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SPECIAL EDITION
MONTHLY LETTER TO FRIENDS OF
THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM
No. 88

SUMMER, 2005

Dear Friends:

Summer is finally here, and if you're like the rest of the country you're trying to get out of the office, away from your computer, and into the sun. But that doesn't mean you need to miss the monthly opines of *Chalk Talk*, my Weblog that officially launched this year. So I've provided this special edition of THE MONTHLY LETTER – a hard copy “dog days of summer” Blog for you to read on the plane, in your chair by the pool, or on your beach blanket. Happy summer vacation to you and don't forget to check *Chalk Talk* in September for more great stuff on anything and everything education.



Seeing Red

A Blog on unions, self-esteem and falling behind

Candace de Russy is a Regent in New York, which is equivalent to being a state board member. In her years on the Board of Regents she's seen plenty of crazy ideas. So her response to the proposal by the Big Apple's teachers union to start a charter school makes a lot of sense: Doesn't the UFT already run 1,200 public schools? If the union is so hell bent on doing it differently, why not do things differently in the 1,200 schools where its contracts already dominate all operations - from hours, to days, to cafeteria duty, to hiring and firing and more?

It makes sense that union leaders would want to show the world they are tolerant of reform by tackling the whole system. As the *New York Post* argues, they could pick up the phone and get their godfather Sheldon Silver, Speaker of the House, to lift the cap and increase the number of charter schools if they thought it was a good idea. Silver could get rid of silly education rules, too, if they wanted. That would make sense to a group that was interested in reforming education. But not a lot of things make sense in education.

Consider the “color purple” which once best signified Alice Walker's challenging, compelling Pulitzer-Prize winning novel. Now the color purple is the new hue of choice for teachers whose education schools have led them to believe that red is just way too harsh a color to use to mark up a child's paper. One of the smartest scholars on the block, Christina Hoff Sommers, says:

“Children who are protected from frank criticism written in ‘harsh’ colors are gravely shortchanged. In the global economy that awaits them, young Americans will be competing with other young people from all parts of the world whose teachers do not hesitate to use red pens. What is driving the new solicitude?”

“Too many educators, parents and camp counselors today are obsessed with boosting the self-esteem of the children in their care. These adults not only refrain from criticizing their young charges when they perform badly, they also take pains to praise them even when they've done nothing to deserve it.

“But two decades of research have failed to show a significant connection between high self-esteem and achievement, kindness, or good personal relationships. Unmerited self-esteem, on the other hand, is known to be associated with antisocial behavior — even criminality. Nevertheless, most of our national institutions and organizations that deal with children remain fixated on self-esteem.”

I would add a more practical reason for allowing kids to “see red:” it’s noticeable, it provides contrast, and practically speaking, boys, in particular, do not notice colors that do not contrast. But for all kids, red is definitive, it’s bright, it’s clear and not wishy-washy.

Wishy-washy. In a world that Tom Friedman describes as “flat,” we hardly need any more wishy-washy. Or call it complacent. Friedman, a Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist reports that this country has fallen behind... again. Young people in other nations can increasingly “connect, collaborate and compete, more easily and cheaply than ever before. We, alas, are coasting along as if we have all the time in the world.”

Consider the results of a report that surveyed 90,000 high school students, which Friedman addresses in a recent *New York Times* column. “Just 56 percent of the students surveyed said they put a great deal of effort into school work. Even though 55 percent said they studied no more than three hours a week, 65 percent reported getting mostly As and Bs.”

Seventy-five percent of colleges have to offer remedial education. Fully, 22 percent of students need math remediation in their first year. But when U.S. students are asked how they are doing, they’re overwhelmingly positive. The international math and science tests given every few years finds that Asians, who outperform U.S. students, are not nearly as happy with their performance, while Americans, who are always at the bottom of the pack, are perfectly content. Complacent.

The color purple is complacent. Not requiring grammar to learn to write is complacent, too.

