



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“CRITICAL QUESTIONS” Series
March, 2006

“How Do We Protect the Human Dignity of Special Education Students in this High Stakes Assessment Environment?”

I was recently asked to think of issues about special education in the climate of education reform. As I considered the questions I might pose, my thoughts drifted to a question I had asked Terry Bergeson, Superintendent of Public Instruction, over seven years ago: “How do we protect the human dignity of special education students in this high stakes assessment environment?”

This question surfaced from my experience at John Campbell Elementary School in Selah, Washington. I was seven years old, in second grade. My teacher best captured the major theme of my year with the observation, “This boy has great potential if he would just apply himself.” Unfortunately, the academic pursuits of second grade were not my priority until the last day of school, when on that last sunny afternoon of second grade, sitting on my bus to go home, I started to look over my report card. A laser-sharp thought interrupted my review: would my teacher retain me after my episodes of inattention during the year?

This thought ricocheted around my brain, and as I continued my review of the first page, nothing quelled my anxiety. I was scared! It took me minutes to muster the courage to flip the report card over and see whether I passed. I slid the report card carefully up, out of the envelope, and saw “*Gordy Linse passes on to third grade*” I shouted for joy. I made it! What a relief to be just a normal kid following a normal path to third grade.

Now 56, I still remember that afternoon’s experience with crystal clarity. I can tell you exactly where the bus was parked and in which seat I was sitting on the bus. This moment of possible grand failure stays with me, deep in my educator’s soul. Through the lens of this experience and others like it, I’ve often wondered about other students, special education in particular, and their perceptions of themselves after the real, often-intense experiences of daily failures. I wondered how their human dignity and self-esteem survive the continuous messages of inadequate experiences.

So, with these thoughts in mind, I give you some critical questions for special education students:

- How do we protect the human dignity of special education student in this high stakes environment?
- How do general and special education teachers, and support staff protect each student’s self respect in daily instruction?
- How do higher educational agencies assist educators in understanding the importance of the educator’s resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness?
- How do regional educational agencies contribute to the dignity of all kids and the staff who serve them?
- How does our state educational agency organize their systems of assessment to ensure all kids are successful learners?
- What can parents, guardians, and relatives do to assist their students in establishing a value for life-long learning?
- And finally, are we all paying as much attention to the self-esteem and human dignity of our students as we are to the WASL scores?

Some readers might be wondering why I didn’t spend time in this article on funding of special education, effective instruction, reducing paperwork for special education teachers, recruiting and maintaining qualified teachers and support staff.

During an annual training class at the ESD, I asked hundreds of special education support staff to write a letter to the teacher that influenced them the most in their educational journey. During six years of capturing the essence of their comments it was clear and surprising that the “critical” comment mentioned was how a teacher had assisted them in

a desperate time of need and helped them to regain their self-esteem. Phrases like "she knew I was failing but didn't give-up on me," "he believed in me when I didn't have the energy," were evident.

What is the most important aspect we take from our school experience for our life's journey? I would offer it is our self-esteem and our resourcefulness and creativity that assist us in solving daily challenges. To do this important work of esteem building we all need at every interaction, at every instructional and assessment action to make sure we have first addressed, "How will this action increase this student's self esteem?"

Try this with your students. In an intentional and thoughtful way, address self-esteem: it could make all the difference!

Contributed by Gordon Linse, Assistant Executive Director for Learning and Teaching, Puget Sound ESD.