

teach from the heart ~ musings of a teacher, parent, and life-long learner

Dear School, It's Not Me, It's You

27 Wednesday, Jan 2016

POSTED BY JENMARTEN IN EDUCATION, PERSPECTIVE, STANDARDIZATION, STUDENT VOICE

≈ 34 COMMENTS

A few weeks ago, a friend shared an essay written by her son. It was a rough draft of an assignment in which he was to declare his independence from something.

She shared it with me for a couple of reasons. First, because he's not a kid who likes to write, and second because there was a passion in his writing she'd not really seen before.

It's not often I'm left with no words, but this essay made me just read and nod my head. He summed up, in a couple of pages, the frustrations many students have with the standardization of our education system.

I asked for permission to share his story right away, but I wasn't sure how to put it out there. Then yesterday I read the latest blog post from Peter DeWitt ([Finding Common Ground](#)). According to an extensive student voice survey (Quaglia and Corso), only 46% of students feel valued in their school.

With that in mind, here is his draft.

Read it with an open mind (Yes, there are some things we probably all agree students need to learn).

Read it and remember your own school days.

Read it and ask yourself why so many students do not feel valued.

Dear School,

We have been together for twelve years now and I think it has been too long. You actually started out okay in the beginning: giving me time for naps during the day and allowing me go outside and get fresh air at least 3 times per day. You also let me play, build, pretend, create and color. At first, I thought you were pretty cool and that I would like you and would want to be with you forever. However, I have finally figured out you have tricked me and I must say you have done a great job trapping kids in your world. Each new school year, you take away a little bit of fun and add in boring activities that are supposed to help me "learn". Taking naps only lasted a mere year before you decided I didn't need rest anymore and that I needed more work. Very quickly, you turned my free play and discovery into subjects called math, science, reading and social studies. You also took away my creativity and I had to do things your way or it was wrong. Playing outside also slowly got cut down year by year. Instead of being outside, you wanted to keep me inside of your walls. Your subjects started out relevant and useful

but quickly turned for the worse. For example, “if you had twelve cookies to share with three friends how many would you each get?” That wasn’t enough for you because then you had to start timing me to see if I knew math facts at a certain speed.

After six years, you made me move to another one of you. You told me how much better it was going to be and how much more fun I was going to have. I actually believed you for the whole summer but when I got there I soon realized you tricked me once again. I had to come to you way earlier each day and once I walked in you would not let me out until you were done. You kept me locked up like a prisoner with no fresh air or freedom. You made your subjects full of useless information, added letters to math and made me memorize ridiculous formulas, you gave me tests upon tests, you had to grade every little thing and you took all my play and discovery away. You gave me the worst three years of my life.

I still wanted to believe you when you told me this next move would be the best years of my life.

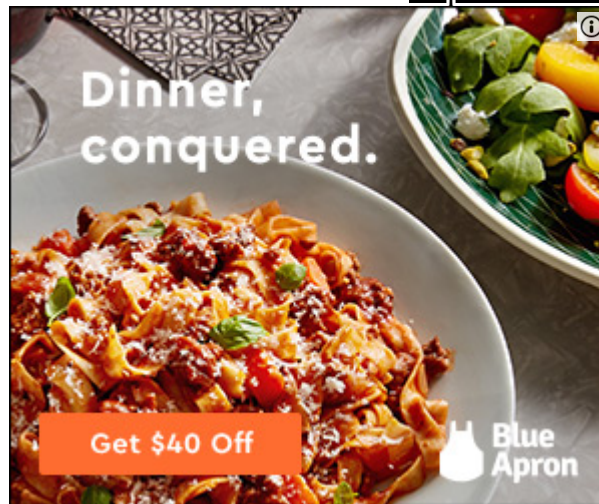
However, after two and a half years with you here, I cannot take any more of your lies. I’m done with you and I don’t believe you anymore. I have to wake up at an ungodly hour to get to you and then you keep me locked inside for 8 hours. But eight hours is not good enough for you anymore, you make me do work for you at home. There is no way to get rid of you; you haunt me 24 hours a day. After I am done with soccer, ski, or golf practice and want to go hang out with some friends or go relax you are in the back of my head saying “no, you can’t have fun, you have work for me to do”. On weekends, when I should be spending time with family and friends, you selfishly won’t let me do that, I have to be doing more work for you.

