

Staying Power. A Higher Calling. A Village.

By Brian P. Cory

December 21, 2012

December 14th changed everything.

As 2012 comes to a close, school communities are focused on a different set of priorities. 2013 will tell if the latest priorities have staying power.

Here in late December, educators and school stakeholders are immersed in conversations and efforts beyond the Common Core Standards, standardized assessments, international comparisons, budgets, and teacher evaluations. Post-Newtown, at least for the moment, there is a higher calling for what constitutes an effective education. The indicators of a highly effective teacher defined on Thursday, December 13, 2012 differ from the indicators defined on Saturday, December 15, 2012.

December 14th changed everything.

Pre-Newtown, everyone was concerned about the Race to the Top. Post-Newtown, everyone has different concerns. The post-Newtown concerns are complex and remind us that life does not fit into neat little boxes on a rubric. Neither does education.

Post-Newtown, more folks are beginning to appreciate that the effectiveness of educators and the growth of their students are impossible to measure via the latest batch of assessments.

It is clear that conversations regarding effectiveness and growth need to change from pre-Newtown education reform rhetoric. At least for the moment, there is a higher calling for education.

If we are truly going to help our educators and students to grow, post-Newtown priorities and conversations must demonstrate staying power. Come December 2013, we need to be focused on the priorities and be immersed in conversations that are being engaged post-Newtown in December 2012...and continue to engage them in December 2015...December 2020...etc.

What are some examples of the post-Newtown priorities and conversations?

For starters, educators are more in-tune with their students than they were a week ago. They have found the courage to push their growing "To Do" list to the side of the desk and have, as a result, discovered new-found time to discuss their students with appropriate colleagues such as school counselors and school psychologists. Renewed conversations have emerged regarding how to engage disengaged students.

Community leaders and residents are taking inventory of their health services and mental health supports. They are assessing their security measures and are researching new considerations to enhance those measures.

The whole child approach to education has also garnered new meaning and importance during the past week. The old African proverb made mainstream by Hillary Clinton in the mid 90's, "It takes a village to raise a child," has resurfaced to encourage and challenge post-Newtown conversations.

December 21, 2012 came and went. The world did not end.

So, school villages now need to prepare.

As they prepare, school villages must ask themselves an essential question: What kind of world do we want to live in?

Our students are watching and listening for the answer.

How will students know that we value their social and emotional development?

Will we provide as many resources to boost our students' mental health as we will provide to boost their SAT score?

Educators are watching and listening for answers too.

In what capacity do folks believe educators should serve in? Are educators expected to focus solely on academic achievement? Are educators essentially defined mainly by curriculum and instruction? Or are educators expected to serve in various capacities? I think the answer is obvious: educators are expected to assume a variety of roles while serving in various capacities. If this is the case, school villages should consider the words of Albert Einstein: "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." Where, when, and how will we measure the effectiveness of an educator in areas outside of academic achievement or curriculum and instruction? Will those areas count?

Similarly, where, when and how will we measure the growth of students beyond test scores? Will our practices and priorities model for students that not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted? How so?

School villages need to reflect on all of these questions. Students and educators are watching and listening for the answers. As I see it, this is a pivotal moment in the direction of education in this country. If the post-Newtown priorities and conversations prove to have staying power, we will begin to redefine what constitutes an effective education. Our schools and their communities will grow in new healthy directions.

In recent days, there have been headlines suggesting that school leaders and educators should be issued guns. Even if carrying a gun somehow becomes the latest and greatest in education reform, personally, I will not carry one. I would rather be armed and take my chances with a set of priorities and conversations aimed at enabling me and my colleagues to answer a higher calling. This is why I chose to become an educator. Students and fellow educators, including twenty-six angels, are watching and listening.

December 14, 2012 changed everything.

As we enter 2013 and beyond, our collective responsibility – as parents, as educators, as community members, and as citizens of this great nation – is to ensure that the lessons learned and perspectives gained post-Newtown have staying power.

Whether or not we fulfill this responsibility will determine what kind of village we will live in.

And ultimately, what kind of world we will live in.