

# WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN AND ARE DOING TO IMPROVE PUBLIC EDUCATION

Fort Wayne Quest Club Paper  
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Fellow Questers, allow me, please, to be quite personal in this presentation, as my own circumstances have me still in wonderment that I arrived at the level of education which I have. Knowing the ups and downs of my own learning process elicited a quick reaction in me when I was informed this past summer of the topic assigned to me: “What communities can and are doing to improve public education.” I said, “Oh no!” I am aware of the perceived sorry state of public education in the United States and the many programs that have been initiated in the past years to improve public education, so often, at least in my mind, without positive results. David Platt recounted the history of past programs in his paper on November 7<sup>th</sup> titled “Accountability in Public Education.” The improvement of public education looms formidable to me. I also questioned whether a recital of some new programs that are presently being lauded in various communities would only just make us all feel better. And then I was informed that there would be a third paper this Quest season on education; “Importance of Early Childhood Education” by Robert Nance, scheduled two weeks from today. What could I then add to far-ranging and complex education issues, of which I was very skeptical? I did whine to the powers that be of Quest and was given other choices, but was also told that I could modify the topic to my own liking. Upon further reflection, the latter I’ve done, and so I’m now approaching the topic with some questions: Is it programs that improve public education? Or is more necessary?

First, I must tell you that I have never attended a public school, although two of my five children graduated from Wayne High School and I presently have some grandchildren in the Fort Wayne school system, one of them autistic and being given special attention. All of my education was in parochial settings. I do however, consider myself a teacher. For 40 years I

taught confirmation lessons to middle school students, both parochial and public, with as many as 30 students in some parochial classes. On a number of occasions in the far past I substitute taught English in a Beech Grove, Indiana, middle public school.

With that I'll proceed. When it actually comes to educational programs, they are something that I've observed only in my later years. In India, where I was born and lived for 12 years, there were no special programs when I went to school. At six years of age I followed the pattern of my five older siblings and started my elementary education at a boarding school 200 miles from my parents. Classes were held in a two-room schoolhouse in a mountain setting, during a school term that ran from January through September in order to escape the heat of summer in the plains. I have no recollection of learning how to read. My sister, Betty, penned my weekly letter to my parents as I dictated to her, until I could print on my own. Mrs. Heckle, my primary teacher, had no special program of which I 'm aware, except to decide where students should be placed. So, after first grade, she put me into third grade because I was reading well. The upper grade classroom, with Mr. Mueller teaching about 30 pupils, was one in which we could listen to what was being taught to other classes, typical of a multi-grade setting. It was an excellent education that simply had as its content reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, and, of course, religion. When I arrived in the United States, having finished only half of the seventh grade because the ship journey started in July, I had just turned twelve when I began 8<sup>th</sup> grade in a parochial school in Elgin, Illinois. I was bored and even somewhat of a problem, and so the principal, who also was my teacher, at times remanded me to a hallway or even had me paint a playground fence during some afternoons. And, yet, I ended up as the salutatorian of the class. (Yes. They made such designations in that grade school. I even had to give a speech at graduation.) No major programs, however, helped me arrive at that point of my education. The teacher taught, the student was expected to learn what was taught, and parents were kept

apprised. And the same was true as I attended Concordia High School and Junior College, on the campus where Indiana Tech is now, to study for the ministry.

I relate these personal matters to you because, upon receiving the Quest topic, it made me ponder what is of utmost necessity for good education to take place, if not improve. Is it programs? And if it is not only programs, what else could be more important than programs, many of which are programs funneled from the top down? It was with that curiosity that I changed this paper's approach. I decided to learn more by listening to what local public school educators, presently teaching or administrating, thought about the education process and also, above all, what they considered important for enabling education to flourish. So I interviewed three present public school teachers; one an elementary teacher, the second a high school teacher, both in Fort Wayne schools, and the third a principal in a county high school. I'm not listing their names, because I want what they related to be of import, not their identity, and two of the teachers did say to me, "You're not going to quote me, are you?" I also spent a couple of hours with Quester Daryl Yost, a former classroom teacher, principal, and superintendent, with a doctorate in education, to garner from his rich education experience his reflections on what I had gathered in my interviews, what I was thinking, and how I was approaching the topic. To those people I give my thanks. I also began to clip many articles in newspapers and magazines and read some books.