I’m angry with you and I think it is best if we went our separate ways immediately. You have fooled me for practically my entire life and now I am 110% done with you. All I wanted you to do is to teach me about things that really matter in life. I wanted you to teach me about things that would really help me in my future. Instead, you have squashed my creativity and love for learning. Instead of giving me relevant information you have filled my head with useless knowledge. Instead of inspiring me, you have tested me and tested me and ultimately degraded me. I can’t be my real self around you and I will never be good enough for you. I wish I could say, “see you never” but as much as it pains me to say this I have no other choice but to say, “see you tomorrow”, I am trapped in your world.

Sincerely,

...

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thoughts on “Dear School, It’s Not Me, It’s You”

1. *said:sarahsthoughts2015*

January 27, 2016 at 8:24 pm

Yes! I don't think students aren't interested in learning, I think they're angry at how it's being done. If you are in a relationship with someone who keeps you locked inside and thinks that you should not only think what they think, but also think how they think, your friends would advise you to leave. Kids are amazing, they shouldn't be standardized into assembly line minds, especially when there are so few assembly line jobs.

REPLY

2. *said:Debra*

January 27, 2016 at 10:09 pm

Wow, it breaks my heart to read this. I honestly do not remember feeling this way about school. I had teachers that inspired me and gave me the desire to teach. Even my worst subject ever, geometry, gave me a persnickity teacher at the end of his career that taught me things and helped me see their relevance even though I was mathematically challenged.

REPLY

- *said:***jenmarten**

January 27, 2016 at 10:39 pm

I think this is how Tim would describe school if I asked him. Oh, he has a favorite teacher or two, but most of his school stories are not good memories. He couldn't wait to be done. And today, with less and less unstructured time, more high stakes testing, and just an urgency to cram in more 'learning' at earlier ages, I'm sure there are many students who feel this way.

REPLY

- *said:***Pat**

January 28, 2016 at 5:23 am

Every year should be just like Kindergarten ! And that is the truth.

- *said:***jenmarten**

January 28, 2016 at 9:51 am

Yep – purposeful play all the way through.

- *said:*Celia

January 29, 2016 at 7:39 pm

This makes me cry! It is how I felt. I was a “great student” according to my teachers but still I hated every moment. I loved learning but not how they were teaching me. I literally started counting down the school days on the first day of each year. Even so I sent my older two children to school and watched their creativity and sense of wonderment fade. One of my children grew to love it and the other rebelled. The youngest was taught at home as are most of my grands.

REPLY

- *said:***Mel Clench**

February 1, 2016 at 9:53 am

This is exactly how Shayne felt about school, he was an honors student up to grade 10 while dealing with his depression and anxiety. Things fell apart for him at the start of grade 11. I think how he felt about school and the pressure he felt from us trying to get him to complete his grade

12 only added to his depression and anxiety. I often wonder how much we are to blame for his suicide. I wish so much like all of us here that we could turn back time and do all over again knowing what we know now things would have been done so much different. So sorry Shayne.

REPLY

◦ *said:***jenmarten**

February 1, 2016 at 10:19 am

So sorry for your loss. I know, as parents, we do what we think is best for our children, so it's hard to look back and ask the what if questions.

3. *said:***Kavita Rawat**

January 29, 2016 at 5:45 am

So true I feel he has written about my views on school. I hated schools and yet attended a B school and it was the worst experience, I did not realise I was with school kids again at age 34.

REPLY

4. *said:*Bob Cob

January 29, 2016 at 4:37 pm

OK, a "normal" school education isn't always fun and games. On top of that, a public school education is certainly not the best to be had. No arguments.

That said, I call bull on the idea that kids are not being educated and there is really something wrong with what is going on.

If this essay was actually written by a student, it goes a LONG way to illustrate that this particular education is working. At a very minimum, it demonstrates a good grasp of the English language and writing skills.

This kid may rather been outside climbing trees or at home playing video games, but the ability to write a clear legible sentence cannot be denied...

REPLY

◦ *said:***jenmarten**

January 29, 2016 at 5:08 pm

At no point was there any reference to kids not being educated. The frustration arises from the traditional system of education that still relies on a factory model of clocking in and out with an antiquated bell system as well as whether or not what students are learning is relevant to the world in which they live. In addition, the increased testing mandated by federal law has taken its toll on things like recess, structured playtime in early elementary classes, and the arts. It's 2016, and many things we STILL ask students to do in classrooms, whether public or private school,

involve rote memorization and multiple choice, one-right-answer kinds of tests. Information grows exponentially every year, yet we are still asking kids to learn things that I learned in high school 30 years ago.

REPLY

- *said:***Lori**

January 29, 2016 at 5:47 pm

It doesn't require 8 hours a day, plus homework, for 12 years, to have "a good grasp of the English language and writing skills". Nor to "write a clear legible sentence". My 8 year old is pretty close to doing that.

