

COMMENTARY

Educational Opportunity Is About More Than Access

By Kimberlee Everson

In the course of the current presidential campaign, the candidates have offered a range of views on how to improve K-12 schooling. Amid competing calls for free preschool, revised education standards, and universal college access, it is time to finally realize that families, not schools, are the most important force in children's lives. It's time we embrace family rights as a cornerstone to sound education policy as we look to the future for our nation's children.

So what would a new set of family rights for the educational arena entail? I propose that all children have the right to find and follow their passions; be inspired by creative, motivated teachers; and have sufficient time and opportunity for developing relationships.

Few people would not agree that there is a base of knowledge that children need to build on for them to reach their potential. However, beyond this base, there are unlimited paths for children to explore.

Some children may grow up to excel at professional dog-sledding or become successful cartoonists. Others may wish to become experts in the lives of Benjamin Franklin, Harriet Tubman, or Robin Williams. For others, success might look like creating their own online startup selling knitted socks. And we hope that some will cure cancer, obesity, and AIDS or build the next generation of space shuttles.

Are we certain that what the world needs is more than 50 million public school children who meet the *same* academic goals? Is it possible that *true* opportunity is the opportunity to develop specific expertise? Might the success of a nation, in the face of a future that no one can predict perfectly, rest on the diversity in educational goals—in the same way that biodiversity ensures the success of a species?

What if the true educational gap for disadvantaged children is related to the opportunity to develop their passions? What if children need more time for free play, recess, or self-directed learning and less time spent in structured preschools or prepping for tests?

Teachers increasingly are subjected to evaluations largely based on student test scores. Few would argue that striving for high test scores is a bad idea. The problem is that, in the quest for higher test scores, we are losing something of greater value.

The hours in a school day and a teacher's energy are not limitless resources. Most teachers already work as hard as they can. Higher test scores come at a price. One of those costs is often teacher enthusiasm, motivation, and passion.

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Teachers need the freedom to be passionate about what they teach. They need to be respected as the inspiring leaders they can so often be to our youths—when they are not hampered by needing to teach to a test.

What if teachers had some room left over in their teaching day for sharing their own passions with the children? What if one teacher taught students chess, another taught watercolor painting or filmmaking, and another shared an interest in the mechanics of flight—and what if none of those subjects was part of the "core" curriculum? What would happen? Would the opportunity gap for children widen or would it narrow? Would teachers and, thereby, children be more excited about coming to school each day? Would general academic performance improve?

There are great teachers out there who are already sharing their passions. But for many, the burdens of accountability and other demands have become a straitjacket.

Most psychotherapists would tell you that a person's happiness in life is closely related to the quality of his or her relationships with family and friends. Yet in school, students are shushed and asked not to socialize during class, and recess—the one time in the school day when students really have time to explore and develop relationships with their peers—has taken a back seat to test preparation.

Excessive homework or school sports, particularly at the high school level, often contribute to insufficient quality family or friend time. Would a careful recalibration of how much time students are devoting to these activities ensure an increase in quality relationships? Of course not. But it would, at the very least, provide an opening for those students—and their families—who would like to lead more balanced lives.

What if families were given one night a week that was guaranteed to be homework- and school-activity-free? What if the school provided endless ideas—but not "assignments"—for families on how to best use that time? Some families might not take

advantage of the opportunity, but wouldn't many families become just a notch stronger? Wouldn't children be just a bit happier and, thereby, better able to focus on their schoolwork? It would be interesting to find out.

Education policy should not prescribe children's access to institutions at the expense of access to personal development, growth, capability, or happiness. All students attending free and high-achieving schools from preschool to college is certainly a beautiful ideal, but if these very institutions quash passion or inhibit relationship-building, then the loss to our nation may be greater than the gain.

We are approaching a period that has potential for some shifts in educational policy, particularly with last year's passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act. And as presidential candidates continue putting forward their visions for the nation's schools, it is my hope that they will advocate for rights of families that extend beyond access to buildings, a uniform curriculum, or high-test-score-producing teachers. It is my hope that they will feel teachers' desire for freedom to inspire and children's desire to explore the world with passion. It is my hope that they will extend *true* rights to all families.

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