

## STAY TUNED

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### **Characteristics of Great Teachers**

It is very difficult for great teachers to do what they know works in the classroom since test scores have now become the deciding factor in the quality of a teacher or school.

To that end, millions of dollars have been spent in this country on literacy programs — money that could have been spent on study trips that provide first-hand experiences and sensory information for the brain that improve the comprehension skills of a learner.

It is tragic and frightening that the “business model,” where we’ve been told that the “bottom line” is the most important measure of success, has just crumpled in front of our very eyes.

More and more test scores are thought to be the bottom line for students/schools/districts throughout the country. Teachers have little or no choice in how they schedule their day and the subjects they teach in the most classrooms — instead focusing continuously on upcoming tests.

Knowing how to read is critically important. The goal of education should be to use that skill to expand the understanding of our fascinating world. There is so much to learn about our communities, the people who live there, our natural resources and how to become a responsible citizen. Meaningful content changes the way students view their school day.

The question most asked by parents at the end of the day is usually “What did you do at school today?” And what answer does your child give you?

The realization is that with today’s technology, all students/adults (regardless of test scores) have access to the knowledge of the world — past, present and speculation about the future.

Invention, innovation and creativity have been hallmarks of this country. Great teachers have been instrumental in moving students to think beyond the obvious, to expand their horizons and to see possibilities.

I couldn’t teach today, for I would be in awe of the mind power before me. I would, by nature of my beliefs and knowledge, resist the mundane and lack of purpose that my young friends are asked to do. My students would be creative, experiment, discover, integrate and otherwise be so engaged in “learning” that no one would be waiting for recess.

If this seems harsh or one-sided, let me assure you that school systems across the country are asking the same of teachers: Purchasing “scripted programs” (programs where the questions and answers are provided for the teacher), having rallies and rewards to spur the students on, and hoping that when test results are released and run on the front page of the newspaper, it will have been worth the effort. If not, the pressure will continue.

We all had teachers who inspired and helped uncover what we were meant to be. It takes courage today to be a great teacher. I fear that once this mania for test scores has become routine, we will have forgotten what “great” teaching looked like, how our students responded, what they accomplished, and who they became.

Malcolm Gladwell, author of “Tipping Point,” “Blink” and now “Outliers,” cites research that “students in the class of a bad teacher will learn, on average, half a year’s materials. Students in the class of a very good teacher will learn a year and a half’s material — putting them a year ahead of their poorly-taught peers. Teacher effects dwarf school effects. Your student is better off in a ‘bad’ school with excellent teachers than in an excellent school with poor teachers.”

After years of worrying about issues like school funding, class size and curriculum design, it is clear that nothing matters more than finding people with the capacity to be a great teacher.

I acknowledge the hard work it takes to be a teacher, the pressure of always being driven to bring up the test scores, routinely having new “programs” to implement, the work that needs to be brought home each night, and planning for the next day. My hope for teachers is that they are in a school system that provides substantive and ongoing training and coaching in the instructional strategies needed to be a great teacher — at the same level of intention for what is provided for great athletes, musicians, artists and members of the workforce.

It is my hope that teachers returned to the classroom in 2009 with a sense of hope and joy realizing how important their job is, knowing that the time in their classroom can enhance the intellectual, social and emotional capacity of their students.

Stay tuned for accountability in action.

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