The teachers I interviewed were certainly aware of programs. The high school teacher was somewhat cynical, observing that "students come to school at the beginning of each year asking, 'What's the new program this time?'" He has dealt with one program after another in his 38 years of teaching and considers most of them rarely requiring of students, but rather of administrators and teachers.

Articles about education programs are a regular item in newspapers and magazines. An

example is the December 8, 2008, TIME magazine, which pictured Michelle Rhee, the chancellor of the District of Columbia Schools system, on its cover for an article titled “Can She Save Our Schools?” One of the first paragraphs reads, “The U.S. spends more per pupil on elementary and high school education than most developed nations. Yet it is behind them in the math and science abilities of its children. The biggest problem with U.S. public schools is ineffective teaching, according to decades of research.” “Rhee has promised to make Washington the highest performing urban school district in the nation, a prospect, that, if realized could transform the way schools across the nation are run. She is attempting to do this through a relentless focus on finding – and rewarding – strong teachers, purging incompetent ones and weakening the tenure system that keeps bad teachers in the classroom.” The article reports that Rhee in just a year and a half has closed 21 schools, dismissed 270 teachers, and removed 36 principals. (TIME 12-08-08)

How is it with Fort Wayne Community Schools (FWCS), as well as the other Allen County School systems? I’m pleased to say that our schools don’t need an act of salvation to take them out of dire situations, such as in Washington D.C. Allen County is blessed with capable and dedicated teachers. The public school teachers, who are members of the parish where I served and still belong, are excellent examples to me of the same. There are also many students who are flourishing. A bell ringing concert in a mall in December by twenty or so young elementary students of a Fort Wayne public school was a delight to both watch and listen to as the boys and girls showed accomplishments that I don’t begin to have. Also, Tom Houlihan, a national education expert, who is consulting the Fort Wayne Community Schools, in September called the leadership in the system “among the strongest in the nation.” (*Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* (JG) 09-20-08) The Fort Wayne elementary Magnet Schools have enhanced education in our city and lately Charter Schools have been founded with goals for educational improvement.

There have been some recent awards. *U.S. News and World Report* in December, out of 21,000 public high schools nationwide, named Elmhurst High School a Bronze Medal school in best preparing students for college, and the federal government awarded Leo Junior-Senior High School a 2009 Blue Ribbon School Award, one of eight Indiana schools so awarded for demonstrating academic achievement or for having made gains in student achievement. (JG 12-11-08) Furthermore in December, Carroll High School, Homestead High School and Leo Junior Senior High School made the Indiana Chamber of Commerce's list of the best buy in education, meaning that their giving taxpayers the most value for their money. (JG 12-17-08)

There is a great deal of testing that occurs to analyze how public school students are faring educationally. Whether testing is program is questionable, but programs are geared in view of testing. The ISTEP+ (the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus) measures understanding of the material taught in the previous grade based on Indiana's academic standards. This year the test will be administered twice, as it was this past fall and again this spring, and in the next years only in the spring to allow students to get almost a full year of instruction before taking it. A *New-Sentinel* article last July reported that the "fall test should be a breeze for experienced teachers. The spring edition, however, represents an unknown element, with teachers left to wonder: What kind of information will the state include on the exam?" (*Fort Wayne News-Sentinel* (NS) 07-12-08)

The results for the fall are in. Headlines in *The New-Sentinel* in December read: "Little good news in area districts' ISTEP+ scores. Even SACS (Southwest Allen County Schools) has seen drops at almost every grade level." And just below that article: "Fewer pass tests this year at FWCS. The district expressed concern over drop in 3<sup>rd</sup>-, 4<sup>th</sup>-grade math." (NS 12-04-08) In its coverage of the results, *The Journal Gazette*'s headline read "Test put spring in schools' ISTEP+. Districts waste no time preparing for 2<sup>nd</sup> round." (JG 12-07-08)

