What Educators Can Learn from Soldiers

Are educators in schools any different from soldiers in combat? From my experience, I would submit that there is no difference in their roles, and that educators need to use the combat soldier as a model for how they approach their profession.

During my 23 years in education, I have been a teacher, coach, and an elementary school principal. My 24 years in the Iowa Army National Guard include a recent year in Afghanistan as a sergeant major in an infantry battalion. In that role, I traveled extensively throughout that nation, checking on troop operations while also visiting schools and meeting with schoolchildren and educators.

In paralleling the life of a soldier to that of an educator, I find a lot of similarities. A soldier volunteers to serve. So does an educator. A soldier would like to have more resources. So would an educator.

Whenever soldiers go into combat, the stakes are extremely high. Lives and limbs can be lost, and minds altered. With educators, the stakes also are high. But while we rarely face physical harm (with the exception of tragic events such as Columbine), what we do have to fear on a regular basis is what I call academic death or injury.

Preventing Academic Death

The question that must be asked is whether educators regard their daily work at school as seriously as soldiers going into combat. When a soldier is taking fire, his or her buddies do everything possible to save that soldier from death or injury. Do we do everything possible to save an endangered child from academic death or injury?

Every person who goes into education does so with the intention of helping children and doing good things. However, somewhere along the line, I believe educators tend to become corrupted by issues like contract lengths, inadequate salaries, insufficient resources, and lack of time. That’s when you hear, “We can’t get this or that done because we don’t have enough money or time or resources or …”

These are easy excuses to use when things get tough, and they are traps that we have allowed ourselves to fall into too often. They subtly suck us in because we are not faced with graphic evidence of failure. On the battlefield, wounded soldiers are easy to see and identify. Instantly, all those nearby do everything they can to help rally and save them. There is no quibbling about how to go about it. A plan is made and it is carried out.

Why Don’t We Act Like Soldiers?

However, in education we tend not to act quite as quickly. Why is that? Is it because the contract day ends at 4 p.m. and we won’t act after that because of contract agreements? Is it because we have to figure out how to pay someone more money beyond a certain time? Is it because we already believe that we don’t have the resources the child may need? Or, finally, have we developed an educational society in which we must make everyone content in our decisions before we move forward to save our children?

In the meantime, children in our schools could be dying an academic death. Depending on how quickly we get to them, they could be crippled for life or completely dead to the academic world. As educators, we cannot hesitate to act because of perceived roadblocks or any of the items mentioned above.

Making a Commitment

The next time we think that we have been working as hard as we can to help children, we need to ask ourselves if that’s really true. Think about the commitment of a soldier in combat and ask yourself if we have made the same commitment to education. Think about how many children in your school are suffering from potential academic death or injury. They are out there and we have to take action.

It is hard, long, and difficult work, requiring more heart, more courage, and more concern if we are to rescue endangered children. But if we focus like soldiers on this goal, to the exclusion of other issues, we can make our education system better than it has ever been.

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HERE’S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author, a distinguished veteran of both education and military service, believes that educators should emulate soldiers by putting aside other issues to focus on preventing “academic death” of at-risk students. Do you agree? Can a military mindset overcome traditional obstacles to speedy action?

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