

THE BLOG

Student's Rant Speaks Volumes for What Ails Our Classrooms

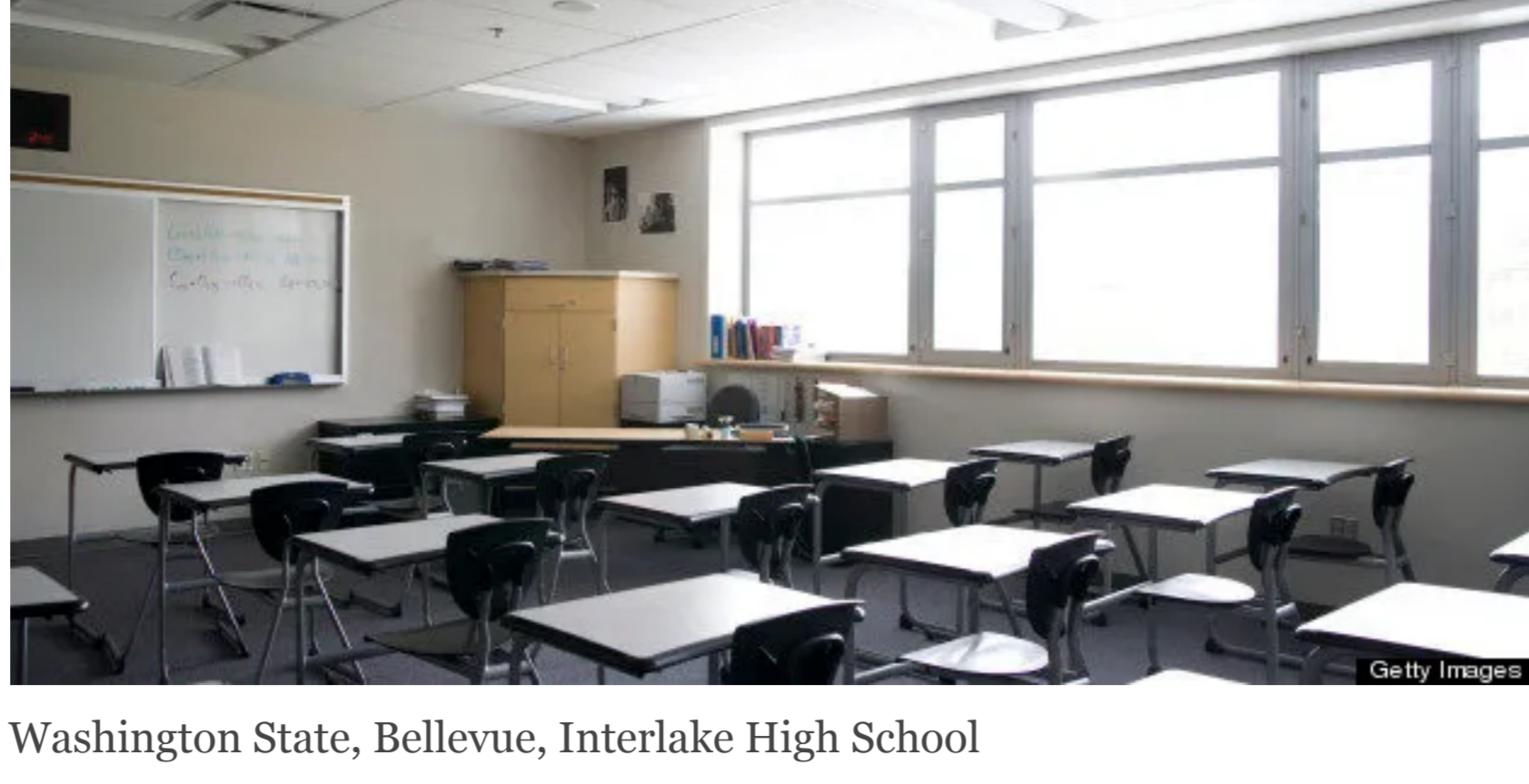
How can we as a nation go where his teacher would not, and rise up to address students when they ask what their schools are doing to help them?