When ISTEP+ scores are published, critics do surface. The arguments are made that listing schools and only their ISTEP+ scores gives the public an unfair and incomplete picture, as the listing of only passing percentages assumes that all schools are equal, and it is incomplete because it does not show the differences among the schools and students completing the tests. It's contended that a better overall picture should include indicators of poverty levels, students who do not handle English well, and special need students. (JG 12-19-08)

The federal government has not been reluctant to get into the mix. No Child Left Behind is now a household term. Yet many aspects of the law have been criticized. Some say that its goal – to have all children reading on grade level by 2014- is absurd.” (*The Baltimore Sun* 12-07-08) No Child Left Behind has dictated to what the public schools of our city and county devise and plan for, yes, program for, to improve education, and new programs have been unveiled last year and this school term. I'm going to focus mainly on the Fort Wayne schools.

The new programs don't, however, encompass what David Tucker of Columbia City urged in a letter to the editor in *The News-Sentinel* this past November. Why he's so concerned from 25 miles away, I don't know, and yet his letter in part reads: “You want to transform the schools? You want to give the kids something better that they have now?” You want to take the drugs, the gangs, the cliques, the rape, robbery and murder out of your schools? It's very simple. Put prayer back in the schools. Put the Ten Commandments back on the wall. Give the kids more than a moment of silence. Put the Bible back in the curriculum. Put God back in the school, and you will see a transformation almost immediately. Fort Wayne Community schools need to do the right thing, even if it means going against the Supreme Court. They don't know everything.” (NS 11-03-08) Oh, if only it were that simple!

One new program already gives evidence of success, and that is full-time kindergarten. Fort Wayne Community Schools was the only public district in Allen County to offer it for the

first time last school year at every elementary school. Thus the headline: “FWCS thrilled by first-grade readers.” Maplewood Elementary School was singled out where the first grade was at 76 percent, which meant that more than three-quarters of the first-graders are reading at the level expected of their age, and those numbers mirror a trend in first grades across Fort Wayne Community Schools. The hope is that those scores will be reflected on the ISTEP+ once the students are in third grade. (JG 10-10-08)

The Fort Wayne Community Schools also unveiled the district’s Balanced Scorecard this past August. In an editorial, *The Journal Gazette* reported that “the approach was first introduced in business in 1992 and, while it does not necessarily transfer smoothly to an education setting, the FWCS board developed its own model. The tool has been modified to measure performance in academic achievement, parent and community engagement and financial responsibility. The intent is to use the measure to find factors improving or harming performance – earlier identified as the district’s goals.” The editorial notes: “The process will inevitably meet resistance. Teachers and administrators have been subjected to new requirements time and again – often with no consistency and non follow-through. But board members made it clear that they don’t want another plan or process that collects dust on a shelf.” (JG 09-02-08)

The Fort Wayne Community Schools this past September also announced a three to five year plan to redesign its six high schools. It will create specialized academies called Programs of Study schools within each high school. They will partner schools with businesses; increase the number of rigorous classes; and strengthen existing programs. Wayne High School will be the first, where renovation work will cost about two million dollars to open a New Tech program this fall in which students will be engaged and challenged daily using computers and new technologies. The various programs are scheduled to be fully in place in all of the high schools by 2013. (JG 12-01-08)

Volunteer support for public schools is also alive and well in Allen County. Recently, Big Brothers Big Sisters began its Lunch Buddy program to connect volunteers with students. Most promising of all developments is United Way of Allen County's new initiative promoting literacy skills for younger students, the goal to target students early so that they could be successful throughout school. Another outgrowth of that is a program Indiana Stamp is undertaking to offer a "parent university" for its employees to learn to be more effective in supporting their children's schooling. (JG 06-09-2008) In December, Jerry Peterson, president/CEO of United Way announced a county-wide initiative called Learn United. Presently, eighteen percent of Allen County children live in poverty; nearly half of low-income third graders are not passing reading requirements on state assessments. Learn United aims to turn all those numbers around in the next decade. By ensuring children can read future poverty is decreased. Third grade was chosen because up until that point students are learning to read; after that year, they are reading to learn. Peterson hopes in the next two to three years to gather 2,000 volunteers to make the ultimate goal of servicing all four Allen County districts. (NS 12-22-08) A week ago Wednesday, in conjunction with the initiative, the Real men Read program was announced. Beginning in March, volunteer men will be in classrooms to read with male students and model the importance of reading. Fewer than 50 percent of boys in low-income families in Allen County are passing third grade reading, compared with 61 percent of girls from low-income families. (NS 01-07-09)

