Community Support

As I consider this matter of starting education in a personalized way, I'm reminded of the day I picked up my newborn daughter and her mother at the hospital. I was college educated, twenty-seven in a stable career, with a house in a quiet, middle class neighborhood. My parents lived in the same town and could be counted on for support. I remember telling myself as I buckled my two day old daughter into the car seat next to her mom in the back seat of our year old, four door sedan, "This is crazy. These nurses and doctors are letting us drive away with this helpless baby!"

Imagine what it is like for parents without all the advantages I had at the time? What about those families and children? To be sure, society has a role in supporting infants and parents. Do we really mean to leave them on their own, perhaps to flounder, or worse, in the name of personal freedom? There is a strong argument for closer support from the community, for medical, mental health, and social services from birth to PreK; if not for the sake of the parents and children, for the financial benefit of society.

A common refrain in public education is, "Call the parents, let them know what's going on so that they can address it at home." Think about that for a moment. Are parents equipped? Who taught them how to be good parents? What needs do they have for training and support? Educators and the public at large tend to simply say that "it's a parent's responsibility" when in fact, if the parent knew what to do, how to parent, they would already be doing it.

One of the biggest gaps in education is created by the myth that parents know how to parent and children know how to behave and learn. "Goals 2000" was signed into law in March of 1994. The first goal stated that by 2000, "all children in America will start school ready to learn." We know that they do not, but we accept the fact and ignore the impact on the child. **Achievement is not really expected when far less is accepted.** Teachers and administrators just call the parents or give the child a consequence, thinking they've done their job. The child is sacrificed and

the seeds are planted for ongoing troubles. The conveyor belt will move them on, regardless.

Goals 2000 is a good example of how we have allowed ourselves to declare goals as the most powerful force for change or success. It is as if we think all that is required is lofty goals and success will somehow follow just because we've announced the goals. This has been a common theme of reform efforts again and again, at all levels of school governance. A corollary is "measure it and it will get done." Yes, goals and measurement matter, but so do plans, details, culture, analysis, adjustment, equity, and the fundamental flaws of the current paradigm.

I propose that the child no longer be on a conveyor belt with an age based cohort. A model or mosaic of learner competencies will serve as the primary growth path for children. As learner competencies are mastered or achieved, content competencies will begin to be integrated along with a vast offering of experiences designed to foster creativity and imagination. The "system" will recognize that a child may not necessarily choose an experience at first and will likely need to be offered and encouraged to try experiences multiple times at multiple stages of learner development. For example, a child may not choose to try the violin in her first, second, or third year of public education, but may choose it further down the road. It will be important to keep options open and adding options as time passes. Learning will be personalized to enable mastery of learner competencies and content competencies. Learning will not be subordinated to time or pace. We will accept that learning rates vary on the way to mastery.

Personalized learning and student choice or student agency need not mean that a student, regardless of age, be given the complete freedom to opt out. Freedom of choice and student agency in this context means an approach that is led by an authoritative teacher who controls the environment. The environment is age or readiness appropriate. The students in the environment are making choices among the options led by the teacher, with room to work independently or collaboratively with other students. When it comes to the environment and learner competencies we have a great deal to learn from the psychologists, scientists, and educators

who have studied learning and brain development over the past generations. Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Madeline Hunter, and many others come to mind.

As we consider the need for quality parenting and family wellness as keys to student preparation for and success in school, we should revisit the whole family community need (point 3) in chapter one. Schools are the natural location for many community services. Let us consider operating hours. Are there needs that could be met in schools while utilizing the facilities more of the 24 hours across 365 days a year? Not just traditional educational needs, but also extended child care, mental health services, family wellness, counseling, and many other services that may exist only in concept now.

Elementary schools typically operate on a time schedule of approximately 7:15 am through 2:30 pm, meaning bus riders may be leaving home at 7:00 and arriving back at 2:45. This is creating challenges for working parents and it means the community has a school going unused about 16 out of every 24 hours. Opening longer hours would create staffing needs, but longer hours would also meet the needs of working families and offer greater learning opportunities for children.

The same issues exist at the middle and high schools. Moreover, high schools may even have opportunities to operate on multiple shifts or schedules to better accommodate adult education programs and working teens. Staffing schools to be open from 6:00 am until 6:00 pm (or even 10:00 pm) would provide families greater support and flexibility while at the same time allowing for extended growth opportunities for students consistent with the goals of learner competencies, content competencies, mastery learning; development of creativity, imagination, critical thinking, and a complete mosaic of enrichment for all.

An example of extended services can be found at this web address (Durham, Ontario, Canada)
https://www.ddsb.ca/en/family-and-community-support/early-years-programs-child-care.aspx