as a manager was to hire a black female as a secretary.

One of four children raised by a single mom, she was studying history in night school while she worked during the day. I started to work with her on building spreadsheets which I needed and I thought she was capable of doing. That lead to discussions about accounting and finance. She found something in this she found interesting and useful from a career standpoint. She changed her major to accounting, graduated and sat successfully for the CPA exam. She was studying all the time, though she was no drudge, was married, and kept a balanced life between work and play.

A similar thing happened to me in Germany. We were about to fire our secretary. I sat down with her and explained her computer skills needed vast improvement, and that she needed to settle down and get to work. The next Saturday she brought in a book about MS Word and commenced to work. We didn’t discuss whether Madonna was coming through on her next concert tour, we talked about how to write business letters, etc.

My point is not that I am a great mentor. My point is the two people above got the message that knowledge and attitude combined are very powerful. Unless students in LA Unified get this message, the status quo will remain.

And walkouts to show off "student power" are not going to help one tiny bit. If anything, they counter the message that should be received.

Its not often that I agree totally with any column in the modern LA Times. Your piece on student rebels is the exception. I was born in Los Angeles to Mexican immigrant parents who had a total of nine years primary school education between them. In time and with a lot of hard work and study, I graduated with honors from UCLA, Phi Beta Kappa, got an MA and a law degree. All this, to the
astonishment of most liberals, was accomplished without the presumed aid that "programs for the disadvantaged" affords. My era predated affirmative action. When I escoved myself in a study alcove in the Powell Library, I did it knowing that the responsibility for my academic performance was mine and mine alone. I set the pattern of hard work and study early in life. Observing my parents taught me to work hard and mother was well aware of the importance of education. Her encouragement was vital.

I decided the student walkout of 1968 and believe that little if any good comes from walking and shouting in the street carrying signs. As for today's demonstration, left wing "activists" have waited a long time for an event like this. I have nothing but contempt for them and their ilk. And too many "educators" are simply incompetent. Lifetime tenure and their union are complicit in the fraud they perpetrate on students and their parents.

This year for the first time in the history of the University of California, Asians become the dominant ethnicity. A greater percentage of Asians have been admitted to UC than even whites. Demonstrations did not lead Asians to this accomplishment - studying hard did. It's their culture.

I read with interest your column. I found it simplified a problem that is complex and not as readily dealt with as having the students..."stay in class and politely but firmly tell their principals to give them better teachers, their teachers to give them more work, their parents to push them harder to complete it."

The school system in the United States has been set up based on a middle class value system that does not fit the current population. The principals and administrators still have a lot of power over how their schools function and usually they gear their decisions according to their own experiences. Same with the teachers.

Better teachers? I don't think it's a matter of better teachers but a system that is set up to support teachers to deal with a diverse population. Sure, the trainings and classes all deal with the issues but I still hear teachers complain how the parents don't help out in the classroom. That could be a cultural issue. For example, it has been a past practice in schools in Mexico that parents may help out with school celebrations but it has been thought to be rude to interfere with anything the teacher does in the classroom.

It isn't as simple as having parents push harder to have their kids complete their work or have teachers give more work. Try working a couple of jobs with no one to watch your kids and make sure that they complete work that you don't understand how to do. Yes, schools are having classes to show parents how to involve themselves with their children's education. However, many of our parents are living in survival mode and haven't been able to rise to the challenge of providing more than food, clothing and shelter. I know that parents can do it but we need to learn how to support them at the place they are and I don't see the schools being able to handle it yet.

Lastly, this isn't just about education. If the places that immigrants were coming from were able to offer them enough money to support their families, they wouldn't be coming here in such large numbers. We need to change the political environments so that they can stay in their countries or if they come here, there is a viable system that supports them in becoming citizens.

I wrote the column. I'm working with Janine Kahn to get this blog moving. I hope readers will let us know what they think.

http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/schoolme/2006/05/mondays_column.html