Now back to my questions: Is it programs that improve public education? Or is more necessary? The first question I posed to the teachers I interviewed was, "What are the basic components that enable good education?" The responses varied and included involved students, capable teachers, supportive parents (which could include extended families- and that could be you and me, grandpa or grandma), a well planned curriculum, a safe learning environment,



cultural considerations, community and business involvement, and a few other lesser items. I then asked them which of them was the most important and each had a different response. The high school teacher chose students, the principal selected teachers, and the primary teacher opted for family. Along with those three, I would add that cultural considerations, that take in family structures, economic circumstances, discipline during rearing, ethnic practices and expectations, and such, also have important bearing on good education taking place. None of the persons I interviewed listed programs as a basic component.

It's no great revelation that student, teacher, and parents are closely intertwined. But it is vitally important that the interaction between student, teacher, and family be ongoing for good education. David Platt, in his paper on accountability, early on in his presentation, touched on that subject. He said then: "I remember a discussion with colleagues years ago about what it would take to create the ideal school. After a long discussion, we agreed that the very best way was to let the principal select the parents. The implication here is that the best schools involve the teacher, the students themselves, and the parent, as well as the community, in a young person's education. It's the 'It takes a village to raise a child' thing." And then Platt said, "But back to accountability" and on he went on with that subject as it applies to school systems. I'll also deal with accountability, but with a different emphasis, using to what he alluded – the need for student and teacher and parents to be accountable and responsible each for his or her own self and also all of them to be accountable and responsible to one another so that education flourishes. To achieve all that can be complex - and also very frustrating.

Let's start with the student. A student who has the capabilities to learn will not learn if he or she chooses not to learn. I initially said that I would be personal in this paper. When I entered high school, just going on thirteen, I stopped studying. Whether it was because of my immaturity at that time, or that my parents went back to India the following January – leaving all of us

children in America, or an unsettling dormitory life, or just plain laziness, I haven't pinpointed – probably a mixture of all. But I stopped studying and that year failed Latin and algebra. Refusing to learn still goes on today. Most of my grandchildren are excelling in school, but two grandsons are doing poorly because they consider school to be boring and don't do assignments or are very late with them. The lads are not stupid; in fact, they read well and, when prodded, have no trouble doing scholastically what is expected of them.

All the teachers that I interviewed enjoyed their profession and being among students, though I sensed that the high school teacher, after thirty eight years of teaching, most of them in the high school which he had attended, was somewhat worn down. None of them depreciated their students, but all of them spoke of their concern for how too many of today's students do not take responsibility for their learning. They also raised the matter of how much time is spent by students with TV and video games and how so much is provided for children so that there is a lack of creativity on their part.

The teachers also observed how students hamper good education because of disrespectful conduct. The issues differ between primary students, middle school, and high school students. While primary children are not as much exposed to drugs and sex and weapons (we hope), as the upper grades, the primary teacher noted that children in elementary school can be very self-centered and often disrespectful. She smiled when she asked, "Who came up with the "Kids First" license plate?" The high school teacher, who selected the teacher as the most important component for good education, also spoke to how student behavior gets in the way of learning - students who, for example, refuse to take tests, telling the teacher, "You can't do that!" "Kids," he said, "think they can speak whenever they want. Some teachers acquiesce to the students, others don't. And watching it all are students who are waiting for others to quiet down so they can learn."

