

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH**Peter Schwartzman**

How might we educate better?

Galesburg High School hosted an open forum last week to get input from the community about what might be done to restructure the high school in order to improve student success. Taking place on the heels of a report indicating decreased graduation rates at Galesburg High School (especially among African-Americans and low-income students), this restructuring effort is apparently mandated for school districts that aren't making satisfactory progress based on state guidelines.

I attended this meeting and sat quietly to listen to three administrators and 12 members from the audience share their ideas. I commend District 205 for arranging this public forum and I applaud those that took the time (and had the nerve) to speak their mind (as well as the other ~100 people who were in attendance); for those that missed it, WGIL has a tape recording of the event on its website. However, for all that was said many important things went unspoken. It appears to me, an outsider's view, that the problems this district faces are not dissimilar to problems faced all over. While, budgetary constraints may limit choices, national policy directives often aren't helping either. We also face self-imposed limits in creativity and opportunity that stifle positive change. Given the direction things are going (for our schools as well as our community—in terms of poverty levels and empty businesses), real change is necessary. This needs to be part of the conversation we are having about education.

First off, no one mentioned "No Child Left Behind," the policy purposed by the George W. Bush Administration soon after taking

office. Though it received wide bipartisan support at the time, the bill puts way too much attention on standardized tests scores and punishes schools that don't do well (as indicated by these scores). Nearly ten years later, the policy is a failure in almost every respect. Teachers have abandoned their regular curriculum and replaced it with "test" study which greatly limits the topics they cover and the amount of critical discussion of literature and historical texts. This is because the standardized tests are very narrowly focused and do not effectively evaluate creative or critical thinking skills or "non-essential" subjects like writing, science, music, or art.

The teachers (and schools) are pressured to do well on these tests because the schools who don't measure up are threatened with probation, loss of funding, and the takeover of their curriculum. In this atmosphere, not only are teachers overly stressed out, students are often very bored. In this environment, should we be surprised that dropout rates are increasing?

Not only are students getting bored, many teachers are finding the "teaching to the test" a very monotonous activity as well. Teachers are likely frustrated as well by students who have lost interest and, by virtue of this, respond in unproductive ways.

Another thing limiting our teachers is an unwillingness to teach controversial topics. The fact that our school district follows an "abstinence only" sex curriculum is one key example of this. This curriculum leaves students "high and dry" when it comes to learning about what sex is and how to deal

with it responsibly. As anyone who does any level of searching on the Internet can testify, this medium isn't what we want educating our children. Sure, kids should learn at home but many don't have parents/guardians willing to discuss the issue (perhaps because they don't know what to say, as they themselves were never educated about it). The school needs to be a place where open conversations can happen (as uncomfortable as that may be). Otherwise, our kids are left to learn on the "streets" (real or cyber) and this doesn't bode well for them making responsible decisions now or in the future. Our high teen pregnancy numbers and STD rates among our youth speak volumes to an educational system that is not helping them.

It is time to get off our prudish idealism and realize that kids have (always had) hormones shooting through them. Thus, we should provide them good information and easy access to contraceptives (that also prevent STD transmission). Many European nations do these things and their teen pregnancy and STD rates are very low. Sure they are having sex, but they are doing so responsibly and without the stigma and ignorance that many of our youth operate.

What do "No Child Left Behind" and "Abstinence Only" education have to do with the school district's future? Everything. We have to think outside the box to improve. First, we have to find ways to increase opportunities for teachers (and students) to be creative. We have to speak boldly against any federal legislation that is not in our best interest.

Unfortunately, Obama's Administration

has done little to reform the policy and recently appears to be furthering it rather than dismantling it.

Next, we have to acknowledge that we live in the 21st Century and we cannot force a particular religious value (i.e., no sex before marriage) on our youth.

We have to recognize that we are biological beings (something covered in biology classes, which by the way, isn't covered on the standardized tests) and we need to understand how our body works rather than dismissing (or, worse, condemning) its urges and predilections. Next, we need to create critical thinkers in our schools rather than automatons or "yes" men and women.

Our society has many broken elements and we are going to need people who are willing to try new things and experiment with new ideas. The "status quo" that has dominated our landscape for the last 30+ years has resulted in our good paying jobs being sent to the lowest wage worker overseas, our soldiers being treated with disrespect (e.g., insufficient armor) and dishonor (e.g., lack of psychiatric care), and now our schools (teachers and students alike) being subjected to mind-numbing tests which don't foster intellectual curiosity and creativity.

All of this starts in the schools. We need to focus there. We did so the other night. I just wish there was more willingness to think "big picture" and consider challenging and dismantling those elements that are restricting our children from reaching their fullest potential.