Stanley Fish, dean emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago, teaches writing. Each year he inherits students who start out ill equipped. He laments:

“We are at that time of year when millions of American college and high school students will stride across the stage, take diploma in hand and set out to the wider world, most of them utterly unable to write a clear and coherent English sentence. How is this possible? The answer is simple and even obvious: students can't write clean English sentences because they are not being taught what sentences are.”

This is true. Students across the demographics — poor, middle and higher income — are encouraged to think the great thoughts that they have been told they naturally possess. They are told to write journals on free topics just to write; but rarely does a full grammar or sentence-graphing lesson get snuck in, unless you've got an old-fashioned teacher or traditionalist school.

But don't just take my word for it. Consider the findings by the Public Agenda Foundation in a survey of education professors about what they feel are the most important lessons for teachers to impart. Most normal people — like parents — would be shocked at the results. Only 19 percent of these teachers-of-teachers believe that “stressing grammar as well as correct spelling and punctuation is ‘absolutely essential’ to impart to prospective teachers.” Rather, they believe overwhelmingly that teachers must understand “the importance of lifelong learning...” which are a few words strung together that, in reality, mean nothing.

So what does this do to our nation? I interviewed several young graduates for an entry-level position recently. The level of their expectations for a first job amazed me. Each of them, in his or her own way, exuded a degree of cockiness that, once upon a time, interviewees were harshly warned against showing. Each of the four wanted me to know all about his or her own interests. None of them had taken the time to learn much about the issues this organization covers. In fact, none of them even wanted to offer a judgment about the issues (judgments, like the color red, are way too strong!).

But perhaps most alarming, none of the four in my unscientific sample could demonstrate to me a time when they had been under pressure, or required to perform at levels above which they had ever performed before. One in particular went so far as to say that the reason she was not going to go into her chosen journalism field was because (at the ripe old age of 22) there was just too much pressure there.

It's all coming together now. The color red is too much pressure. Requiring mastery in math before high school, and high stakes tests, and No Child Left Behind — it's all pressure. Learning grammar and sentence structure is not as much fun as spending your days watching “American Idol” or reading *People* magazine.

Students report just “getting by” to the researchers at Public Agenda. They know we’re not pressuring them, and at first, they don’t much like it. But it becomes their habit, their pattern and their expectation.

And yet, do we really believe our most respected leaders — from Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt to John F. Kennedy — sacrificed to ensure we rid our nation of its competitive juices? Do you think they would have been happy just “getting by?” Had they taken that tact, Lincoln may have given in to the eleven succession states; Roosevelt would have managed to stay home, and Kennedy would have never responded to Sputnik. With lessons like we’re teaching today, it’s likely these men may never have found people to wage their battles with them.

As Tom Friedman opines, “In a flat world, where everyone now has access to all the same coaching techniques, training methods and scouting reports — a more focused, motivated team always beats a collection of more talented but complacent individuals.”

To compete in a global world, to maintain the freedoms that most of our nation’s founders died for, and to spread good and perpetuate a free society require that our children understand, accept, and be prepared to work under pressure. It requires they keep exploring, meeting new expectations and remain open to not just the color red but — even “worse” — unmitigated correction and criticism scribbled on the papers they write or the ideas they deliver.

Our schools should demand more and deliver highly educated graduates who can handle challenges and pressure. The stark evidence of the continuing achievement gap in America, up against interest group opposition to raising the bar and holding schools accountable, makes education change all the more critical. Reforms that demand and produce high standards, accountability and freedom are guaranteed to turn complacency on its ear.

When the Baltimore, Maryland Teachers Union demands more money in the face of declining enrollment and dismal test scores; when the national unions sue the federal government over accountability requirements; when school boards fight the opening of a charter school in Marlborough, Massachusetts because its curriculum is advanced; and when New York City’s union fights to open its own charter school — when all the while it has opposed charters, until just now when there are precious few charter slots left to hand out in the state of New York — policymakers should echo Regent de Russy and demand: “fix your schools first, and then come see us about your demands.”

They can start by changing the way teachers are hired, compensated and rewarded, by allowing schools — not districts — to set policies, and by being willing to work for — or lose a job over — student achievement.

With red pen, high expectations and lots of pressure.


Jeanne Allen