One of the teachers put it simply by stating that, in education, every day the parts come in different and have to be dealt with – not like manufacturing that has the option of rejecting parts that are objectionable. And that is the reality. Public schools receive all and every student and strive to give each one a good education, whatever course might be best for the student. And if the students are capable, they can learn. If they don't want to, they won't. The responsibility to learn is each one's, as well as the accountability of each one for what he or she does.

Next, teachers. Teachers want students to learn, though it is true that there are teachers who come to the point where they no longer care whether a student learns or not. And it's apparent that can occur when teachers feel helpless. My high school teacher interviewee stated that people don't understand the abuse that teachers take. He thinks that FWCS administrators wants teachers to dynamically engage students, but at the same time don't want to hear about discipline problems.

Parker J. Palmer, in his book "The Courage to Teach," asserts that "from grade school on, education is a fearful enterprise." (TCtT, p.36) He amplifies by stating that "the external structures of education . . . are rooted in one of the most compelling features of our inner landscape – fear." Teachers fear that they will not be good teachers and can end up fearing their students. And students, too, are afraid; afraid of failing, of having their ignorance exposed, of looking foolish in front of their peers. (TCtT, pp. 36-37.)

His opening paragraphs read: "I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold my joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illumined by the lightening-life of the mind – then teaching is the finest work I know. But at other moments, the classroom is so lifeless or painful or confused – and I am so powerless to do anything about it – that my claim to be a teacher seems a transparent shame." (TCtT, p. 1)

Palmer's book then builds on a simple premise: *good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.* (TCtT, p. 13) It's from such understandings of self and students that Palmer seeks to enable teachers to connect to their students. He writes: "Bad teachers distance themselves from the subject they are teaching – and in the process from their students. Good teachers join self and subject and students in the fabric of life. Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves." (TCtT, p. 11)

Teachers must care for their students. I am personally thankful for an educator who reached out to me in my youth. After failing Professor Schnedler's algebra course (in my high school schooling everybody was called a professor), I passed a makeup test when I returned for my sophomore year. And who was my geometry teacher as a sophomore? Professor Schnedler! Again, I didn't study, but only a few weeks had passed when he called me up to his desk and said, "Luther, you're doing again what you did last year." Somehow, what he said jolted me. My final grade in geometry was an A, and I did begin to study. Many years later, after I had entered the ministry, I happened to see Professor Schnedler and I thanked him. I don't think he really remembered the incident, but if it had not been for his concern for me, I very well might not have earned a Master of Divinity degree, or even entered college.

Parker Palmer, referring to teachers as mentors and students as apprentices, sums up the mystery of teaching. "Mentors and apprentices are partners in an ancient human dance, and one of teaching's great rewards is the daily chance it gives us to get back on the dance floor. It is the dance of the spiraling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn." (TCtT, p. 25) Responsible and accountable teachers! And Daryl Yost also

added responsible and accountable others in the school system, such as custodians, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, all being responsible to create a wholesome and safe environment. He has fond memories of his bus driver, who would regularly exhort the students as they got off the bus to mind their parents and study hard.

The third basic ingredient for good education is parents and/or extended family. And, let me say again, each component doesn't stand alone, but, they swirl together in the recipe. It might sound like my parents in far away India weren't concerned about me. Not so! My mother saved all the letters I wrote to my parents and 60 years later, after both were deceased, I finally read them. In some of them I responded to their concerns about my poor grades. One, very poignant for me in reading it, brought back the time when a letter from them had stated that they had been considering that my mother return to America, leaving my father in India, so she might have more supervision over me. I assured them in my letter that that was unnecessary and that my father needed my mother more than I needed her. I meant that sincerely, and their readiness to make such a sacrifice was another stimulus for me to improve academically.

