

OP-ED: WE MUST LEARN TO TEACH THE ENTIRE CHILD

BRIAN P. GATENS AND MATTHEW J. MURPHY | MAY 4, 2016

Emphasizing the academic aspects of education to the detriment of others will not help develop life-long learners



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Public schools have been, and always will be, primarily academic institutions. Yet schools are doing a disservice to students if they exclusively emphasize the academic side of their students' experiences. We need to be that and so much more.

As UCLA education scholar Mike Rose wrote, "Parents send their kids to school because, in addition to preparing them for the world of work, they want them to learn how to learn, to learn how to work with other people, and to find things that interest them. They want them to become good people."

Rose, who studied the types of schools children need in order to thrive, captures the essence of what school is for. He reminds us that while academics is central to why children attend school, it's incorrect to think academics is their sole reason for being there.

In terms of relative quality, it's incorrect to believe the value of schools is solely reflected by dubious magazine rankings, standardized test scores, number of grads who attend Ivy League institutions, or other superficial performance indicators. The very finest schools strive to educationally enlighten students through a broad array of academic, extracurricular, and social-focused offerings.

Simply put, school is more than just school. It's a place that's part of a student's present experiences, as well as a preparation for whatever their lives will become. It should and can be where students discover passion and purpose; develop critical skills; and learn how to be contributing, dependable members of our pluralistic society. It would be a mistake if we thought students' entire time at school should consist solely of academic coursework.

And any overemphasis on standardized testing reflects an unfortunate tendency to blur the lines between how adults and children learn and process information. We're approaching a time in which a generation of students has completed its school experience in the shadow of high-stakes tests and adult-level pressure to attend the "right" college. As a result, schools have distanced themselves from providing extracurricular, vocational, and even academic offerings that don't involve training specific to math and language arts skills. The logic is simple: tell someone particular skills will determine their success or failure, and that's what they'll focus on. Not only do our students deserve better, but also we must remember that a rich base of research supports a broader, more comprehensive slate of offerings.

So what should schools do?

First, they should seek to help develop the whole person via a sweeping menu of academic, vocational, and extracurricular offerings. Arts, music, advanced classes, volunteer opportunities, and clubs are just a few examples of what our schools should make available. In addition, parents

should be encouraged to support those classes by attending art shows, performances, and student exhibitions. Remember -- we pay attention to what we value.

Second, we should expect a more balanced role for standardized testing related to the daily activities of students, keeping in mind that no proven correlation exists between such tests and future professional success. Finally, we need to balance the academic workload so children will be encouraged to participate in a range of offerings during the actual school day. To bolster this effort, we should enthusiastically recognize the efforts of students who play an active role in the entire life of the school, rather than focusing praise exclusively on high academic performers.

For all the “noise” swirling around America's public schools, they collectively remain the most successful public education system in history -- and a consistent driver for the most fluid, powerful economy the world has ever seen. The Bergen County Association of School Administrators takes distinct pride in the quality of our county's schools, acknowledging that their long-term success is a result of hard work by our boards of education, dedication of our teachers, strong partnerships with students' homes, support of our communities, and personal leadership of our association's members.

In Bergen County and beyond, our public schools can always be improved. But we must not forget that they're among our society's most effective tools for helping young people develop into well-rounded and engaged adults.

Brian P. Gatens is superintendent of schools in Emerson and secretary of the Bergen County Association of School Administrators. Matthew J. Murphy is superintendent of Ramsey schools and president of the Bergen County Association of School Administrators.