What it does prove is that yes, he can write — but he will never do it out of joy. He will never enter a school and think, "Today is going to be a great day of learning." (And I felt that way with my public education in the 80's.) His creativity and love for learning the rest of his life has not been nurtured, but squashed. God forbid he cannot do a math problem 30 seconds faster than he did last year — and I'm not sure anyone in the administration cares that he may never enjoy math again because of it.

That is what is wrong with the current educational system. And that's what breaks my heart when I read this. And just for the record, too many of my teacher friends are telling me similar stories. They hate what they are doing to our kids.

REPLY

- *said:*Carol

January 29, 2016 at 5:51 pm

Bob, I call bull on your words. The ability to write well about his opinion is exactly because he was writing his truth. Not sure how old you are, but the stress and driven academic atmospheres in school is creating a frustrated angry society. I couldn't agree more with this child.

REPLY

- *said:*Barb

January 31, 2016 at 4:13 pm

Have you looked at Facebook lately. Kids not being educated... Kids are not being taught cursive writing, everything is on computers, Calculators are a mandatory item on a grade school supply list. What happened to learn first then use a calculator? Kids cannot spell anymore. Everything up here is age equivalency grading instead of earning your stripes and being taught in a way you can understand. Bob maybe you should go back to school as a kid and try to learn this NEW MATH. I am teaching my Grand kids the way I was taught and they are getting it. I am teaching them how to spell at home not phonetic spelling. I am making it interesting at home so they can go to school and have a good outlook. NO I am not a school teacher. I am a concerned Grand Parent that wants to see her Grand Kids succeed. Teachers need to get the students Engaged again. So many are falling through the cracks.

REPLY

- *said:*[jenmarten](#)

January 31, 2016 at 6:20 pm

Barb, I don't need to read Facebook, I teach and am in several buildings in my district every week. While cursive is still being taught, it does not have the time devoted to it that it once did. When I first started teaching, we spent 20-30 per day on cursive, and there is no way that teachers today can do that with all the additional curriculum demands. As for calculators, they aren't usually used at the elementary level, and at the secondary level they are used for skills that are already mastered. Your brain can only hold on to 4-5 concepts at a time, so if you are asking a student to solve complex Algebra problems, it makes sense to allow them to use a calculator for low level skills. The calculator is useless to solve the more complex steps unless they understand the process.

Part of the problem is that everyone is up in arms when schools try to change up curriculum to meet the current needs of students and the world they live in (the debate over cursive is one of those things). We keep adding to the curriculum yet never subtract, and that is to the detriment of our students. The need to cover more and more core subjects (math, reading, science, and social studies) takes time away from the arts, music, and any kind of unstructured free play. To get students engaged, they need to see the value in the material they are learning, and too often, they don't.

- *said:*Harmony Fritz

May 7, 2017 at 5:01 am

I learned how to write by reading and I learned how to read before I even started pre-school. I am a naturally inquisitive person and thrive on teaching myself new things (I am currently teaching myself French), but I hate school and find I no longer have the time to learn the things that I want to. I am in Grade 10 and am asking my parents to let me home school myself. Due to high levels of stress and anxiety caused by the system not working for me, my once A-standard grades are dropping and I am finding myself not even doing assignments at all. I no longer feel safe at school and find myself nervous and on the edge of tears. My teachers let me off the hook more than they should because of my high test scores and behaviour in class, but I just want out. I feel like I haven't learned as much as I could have if I continued on the same path I did when I was in Primary School, where I barely had to concentrate on assignments and instead could spend all my time reading anything I could put my hands on. I spent all my time in the school library and while people may say that I should have been socialising, I can honestly say I was happier then, with a minimal social life but time to pursue whatever I wished, than I am now, with a large group of friends but a system telling me to do 4 hours of homework a night.

REPLY

5. *said:*[Marie Cowgill](#)

January 30, 2016 at 11:14 am

One of the saddest things I've heard from a high school graduate is: "I wish I had learned something in school besides how to take tests"

REPLY6. *said:***play and other things**February 1, 2016 at 6:33 amReblogged this on Play and Other Things...**REPLY**7. *said:***Heal Thyself!**February 1, 2016 at 7:14 am

It doesn't have to be this way. We "unschool" and live our lives as if school doesn't exist. We learn as a byproduct of living a full and engaged life, in the real world.

Grateful we chose a different path for our family.

Pat Robinson

REPLY8. *said:*don GravelleFebruary 1, 2016 at 8:26 pm

I must say that I find it interesting that so called "adults" think that children need to be taught the same way, right across the board. It appears that the education system is structured in a way that takes away creativity and the imagination that is needed to be that way.