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USA, Washington State, Bellevue, Interlake High School

You can walk into plenty of schools in the nearly 15,000 school districts across the country and find examples of excellent teaching. Schools where instructors actively engage their students and use proven educational strategies to build and deepen knowledge, where students focus on content, work collaboratively to problem-solve and thoughtfully evaluate information before processing it into deeper knowledge.

That's how the discipline and science of learning are supposed to work. Even still, too many teachers appear to be following the lock-step approach of DLR: drill, lecture and repeat.

A school's or district's curriculum, which should be a guideline for teaching, often becomes a crutch upon which too many teachers lean to "manage" learning, with tests to confirm the drills are being committed to memory. This builds walls rather than productive relationships between students and teachers and supports the unspoken contract: "If you don't bother me, I won't bother you."

In Duncanville ISD, a Texas school district, a student who had returned to high school after dropping out railed against that contract. [In a video](#) that was recorded by a classmate and quickly went viral online, Jeff Bliss takes issue with his teacher's teaching style.

"Since I got here all I do is read packets," Bliss says. "If you would just get up and teach them [the students], rather than handing them a package ... [well] you got to touch his heart [students] ... you has [sic] to take this job serious ... we are the future of the nation ... this is my country's future!"

Bliss has not been disciplined as of this writing, but his teacher was put on administrative leave pending further review. For its part, the school system seems to support Bliss' remarks. [In an interview with ABCNews.com](#), a district spokeswoman said Bliss "makes a number of valid statements about how schools across America need to change."

As someone with 20 years of classroom experience and observation, I know that, in many cases, teachers have the ability to turn a rant into a teachable moment for the benefit of a student and an entire class.

I worry that Bliss' teacher projected fear, rather than confidence, when she remained in her seat -- cornered by her desk, if you will -- out of some possible concern that she might lose control in the classroom.

Don't get me wrong. My intent is not to evaluate the teacher reaction, or lack thereof. It is to respond to a student's passionate outreach to his teacher, in what I perceived to be a well-controlled manner. He is imploring her to teach him and his classmates.

This moment builds on a great African proverb, "I am because We are." When students are valued and challenged, they are likely to succeed. But when, as educators, we leave the teaching to the instructional material and allow curriculum to become the one-size-fits-all mantra, we do nothing to stem the dropout rate of approximately 7,000 students per day.

Bliss is a returning student who gets the fact that we need him to succeed, for his sake and that of the country as a whole. The 1 million students who drop out each year cost our nation more than \$300 billion in lost income over the course of their lifetimes, [according to the national Alliance for Education](#).

So what are we to do? How can we as a nation go where his teacher would not, and rise up to address students such as Bliss when they ask what their schools are doing to help them?

Let's begin with the teacher. Let's recognize that she or he is often the last best hope for youth as we attempt to frame the American dream for all. That's not hyperbole: Teachers account for at least one-third of the variance in student achievement, according to research [such as that conducted by Bill Sanders and his colleagues at the University of Tennessee](#).

Some teachers come to the field well prepared by their undergraduate and graduate experience, others do not. Yet no matter where and how they are trained, teachers are the ones with the responsibility to put the American dream within reach for all students.

It is high time we recognize that human capital is either developed or diminished in our schools. As such, we have to promote and improve professional development for educators. As colleagues I work with have written, "many... educators live in fear -- of their schools being labeled failures, of increasingly punitive sanctions, of loss of respect and livelihood. This fear pervades the entire school community, affecting the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of its members ([see ASCD's 'Aim High, Achieve More'](#), by [Yvette Jackson and Veronica McDermott](#)).

Going forward, I plan in this space to share narratives of success that may be less about education reform and more about "nation building." These stories are grounded in student-centered, culturally responsive and respectful pedagogies that take into account educational philosophy and theory and what neuroscience says about how we learn.

In these stories are ideas that could help turn the rants of the Jeff Blisses of the world into raves. I look forward to sharing them with you.

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