

Value of Education

April 2014

As we prepare to end another school year and look toward graduations, I can't help but think about the students who began their education in Whitfield County and in school systems across America who will not be walking across the stage to receive their high school diplomas. These young adults will not experience the excitement of graduating because they decided to end their education early by dropping out of school. Too often, that decision is made long before the student is in high school. When students as early as elementary school don't experience academic success, they often become disinterested in school and begin to tell themselves that education is not important. Without the encouragement of adults, their self esteem becomes low and they cannot picture themselves graduating. It is easier to show disinterest in school than it is to deal with the feelings of being unsuccessful. At a very early age, they take the first steps on the path to becoming a dropout.

Many factors can put students at risk of dropping out of school. One of the most prevalent factors is that some children never develop those important relationships with teachers and/or other students – relationships that will keep them connected and involved in school activities. For some middle and high school students, this connection is often developed through an interest in extra-curricular activities such as band or sports. These connections can last a lifetime, helping students to mature and understand the value of continuing the learning process through high school and beyond.

Some students drop out due to their family's economic needs even though, ironically, education can be that one lifeline that can pull them out of economic hardship and break the cycle of poverty. Other students quit because of low student engagement, or poor academic performance. Sadly, some will remain in school physically, but will drop out emotionally. These students will drift through their education instead of actively participating. They choose not to take advantage of the many benefits that education will provide them. Unfortunately, this is their decision to make. Parents and teachers can encourage them and keep them in the classroom physically, but they cannot demand their attention and participation in the learning process.

As a teacher, it was frustrating when I would speak with students who were talking about quitting school. I would urge them not to drop out, but they could not see beyond the immediate future. Teenagers live in the moment. Many of them cannot even imagine the difficult life they will face without an education and most will find it very difficult to compete for jobs because businesses want to hire people who are well educated and who know how to think and solve problems.

Education is much more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. A good education not only provides an individual with critical skills needed to raise income levels, but it also contributes to improved health and overall happiness. Education is the foundation for a successful independent life. It exposes a student to different ideas and enables a person to look at things from different points of view.

It is crucial that parents and teachers join hands in looking for early signs that a student is in danger of dropping out. We must all provide the support that children need to feel successful in school. Parents must ensure that students are present every day, and teachers must make use of every instructional minute in the day. Although demands on teachers continue to increase as does the number of students they are asked to teach, every child must have some individual attention from their teachers every day in order to stay connected.

Providing a quality education is expensive, but failing to provide opportunities for education is even more expensive. Investing in education is the single most effective way of reducing poverty and raising the standard of living for our entire community. As the educational level of an individual goes up, the probability of that individual being unemployed goes down. A person who graduates from college or a technical school can expect to earn approximately twice as much as a high school dropout will earn. Education will open the doors of opportunity for our students as more and more future jobs require a license or certificate.

Approximately 21% of the world's population lives in extreme poverty. In 1995 the percentage of children on the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program in Whitfield County Schools was 31%. This school year 72% of our students qualify as economically disadvantaged. In light of these statistics, it is vital that we step up efforts to give these children a better chance of a decent and fulfilling life.

Education has a central role to play in such efforts. I am reminded of Nelson Mandela's comment that "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." We may not be able to change the entire world, but by working together to provide quality education for our students, we can change our little part of it.