Kids are pounded with the message that w/o an education you will not succeed in this world and basically that was the same message I got 60 years ago. It just isn't fun being a kid any more, too much emphasize on succeeding, winning and grades. There is little room, if any, for individualism in school and that deprives kids of growing up differently then what is "expected".

It has to be extremely difficult for kids today to hear over and over "you need an education" to be successful and see the truth all around them. The truth is that so many do get that education, only to find that the pot at the end of the rainbow has long disappeared and they are relegated to meaningless jobs with low income.

I was very frustrated reading this young man's letter and even now, after many years of having been out of school, I can relate to his feelings.

But, I will say one thing, education starts at home and the sooner it does start, the better. Experience is still the best teacher and I learned more from that, then all my school years combined. Let the kids experience learning in different ways, get rid of the old structured books and teaching methods. Let their imagination soar and take away "it's this way or no way". It isn't working.

My heart bleeds for the people who lost their son to suicide and yes you can partly blame it on society for placing so much pressure on kids to succeed from early on.

Thank you for posting this, much can be learned from reading it. Much.

Oh yeah, before people jump all over me with "how would you know, you ole fa..

Let me say that my son (24) and I went to school "together" and I learned a lot about the education system. I was lucky enough to help out at the school and contribute to his learning. It also helped that the biggest question he constantly heard from me was, "What If?"

REPLY

9. *said*:Barbara

February 6, 2016 at 8:29 pm

Thank you for sharing this, it was a difficult but good read. I have one that will graduate this year and returned to school in her 9th grade year, after an extended period of homeschooling. Now, in 12th, she's at the Uni all day and is happier, but feels that the three years at the high school damaged her creativity and spirit, and she is trying to convince her sister to stay home for high school.

I hope the mother of the author can move forward without crippling guilt.

REPLY

10. *said*:Stephanie

February 6, 2016 at 9:32 pm

This is more than a little scary for this mom of an 8 yr old, who already hates going to school... except the one day a week he has talented and gifted classes. He loved school until 1st grade; then the boredom began. So then, he skipped the 3rd grade, which has a new set of problems. He's only 8...many of his classmates are 10. What are we to do with our gifted children? Someone please tell me. We live in a poor county where there is little money for the gifted program.

REPLY

o *said*:Blizzard77

February 8, 2016 at 8:27 am

Stephanie, Please take him out of school. Or only send him there for some classes, not all. Even if you work, it can be and is done—look at Hoagies online for many gifted resources; many are free. Would it hurt to try?

Your son's story replicates my now-13yr-old's story. We skipped him over third, he excelled through 4th, then the school skipped him into 6th instead of offering him more advanced math in 5th (as we asked). No one knew what to do with a 9yo 6th-grader, with next-to-no writing skills, but a firm grasp on algebra and physics. They un-skipped him to 5th after six weeks (three schools in six months?), where he had brief success. But damage was done...back in 6th, he was alternately hysterically angry or completely blank. Then head-slamming headaches, failure, withdrawal from family. Still, the homework, the testing, the projects increased. Demands on non-existent motor skills. Self-harm expressed; we called the school guidance and psych. Who responded that we needed to stop being helicopter parents. That they would not help him or communicate with us because he did not have an IEP.

We pulled him out in winter, but he could not learn for nearly a year. Instead, he played and built and climbed and fought with his siblings, read all of Harry Potter, visited his grandparents for a month, and sat in the sunny patch by the screen door. He healed....some. He is now a 13yr-old doing advanced high school math, chemistry, and grade-level 7th grade writing/grammar. He's found a new love of history, fueled by countless documentaries and interactive timelines. We regularly battle over reading and writing; he still would rather give up than fail trying. BUT, he is a funny, affectionate little boy; he is ours, and we know him well. He will turn 13 in two weeks.

REPLY

- *said:*[jenmarten](#)

February 8, 2016 at 9:50 am

Homeschool is an option for some but not for all. I know people who do it well and those who have tried and not felt it was successful. I believe real change in education will come when parents and teachers speak up and insist on doing what is best not what is politically on someone's agenda.

Also, I think if you were to ask the young man who wrote this, school has not been all bad. There are teachers and subjects he likes and enjoys. It is the one size fits all, college-career ready, standardize test them to death things about school that is frustrating.

- *said:*[jenmarten](#)

February 8, 2016 at 9:47 am

Acceleration helps but is not a total fix. So many things to consider for individual children, gifted or not. Asynchronous development of gifted children really has to be considered.

