



An Educator's Woes

After just three years as a Florida educator, I have grown jaded by all facets of education. Between the lack of administrative or parental support, and the continually lowered standards set by school districts, teachers have become more powerless and less influential in the classroom. What's worse is that I am one of many teachers who feel this way!

Beginning with the decreased standards, one must only look at changes in graduation requirements over the past 10 years. In Florida's Pasco County School District, 8th grade middle-school students who have failed any of their core classes, or their Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test for any of the classes, are placed into what is called the "Promotion Recovery Program." This program consists of 11 days of subject-related worksheets for the students to complete. Upon completion, the student is given the go-ahead to graduate into high school. This program not only undermines the effort put forth by the teacher and the other students that worked for an entire year on the course material, but sends ill-prepared students to the next grade level, making them some other teacher's problem.



It gets worse. A lack of federal allocations forced J.W. Mitchell High School in Trinity, Florida, to accept low-level, low-achieving students into their Honor's Program last year. Because the new group of students did not have high reading or writing skills, the freshman English teachers had to change the curriculum, further lowering the standards, to accommodate these children. As a result, incoming freshmen were asked to read sixth grade-level novels for their summer reading.

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The greater irony is that teachers are still held accountable for the test scores that the students earn, while the students are given a waiver. As part of President Obama's "Race to the Top" program, standardized test scores are going to be used to determine teacher's bonuses, salaries, and which schools will receive federal grants.

Many teachers are unwilling to lower their personal classroom standards, despite the decrease in standards that seems to be engulfing the education system. However, these teachers will often find themselves confronted by angry parents, and in turn, angry administrators. As an example, I have a



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strict homework policy in my class that requires the students to turn in any assignments within three days of the due date. Past three days, the students earn a "0" for that assignment. I firmly believe that this requirement will prepare students for real-world expectations. When my principal discovered that nearly 1/3 of the students were failing my class, he questioned my grading policies. I explained that the students were refusing to turn in assignments, whether they were as simple as a crossword puzzle or as difficult as an essay. His response was that I needed to change my homework policy, so that I either give less homework, grade less homework, or institute a minimum grade of 50 percent for every assignment.

Additionally, in the past few years, presidential administrations have focused on science and math in education, leaving English and history in the dust. More than anyone, the government should recognize the importance of communication skills and national pride, which can only be derived from historical knowledge. Likewise, the emphasis on technology has forced teachers to incorporate more technology in the classroom, which more often than not, distracts students from the purpose of the lesson. Teachers who need to prepare students for multiple-choice and written standardized tests find very little time to train students in technology, when the mere act of teaching students to write complete sentences is a never-ending battle.

Teachers are expected to differentiate their lessons and assignments to accommodate all learning modalities, yet the standardized test for which they are supposed to prepare those students makes no such accommodations. It is an extremely daunting task to make adequate yearly goals when the standards we are forced to maintain throughout the school year are relatively low, while the standards set by many of the state tests remain relatively high. Adding to the dilemma is a lack of parent involvement for additional support at home. Many parents insist that school is *not* a child's job, and that when the school day ends at 3 p.m., so should the work.

In addition to the lack of academic support from parents, parental discipline seems to be a long-forgotten memory. I recall having written a student a disciplinary referral, and in an attempt to explain what prompted the referral to the parent, was asked to hold off on the conversation until they return from their surprise weekend trip for their child.

There has been a great deal of speculation about the minimal support from parents in recent years. In Susan Gregory Thomas' article "A Teacher's Guide to Generation X," she lists herself among the Generation X parents (those born between 1965 and 1979) and explains their constant insistence to defend and protect their child. She cites a 2004 study conducted by the research firm Reach Advisors, which states that Generation X parents "went through its all-important formative years as one of the least parented, least nurtured generations in U.S. history."

Thomas adds, "Half of all GenXers' parents are divorced. We were the first to be raised in record numbers in daycare, and some 40% of us were latchkey kids. We've been taking care of ourselves since we started going to school, and we don't trust authority figures because they weren't trustworthy when we were growing up." These parents will go over the teacher's head if they do not get what they want from them, and unwilling to take on these parents, administrators often succumb to their demands.

The Generation X parents consider themselves major proponents of their children, unaware that their constant pampering and aid enables their children to work less, and prevents them from developing into self-advocates. With the threat of these parents looming overhead, praise for exceptionalism has become a thing of the past, as mediocrity is now what is being encouraged. Parents are unhappy if they feel their children are not receiving the attention they deserve, regardless of their academic or behavioral



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performance. Students that were behavioral issues throughout their entire academic career who may have made some positive changes are greeted with reward after reward, while students that behaved appropriately since day one are ignored.

One thing is for sure. Years from now, when I am in my 50s and need to visit a doctor, I will be terrified by the prospect of being treated by the person who walks through the door. This generation of students will be the future professionals, politicians, doctors, and lawyers, and that is a scary prospect. Without change, this downward spiral will be irreparable. Most importantly, despite popular opinion, throwing money at the problem is not a solution.



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