

When advancing a base or two is no longer good enough; everyone needs to make it across home plate

Earlier this summer I had the opportunity to spend quality time with a renowned educational consultant and speaker, Dr. Luis Cruz. Over dinner he and I discussed his use of a baseball metaphor earlier in the day where he was able to simply, yet so eloquently, describe the critical role that the K-12 educational system plays in ensuring lifelong success for today's youth. Although a powerful conversation at the time, it wasn't until last week's Walla Walla Sweets game, where we lost a nail-biter to Bend 3-2, did the wisdom of his analogy truly sink in. As the game went on, and the sun began to set on what was a glorious Walla Walla evening, despite advancing ten runners on bases over various innings, we just couldn't seem to get anyone to round third and make it across home plate for that critical tying run. Even Sweet Lou's crowd energizing antics couldn't spark a two-out rally to keep the drives alive.

As dusk began to settle at Borleske I recalled my mealtime conversation with Dr. Cruz where he explained to me that in the past not every student needed to get to home plate in our K-12 system in order to be successful (home plate being his metaphor to describe students graduating high school, prepared for post-secondary education). His conclusion is backed up by solid data. Research shows that as recent as the early 1970's, those who failed to finish high school still made up one third of the 91 million working US citizens. Despite not completing their formal K-12 education, many were still able to find work to provide for their families. In addition, some forty percent of the US workforce maintained gainful employment with only a high school diploma. This left a mere 28% of the labor market who held some sort of college education. Fast forward to 2010, the US workforce ballooned to 143 million, where now only 11% of those working were without a diploma, and those who maintained some level of post high school education doubled to 59%. By 2020 the workforce is expected to crest 164 million, where nearly two thirds of the labor market will hold some level of post-secondary training or credential, leaving little room for mere high school diploma bearers, and even less for non-graduates (Georgetown, 2013).

As my family and I drove home from the heartbreaking loss (although the fireworks show at Borleske afterwards made the defeat a little easier to swallow), I got to thinking how this macro-level view plays so acutely right here in Walla Walla. Rewind the clocks back 54 years to 1963, an era many long-standing locals may remember as the year the "new" WaHi opened its doors to students. Boasting 4873 pupils districtwide in 1963, only 16% of Walla Walla's student population were considered to be living in poverty. Estimates also reveal a predominantly anglo population, where less than 10% of the district's student population were considered minority (US Dept of Commerce). Although certainly not true for every student, suffice to say that many pupils of this era were probably fortunate enough to already be staring down 2nd or 3rd base by the time they even reached the district's doorsteps. It was altogether a different time where second language acquisition, generational poverty, ACE's, methamphetamines, and other societal impacts were not near as prevalent. Clearly Walla Walla Public Schools did a remarkable job for most of its students. The stories I have heard and successes of prior graduates from this era that we continue to laud today reveal that many students indeed made it across home plate. For those that may have stumbled at second or third base, an abundant workforce market and opportunities still awaited them for a life of success and accomplishment.

Fast forward to 1988, this marking the first year of teaching for thirty-year veteran educators this upcoming year. The student population in Walla Walla grew slightly from its 30 year predecessor to just over 5000, while poverty crept up from 16% to around 26%, and just one in ten students were considered minority. Although one would assume the slight uptick in poverty and societal influences may have landed some students on first or second base, most still found themselves rounding third on their way to home plate by the end of their high school career. Boasting a graduation rate of about 70% (NCES), comparable to the rate of their counterparts in the mid-sixties, Walla Walla Schools continued to produce outstanding graduates and scholars. And for those who didn't quite finish, the labor market of the eighties still maintained a demand for non-diploma bearing workers.

It is now 2017, and our thirty-year veteran staff preparing for this fall face a far different student population than they did in 1988 when they first began. The student population has ballooned to nearly 6000 students, poverty levels have more than doubled from 26% in 1988 to 56% last school year (three and half times more poverty than in 1964), and student diversity has quadrupled from 10% to 40% (OSPI) over their teaching career alone. Due to the barriers that now face so many students who enter our doors, many no longer find themselves staring down 2nd or 3rd base like they did in 64 or 88, only needing a sacrifice fly or bunt (my analogy for a little "boost" from the K-12 system) to drive them home. For many of today's students, even reaching first base seems like an untenable expectation. And despite these many challenges, increased rigor, and never-ending legislative mandates, Walla Walla Public Schools is graduating more students than ever before (~80%), and seeing record numbers of students off to post-secondary education (~66%), far exceeding the state average.

Despite our many successes, we can and must do better; too many of our students are still not getting to home plate. Although the game has not changed, the players most certainly have, and it is incumbent upon us to implement a game plan that better responds to the current assets of our youth. In order to reach all students, we must equip our staff with the training and resources to meet a population that is staggeringly different than when many of them began their teaching career. We must improve alignment and coherence of our systems and programs to maximize efficiencies in order to ensure improved outcomes for all. We must embrace and support our diverse population and their families to ensure high levels of engagement and connection. And finally, we must understand that the social and emotional challenges facing our youth are unlike we have ever experienced before, requiring different approaches and responses.

For these reasons, our Board of Directors have implemented bold strategies to tackle these goals, targeting our limited resources to address critical levers that are geared toward getting all students across home plate, regardless of how they enter our system or the challenges that await them throughout their schooling. Together, armed with the right strategies, approaches, and educator investments, we will achieve our vision of developing Washington's most sought-after graduates!