REPLY

11. *said:*[suz](#)

February 8, 2016 at 2:57 am

I noticed the same things happening with my 6 year old and his love of learning they began to destroy. So glad I got him out when I did and homeschooled, he's a happy secure boy again and his love of learnings returned, those past two schools would have successfully destroyed him had I kept him there. Counselling helped him get over the anxiety they caused him. He was happier as soon as he heard me tell him he never had to go there again. Hes too smart for them that tried to stick labels on him. His results are outstanding.

REPLY

12. Pingback: [Dear School, It's Not Me, It's You | APH - Home...](#)

13. *said:*[Hed](#)

February 9, 2016 at 10:51 am

We are not just tricked at school, it goes right back to the Birth Certificate where we become owned by the crown. You then need to be controlled and learn the version of the world created by somebody else, using their meanings and spell(ing)s. Do they have a child's best interest at heart or the good of the govern-mental illite? google legal name fraud.

REPLY

14. *said:*[Mary Kvanvig](#)

February 9, 2016 at 11:18 am

that makes me very sad—From where I stand – a know many, many, teachers who hate the standardized test- it's ridiculous- they are teaching to pass the test- no fault of the teacher—its the Fed. Dept. of Educ. and their mandates. Teachers would love to try to meet all students learning styles and bends—they would love to just teach—they become teacher to TEACH not test—but the govt is pushing their way into the education system and actually destroying it– Teachers I know use many opportunities to creatively teach– — and for the record teachers are teaching children that are not all cared for, are overtired, have home issues, or are on the computer screens until wee hours of the morning—then they are suppose to be miracle workers, encouragers, listeners, etc for 25-35 kids in short order and still get all their creative prep done, planning, preparing, creating a stimulating environment, test, and correct, grade and creatively teach those children to learn—when a lot of the issue is insecure children, absent parents, too much screen and not enough to play ..

When I went to school decades ago– I went to the same classes this student was writing about—not creative – and not stimulating– I could have used some innovative and creative teachings at that time and I probably would have had better grades and maybe learned the content and material– -I didn't get entertained either for the most part—but I did learn patience, persistence, determination, values, work ethic and the fact that it is not about me– and many ideals that helped me grow up find a job that I loved, play explore etc. –my “boring” education prepared me for life and living. And really life is not about school anyway—grades and whether they entertained you or not-cannot determine your future or where you will go in life. I was extremely shy and my grades were low and I am a creative person—but I learned what I could – and moved on! Please don't blame the teachers! Really the education system is not set up very well – categorizing students– but that is not the teachers fault– not ideal – so as a community and citizens rather than complain –get a vision and make a change to better the situation

REPLY

15. *said:De*

February 14, 2016 at 3:15 pm

What bothers me is that no one is telling our kids that life is not all fun and games and school will not be all fun and games. They play enough games and look where that past time has gotten them – lazy, gaining weight and being surpassed by students from countries we used to call “third world”. Nothing worth having ever came easily.

REPLY

○ *said:[jenmarten](#)*

February 14, 2016 at 6:38 pm

Nowhere in this post did either the student or I suggest anything about easy. His post was about the relevance of what is being taught and how it is being taught. I have been an educator for 28 years, and in my experience, when a student understands the purpose of the work, they have no problem doing it. The issue is that we are still teaching in the same model that was first introduced a couple hundred years ago, and we are still expecting students to learn the same content and in the same way that their parents, and even grandparents did. And we are not being

surpassed by third world countries. Our PISA scores are higher than they were when the tests were first given in the 60's, and most people fail to mention that the US is one of the few, if not the only country, that educates all of our children.

REPLY

- *said:*Barbara

February 14, 2016 at 8:03 pm

Working hard for something meaningful is much different than working hard at too much busy work. Teens today are amazing, and we are burning them out needlessly. They work hard, tirelessly, and much of it is nothing beneficial for living a full and rich life.

REPLY

- *said:*Carol

February 15, 2016 at 7:16 am

I don't know how old you are De, but I teach dozens of piano students all different ages. I know of not one single person who doesn't get that life is not all fun and games. This description of children as lazy, gaining weight, etc is ridiculous. I think it was Jonathan Kozol who wrote, "Life isn't any damn way". The idea that school should create negative experiences as part of education makes my blood boil.

REPLY

- *said:*Rowland

February 16, 2016 at 11:49 pm

So much truth in this. It gives all stakeholders in education a challenge to reflect on how and where give an education.

Come to think of it. where did educators get it wrong. Its sad to have such a result knowing that most people spend over twenty years in School. Infact learning is a life time part of all of us, but,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,, not.

Rowland

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