Befriending Our Critics and Remembering Our Mission

A nyone with a pulse these days knows that public education has many critics. Make that many, many critics. Some of these critics are even challenging the very existence of our system of publicly financed and publicly run schools. Their choruses of “something new, something different, something now!” seem to be politically motivated and perhaps they are. But many of those who are throwing up their hands are people like us, with deep wells of affection, experience, and respect for public education. For many of you, the incessant drumbeat of “failure, failure, failure” can easily distract you from your mission as you spend precious time and energy answering the critics. This is where I believe I can help. In the few paragraphs allotted to me, I want to tell you how I think we can respond to this drumbeat of criticism with serenity.

First, I believe we really need to “befriend” our critics and listen deeply to their ideas. We must assume that most of those raising their voices believe just as much as we do in the value of free education for all children. We must grant that their criticisms are principled and come from their genuine frustration with the deep-seated inequalities that doom so many children to second-class educations. Indeed, they may well have the same passion as we do to see these inequalities disappear.

Friendship and Serenity

As my friend Vashti Washington, the associate superintendent of a South Carolina district, says, friendship is a two-way street and we must find ways to bring these “friends” into our schools so that they can better understand the realities we face. During her tenure as principal of Mt. Zion Elementary School in John’s Island, South Carolina, her “open school” policy afforded numerous beneficial “good friends” relationships, which invariably led to supportive partnerships. So, let’s follow her example and thank our critics for caring as much as we do about our children, and let’s welcome them into our schools.

But how do we remain serene even while hearing all those negative comments directed at us? We can do it by recalling the reasons why we chose a career in public education. I was reminded of this the other day when I talked with one of those educators who so embodies the true spirit of public education. After listening to Yvonne Allen, my faith in the importance of public education has been firmly anchored and my serenity in the face of criticism has been restored.

A former NAESP president and a National Distinguished Principal, who is now the Memphis regional director for the Tennessee Department of Education, Yvonne is the recipient of so many of the nation’s highest education honors that I can’t even begin to list them. She is justly famous for transforming a very poor rural and predominantly black school into a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence—literally with her own hands.

You should know that Yvonne is the child of a sharecropper who had never learned even to write his own name—until she taught him how. But let her tell this inspirational story.

“Years later, Yvonne and her father were featured in a documentary movie. Dad signed his name and held it up for the camera. And he was smiling. Whenever he signed his name, you would see this glow in his eyes because he no longer had to make that X. Out the window, you could see his cows and the cotton fields where he had to labor so many backbreaking hours of his life. But all I could see was the gleam in his eye. That’s why I’m just so passionate about public education.”

When I heard her tell this story, I guess you could say I heard the “gleam” in her voice, the gleam that comes when a child born into poverty has taken a firm step on a new path toward a better life.

The knowledge that what we are doing in public education is right and good allows me to embrace all that criticism with serenity. And you should, too. 🙌

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