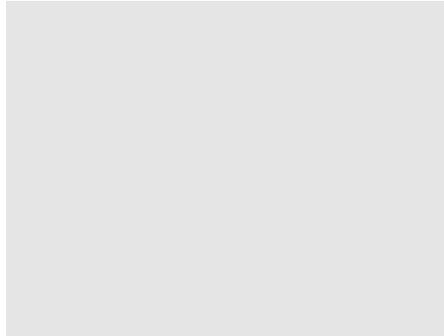


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Teacher to Parent - A child must be a willing participant in his own education

By Jody Stallings Special to the Moultrie News
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Q. Sorry, but I'm a parent who feels like teachers should be held accountable for teaching their students. If the students under a teacher are failing or can't get adequate test scores, that teacher should be replaced. Our kids deserve quality teachers.

Teachers should indeed be held accountable for teaching their students. But that's not what you're demanding. You're demanding that students learn, and that's a very different issue.

If every child was a willing participant in his own education, I could be convinced to get behind your ideas. Unfortunately, this isn't the case. Many (and in some schools, most) students are reluctant or unwilling to engage.

Have you ever tried to make a child eat something he didn't want to eat? That's what teaching unwilling learners is like. The reality is unless they have an appetite, you can set an entire banquet in front of them and it will go untouched.

The problem is that we are slipping into a world where we don't judge teachers by the

banquet they prepare but by the appetites of the children at the table.

Teachers who teach high-achieving students from good homes where education, discipline, and work ethic are valued need not worry. A hungry child will eat more or less anything you put in front of him. My best students could probably forego school altogether, spend the days in a library, and be just as well off as they are in my class.

But there are too many kids in our society whose families don't value education. They have not been reared with appropriate discipline. And work ethic isn't even a thing. These children often come to school and spend their days playing or distracting others. Homework, which is necessary to solidify the content that has been taught to them, is never completed.

These students tend to do very poorly on their graded and standardized tests. Is it fair to blame the teacher for that? Is it fair to blame the chef for cooking a bad meal when no one even ate what she prepared? Is it fair to blame the chef when she is told what recipes to make and what ingredients to use by her bosses?

"There are no excuses," educational leaders tell us. "Failure is not an option." Is that fair, either? Isn't it even possible that sometimes the obstacles are too difficult for the average mortal to overcome? Denying the reality only leads to discouragement, and that's one of many reasons teachers are fleeing the classroom. (That's why your demand that teachers should be "replaced" is so hollow. Who do you want to replace them with, exactly? There aren't enough of us as it is.)

In response, modern education offers all sorts of expensive strategies that may help to make a more attractive meal. But it hasn't yet (not in any way I've seen) offered any sustainable method of getting a sated child to eat it. Children have free will, and just because you are able to turn the water into wine doesn't mean the child can be induced to drink it.

I'm perfectly willing to concede that there are those extraordinary teachers who are able to get even the most unwilling child to dine. These are extremely gifted individuals. But despite every attempt to replicate their results, the outcomes have fallen short. Apparently a truly extraordinary teacher is more than just the sum of his or her actions.

I am by no means suggesting that we throw up our hands in despair. We keep fighting and keep pounding and never lose hope. But I am suggesting two things.

One, we make our expectations conform to reality. We don't judge doctors by the health of their patients; we judge them by their practices. We don't judge soldiers by how many enemies they capture; we judge them by their actions. And we shouldn't judge teachers by the willingness of someone else to learn; we should judge them by their teaching.

Secondly, we have to start being clear about our values. We are simply too accepting of negligent parenting. There's something wrong when more shame is attached to a teacher who fails to reach a certain standardized test benchmark than there is to a parent who neglects to provide their children with the fundamental traits necessary to be productive citizens.

The American expectation should be that all parents instill in their children the importance of learning, discipline, character, and effort. We as parents are the ones who should stop accepting excuses for failing to give these values to our children. We are the ones who should be proclaiming that in this responsibility, failure is not an option.

When these two things have come to pass, I will be the first one to vote for your system of accountability. Until then, let's not direct our judgment at the hand that grades the papers. Let's look more critically at the hand that rocks the cradle.

Jody Stallings has been an award-winning teacher in Charleston since 1992. He has served as Charleston County Teacher of the Year, Walmart Teacher of the Year, and CEA runner-up for National Educator of the Year. He currently teaches English at Moultrie Middle School and is director of the Charleston Teacher Alliance. To submit a question or receive notification when new columns are posted, please email him at JodyLStallings@gmail.com. For easy sharing and notifications, follow Teacher to Parent on Facebook: facebook.com/teachertoparent.