*The New-Sentinel* this past December had an editorial "Without the parents, school just won't work." It, in part, read: "The U.S. Department of Education said in 2002 that a synthesis of research shows 'the evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: Families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life.' That really is beyond debate now, isn't it? So we need to get that lost involvement back, but what's the best way to do it? Eugene White, formerly of Fort Wayne Community Schools and now superintendent of Indianapolis Public schools, has an idea about that and decided to give it a try at Indianapolis Public School 57. Parental involvement is a must at School 57; it's treated just like homework, and if a student's parents fail to meet expectations, the child can be shipped to another school." The editorial also noted that one teacher reported that where just half or three quarters may have

turned in homework on a given day, now 90 percent do.” The editorial ended: “We need to stop and remember what has worked in the past and will likely work in the future – simple things like homework regimens, dress codes, discipline, emphasizing the basics. And a little parental involvement.” (NS 12-03-08)

All of the teachers I interviewed called for parental involvement. The principal of the county high school praised the culture at the school, especially being backed up by parents who reinforced school standards and expectations. In Fort Wayne, at Northrop High School, 800 people gathered in September for its Back to School night and Public Law 221 hearing, a meeting now mandated this year by the FWCS for all its schools. (NS 09-10-08) On the other hand, the FWCS high school teacher I interviewed lamented the lack of participation of parents at back to school nights during which teachers hosted in their classrooms. Some of the teachers had no parents appear. He sees too many parents as being enablers. They used to make sure that their children went to school, but now they give excuses on their behalf and see to it that their children are not mistreated by teachers. The same theme came from the primary school teacher. “Parents should modify their children’s behavior. They make excuses. Rather than asking what they can do to help, they resignedly say they don’t know what to do. We spend so much time teaching proper behavior.”

John Rosemond, a family psychologist, in a recent one of his syndicated “Parenting” columns, listed six ways to growing a successful child. Here’s the fifth step: “Emphasize manners, not skills. Sixty years ago, most children came to overcrowded first grades not knowing their ABCs, yet at the end of the year were reading at a higher level than today’s kids, most of whom are already reading in kindergarten. That happened because parents of 60 years ago taught proper behavior, not skills; therefore teachers taught skills, not proper behavior. Grow

a polite child.” I also like his sixth step. Only one sentence: “Love your child enough to grow a happy child!” (NS 12-10-2008) Responsible and accountable parents!

Student, teacher, parents; there is plenty of consensus, with which I concur, that they are the basic pillars of good education. What about programs? Of course programs, organized initiatives to improve education, serve purposes. When someone says to me that they are against organizations (and I do hear that comment), I ask them whether they would rather be disorganized. Daryl Yost, however, observed that programs work on a lesser scale, but no program achieves on a grand scale. And all of those who spoke with me underscored how student, teachers, and parents are inter-related and the necessity for them to work in sync for education to flourish. The principal said that good teachers in bad schools can still be affective. The primary teacher said, and I do quote: “A child will do well, even with crappy teachers – if the parents are supportive.” And Daryl Yost simply put it that if one of the pillars of student, teacher, and parents fail, the progress of the student might well nosedive.

The given topic for this paper is “What communities can and are doing to improve public education.” In a limited way, I’ve sketched some programs that those in charge in our Allen County community have initiated and are presently doing. But the more I pondered my added questions and came to my answer that the three pillars - student, teacher, parents - all being responsible and accountable in the dance of learning, are of more importance than programs, I kept hearing within myself the now familiar declaration of Walt Kelly’s Pogo and I kept transposing it to: “We have met the program, and it is us.” And it’s with that in mind -that we are the program - that I would venture a suggestion what here in Allen County and, especially Fort Wayne, we might and could do to improve our public education.

Undergirding my suggestion is the positive reality that in Fort Wayne and Allen County there is a desire and commitment among many of our citizens – our community - for excellent

education to take place. Aren't three Quest Club papers in one year on the subject evidence of that? And while we have had a referendum battle, the saving grace is that a tremendous amount of interest in the public school system was generated. We are not a community that quietly observes the scene and hopes that someone else take care of educational matters, for there is ample opinion offered by those who are not in leadership roles. I was surprised, after my topic was announced in the Quest booklet, how many people gave me some input.

