Student's Best Speaks Volumes for What Ails Our Classrooms

By Eric J. Cooper, Contributor

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It is high time we recognize that human capital is either developed or diminished in our nation. By that, I mean the individual and collective growth of our students. How can we expect to move our nation forward if we are not nurturing the minds of the children of our nation, the young people of our nation, the future of our nation? Teachers are the ones with the responsibility to put the American dream within reach for all students.

Some teachers come to the field well prepared by their undergraduate and graduate experiences, but others do not. Yet no matter where and how they are trained, teachers are the ones responsible for putting the American dream within reach of our students. What we must ask ourselves is not the effectiveness of a single teacher but rather the collective impact of the teachers serving our 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.

The moment in Duncanville ISD, a Texas school district, that quickly went viral online, Jeffrey Bliss, a student who had returned to high school after a two-year absence, took issue with his teacher's teaching style.

Bliss makes a passionate appeal to his teacher, Ms. Terry, in a video that went viral online. Bliss's remarks in the video sound like raves. I look forward to sharing them with you.

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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-conceived rhapsody in defense of the American dream.

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The scene is a chemistry lab. Bliss is seated at his lab bench, staring blankly at his teacher, Ms. Terry, who is standing in front of a whiteboard and reading from notes.

Bliss starts to ask his question, but before he can finish, Ms. Terry resumes her professorial role by quickly reminding him that the period is over, that he has been absent from school for two years, and that he needs to catch up. Ms. Terry proceeds to lecture about her class expectations, and then, in a tone of frustration, she reminds him that she cannot work with students who cannot keep up.

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 am not suggesting that teachers like Ms. Terry are bad teachers. Quite the contrary. Ms. Terry is a brilliant teacher and an admired teacher. In fact, she is the executive director of the national Alliance for Education.

Bliss has not been disciplined as of this writing, but his teacher was put on administrative leave prior to her interview with ABC News.

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?

That's how the discipline and science of learning are supposed to work. Even still, too many students are paying the price for the fact that we need him to succeed, for his sake and for the sake of his teacher.

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As educators I work with have written, "many... educators live in fear -- of their colleagues,... and find examples of excellent teaching. Schools where instructors actively engage their students when they ask what their schools are doing to help them?"