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Thursday, March 3, 2005

More education (sorry, baseball fans)

My old friend Julio posted a comment to my last entry. I responded to part of it there, but I thought I'd put some thoughts and responses up on the main section here, as well, for those who don't descend to comment-land.

First, One of the key issues in education today that has been put on the back burner, is tracking. Many of the issues we see in high schools today is students that have been tracked at early grade levels and are left with a lack of motivation to excel, since in their minds they are "stuck" taking certain courses. There are definitely issues with tracking that I see within my school. As I mentioned, due to tracking on a macro (city-wide) level, we don't have that many strong kids in the first place, and now the strong ones we do have are being placed in different classes from the other ones.

I happen to have drawn one of the weakest ninth grade classes this year (I think; it's not really official). However, since it was apparently based only on reading level, I do have some kids whose mathematics ability is quite good. That said, it's an incredibly tough class to manage because many of them gave up on school and being able to do well a long time ago, just as Julio mentions. The kids in there who are failing run the gamut: there's the thug archetype; the immature kids who, less than not caring, just don't yet realize the importance of school; the socially-awkward kids who are trying to gain acceptance and neglecting work in the process; and then there are the kids who don't really fit any of these but just don't have the mathematical ability to succeed in high school.

With few real peer role models in class, there's nothing really driving these kids toward any level of success.

Now, I do believe in the necessity of tracking to some degree. Having every kid in a high school in the same math class isn't good for the kids who want to be doing calculus while their peers are still struggling to master geometry. In addition, it's tough on teachers, not just to try to create lessons that meet the variety of needs their kids have, but also, as I alluded to before, in management. When kids are bored, they become problems. When you add problems to a class that already has kids who would be problems in almost any setting, it's a recipe for disaster.

That said, there's a difference between leveling and tracking. When you track somebody, they can never get off that track. When you put them in rooms that are a little bit level-homogenous and give them the opportunity to work to the next level, that's not so onerous. Sure, you lose the benefits that heterogenous classes provide (the aforementioned peer role models, for example), but it allows teachers to not have to worry about meeting five or six different levels of need within one class.

This sounds like common sense, but there are plenty of places where being in a certain science or math or English class in the freshman year dooms the student to never be able to get to Advanced Placement or honors classes later on. Some children bloom late and tracking does that group a great disservice.

Julio also mentions What educators both in K-12 and higher education are faced with today is standards-based education, one of the most controversial methods to educate youth. Adding to the pot, the fact that schools are struggling financially, doesn't make the situation any better. Now, I hadn't ever thought about strict standards causing issues in higher education the way they do in K-12, but, as I consider my teacher education program at Lehman College, I realize that Julio is, of course, dead on. My current education class (essentially a teaching methods course for 11th-12th grade math) revolves around the graphing calculator and how to teach pre-calculus and calculus using it. On the first day of class, the professor explained the evolution of the course: it had formerly been a simple methods class, not necessarily focusing on technology more than any other class. Lehman, however, wants to have and maintain NCATE accreditation because it supposedly indicates that "the Unit's Programs in Teacher Education meet the highest national standards." In order to get this accreditation, Lehman needed to institute a greater focus on technology, so they re-arranged how this course was taught to satisfy the accreditation group.

That Lehman is forced to use technology in its classrooms is not a bad thing, of course. The problem is that the school has to follow what appear to be rather rigid rules (another example is that the syllabi in every one of my education classes has looked exactly the same) and structure its program precisely as NCATE tells it to. There's great potential here for stifling of creativity, which is precisely the same problem we find in the K-12 public schools. It's hard to come up with new, creative ways to teach when you are being told exactly the model of instruction to use, exactly the timing the various components of your lesson must use, and so on. (Thankfully, my school backs off of us a lot; we're still teaching the same curriculum as everyone else in the city, and on the same pace, but the infamous Workshop Model is great

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de-emphasized in favor of finding whatever method or methods work best in any given lesson or unit. There are other schools in my building where the teachers are not so lucky to be able to develop their own methods, though.)

If innovation and creativity can't be used in the classroom, whether at the K-12 or higher-ed level, the country's education system is going to fall into greater disarray than ever. There can't be a lack of oversight, of course, and teachers have to be held accountable (though not in the usual way, by examining the test scores of their students), but let's bring this back to baseball. A general manager often has great say over what goes on in his organization. He doesn't control the budget, but he controls almost everything else. He is, like Billy Beane, like Branch Rickey, allowed to innovate in order to make his team better. If his innovations just end up being wheels spun uselessly, he loses his job. If his innovations work, or if he is able to realize when things aren't working and fix them, he keeps his job.

If I'm the general manager of my classrooms, then I'm essentially Brian Cashman, of the Yankees, at this point. Cashman is, it seems, a GM in name only. George Steinbrenner seems to be calling a lot of the shots. When he wants a big-name pitcher, regardless of the cost, Cashman has to get it done. When someone on high decides that I'm supposed to teach the slope-intercept form of a line to kids who still count on their fingers, I have to get it done.

Posted by jason in Education at 15:56

Great insights Jason! I am a reader of your site, may not be the most avid, but from time-to-time reading up on the A's (one of my favorite teams) breaks up the monotony of daily life.

Anonymous on Mar 4 2005, 18:55