

Parent Power: Fueling the Education Revolution

How many parents does it take to match the power and influence of a roomful of Ph.D.'s on a child's education?

Just one. But this parent must be passionate, informed, and prepared to allow for a different way of learning for their child.

Researchers have continually found that parents have an extremely positive impact on the quality of their child's education. This is why the parent should be more powerful. The parent is the one that cares most about and bears the responsibility of their child's education. Other than the child himself, the parent has the most to gain or lose. Unfortunately, in many critical areas of their child's education, they don't have as much power as they should have.

Everyone has a different opinion about how the child's education should proceed. Every teacher in every classroom thinks a little differently about how children should learn, while researchers and administrators have their own opinions. While I sincerely believe most teachers do have a kid's best interests in mind, quite often their hands are tied by the standardized testing and core curricula they must teach that's handed-down to them by distant bureaucrats in Sacramento and Washington DC. While you and your child's teacher will work with your son or daughter every day, it's a good chance that these wonks have never set foot in your child's classroom. These are the people who think standardized testing is a good idea...the "one-size-fits-all" crowd.

Fortunately, human beings aren't wired like that. Every child is unique. Every child thinks and learns and processes information differently. Some kids are visual, some aural. Some kids grasp abstractions earlier than others, while some need more tactile methods to stimulate learning. The current system of public education doesn't allow for this flexibility. In fact, public education rigidly adheres to a set of standards geared toward one aim: achieve certain levels of performance on State-sanctioned standardized tests.

In this system, parents are given very little to say with regard to the quality of their child's education. Other than showing up to parent-teacher conferences and helping their 7th-grader with her pre-algebra homework, they've basically signed-away their responsibility and influence, giving it over to the system.

Does this sound appealing, especially if you have one of those kids who might have a different way of learning?

Charter Schools: A Way That Makes Sense.

I think that the way standardized testing has hijacked our children's education is a crime. In fact, the standardized testing solution has not created the benefits it promised. There are still more foreign-born students enrolling into the engineering programs of U.S. universities. More jobs are being exported to places like India and Mexico due to cheap labor costs (and a workforce that is ready, able and prepared). Other countries like Japan,

Canada, Finland and New Zealand (and 20 other industrialized countries) have higher math scores in standardized testing than American kids. Simply put, our current system of public education hampers the competitiveness of our kids, and adversely affects American productivity.

A realistic and sensible solution to this problem is the concept of charter schools. And it is within *this system* that parents re-gain their power.

First, the charter of any charter school must state the ideas, philosophies, and practices of that school. This is meant to inform and attract parents to the school. For example, a charter school in Nevada City places a great deal of emphasis on the arts. Parents who believe their child learns best in this kind of creative atmosphere can have a reasonable expectation that their child will do well in this environment. By the same token, a charter school may emphasize preparing kids for college, with a rigorous academic curriculum that might emphasize higher math and science courses, even the Classics.

Why does this system work better? Accountability. First, parents have the freedom to place their child in any school they wish. If the school doesn't deliver on its stated charter, the parent can place their child into another school that does. If the original school continually fails to deliver, it will close because it will become financially unviable.

Second, charter schools are under more rigorous scrutiny by those authorizing the charter (typically local school districts). While districts typically leave the charters alone to innovate, these authorizers can audit financial and other data at any time. Thus, parents are assured that the charters are accountable to a higher local authority.

Third, California and other states have taken active roles in passing a continued litany of laws that give the state increasing control over charter schools. The state audits the charters to ensure that antisocial, cultist, or other dangerous curricula aren't being taught. The state also regulates the charters with regard to meeting certain performance standards and goals (i.e. standardized test scores). While this is not necessarily desirable, the charters (thus, parents) still have considerable control over how these performance standards will be met. And that's the difference.

Finally, charters tend to be more individualized, with smaller, more intimate settings for school and classes. Teachers are trained and willing to work with parents in evaluating student progress, and in using innovative techniques to keep students engaged and learning. Because charter schools promise parents more, their accountability levels are actually higher than those of most regular schools.

Success requires a team effort.

I think most parents have fallen prey to a snow-job that they can't be trusted with their child's education. That, if left in their hands, their children will bomb-out, drop-out and will have a career collecting hairnets and name plates from fast-food restaurants.

I am not saying that we parents have all the answers and know exactly the right techniques and curriculum to use to best educate our children. Education, at its most effective, is a team effort. Parents must share with teachers all they know about how their child learns. Teachers must consult with counselors, education experts, and other outside resources to create a curriculum that best suits their students.

When I advocate parental control of schools, I am not saying that parents should run the show from top to bottom. Teachers, teacher unions, school boards, administrators, and state-level officials have significant roles. There is a tremendous amount of wisdom inherent in all these levels of education, and we must create an environment where this wisdom can be shared easily without power struggles. That can be done if the ultimate power – the ultimate accountability – is in the hands of the parents.