One of those was fellow-Quester Will Clark, and to him I give credit for planting the seed of my suggestion for what we might and could do to improve public education in our community. Will handed me two sheets of paper. "Education First Concept" is at the top of the first page, followed by a sentence that reads, "Establish a national reputation for Fort Wayne and Allen County for providing the best pre-K through 12 education in the Midwest." Later, another sentence reads: "This is NOT ("not" capitalized) a program to tell the school systems how to better do their jobs, or to just demand better performance from them." And another sentence: "We need to put together a group of key leaders to discuss this concept and to agree to work to define the details of such a program."

Do you hear that word "program?" And please hear again what has been reverberating in my head: "We have met the program, and it is us." And so, while Will Clark doesn't further define a program, I will. This is my challenge: that a group of key leaders (and do include students and teachers) put together "the program which is us" – the promotion of inter-relatedness, accountability, responsibility, co-operation between all of our Allen County students, teachers, and parents and extended families to prevent our students from nose-diving scholastically, or failing, and to build up that foundation so that they may have a love of learning and the desire to reach for goals and be productive citizens in their generation.



What I envision is a program that generates and promotes self esteem and the desire for learning. It could be incorporated around a catch phrase. What comes to mind is the slogan “The mind is a terrible thing to waste” that the Ad Council developed and for some time was ubiquitous on our television screens. Frankly, I’ve always had somewhat of a problem with that statement. It isn’t the mind that is a terrible thing; but the waste of it is terrible. And then, too, it’s a negative statement that gives no encouragement and even lays down a guilt trip. But I understand the intent – that we use well the brain power we have. And so while I’m making what might be considered by some a “far out” proposal, I’ll also be so bold as to suggest a more positive catchphrase for the “program that is us”, and that is: “Your brain is a treasure to use well.”

I select the word “treasure” because it conveys a number of things about our brain and our ability to learn. It is a treasure to be highly prized. Because of it, we live and move and have our being. When it doesn’t function properly, we even call people “vegetables.” But in normal living, it’s a dynamic storehouse which takes in learning and remembers and by which our bodies are controlled and with which we make decisions. A tremendous treasure! And, as such, it’s a treasure to be respected. And the greatest respect we can each show for our brain is to use it well.

That’s a theme – or something like it - that could be sounded and re-sounded in Allen County for the next years. How to do that? That’s not my task; it would be, to quote Will Clark again, the task of a” group of leaders to discuss the concept and agree to work to define the details of such a program.” It would be the task of the leaders of the program to determine ways to convey the message and change attitudes to wanting to learn and helping to learn – whether through all media, meetings, billboards; whatever would reach all of us. And while I would leave the details to them, I envision that it would be “the program of us” that would assure every

student that to learn is not “nerdy”, but a crucial and necessary process to live well; that would encourage and build up teachers to enjoy the dance of learning with their students; that would stimulate parents and extended family to be examples and motivators of their next generation to treasure and use well their brains. And that together, students, and teachers, and parents would respect one another, strive to help each other do their part of the learning task, and together create a climate where excellent education takes place. I realize that my proposal, to a great extent, deals with intangibles. But love and respect and responsibility and accountability are intangibles. And is it not those intangibles that we want to practice in our daily living?

And, yes, when we do practice them, Fort Wayne and Allen County, on the educational scene, well might achieve a national reputation for providing the best education for our children. Could it already be starting? *Business Week* magazine in November rated Fort Wayne as the best city in Indiana to raise kids, a rating that took in education. Far different than being rated the dumbest city in 2005 by another magazine!

Students, teachers, and parents together– the pillars of “the program that is us”! And, if that is so, shouldn’t we all “get with the program”?

## NEWSPAPERS

JG – *The Journal Gazette*, Fort Wayne, Indiana, newspaper

NS – *The News-Sentinel*, Fort Wayne, Indiana, newspaper

BS – *The Baltimore Sun*, Baltimore, Maryland, newspaper

## INTERVIEWS

Deborah Neumeyer, Principle of Carroll High School, Allen County, IN, on 11- 14,-2008

Martin Erickson, Teacher, at South Side High School, Fort Wayne, IN, on

Christine Michael, Teacher at Irwin Elementary School, Fort Wayne, IN, on 12-11-2008

Daryl Yost, Director – Certified Technology Park, on 12-18-2008

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