
Arizona Republic

These Youths Deserve Better

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Recently a local high school English teacher told his sophomore class they should quit school. He said that none of them would get a degree so they might as well get a job as quickly as they could. His logic seemed sensible to many of them.

Were these kids illiterate? No! Almost all read newspapers, magazines, and the instruction sheets that come with the complex electronic equipment they can all operate. Were these kids innumerate? No! They could all do basic arithmetic, meaning they could balance checkbooks and calculate store prices. Were these bad kids, to be pushed out of school because they were behavior problems? No! Actually, they were mostly nice kids working harder than most to pass their school subjects.

So why recommend that they drop out, and why were so many of them thinking of doing so? The answer is simple. AIMS!

To graduate from high school a passing score on the Arizona Instrument for Measuring Standards test is required of this year's sophomores. But almost all the students in this teachers' class will not pass the test. All his students read at a much lower level than the test requires. The English class he teaches is a special education class, a class where the students possess many skills that are not valued by our School Board and Superintendent of Public Instruction. Some of these kids have ranching, farming and welding skills they have demonstrated in real-world settings. Some have art skills, others sing in their church choir and some already hold part time jobs. But what none of these kids has is advanced reading skills. They never were and never will be fluent readers. That skill eludes them. Nature is like that. It produces differences in talents among us. By every sensible standard of literacy in the world, these kids are literate, but most will not pass the AIMS reading test. Most of these kids cannot pass the AIMS math test either, though they can do practical, everyday math.

The parents and many special-education teachers and classroom aides who have worked with these students for the past 10 years are all as proud of them as they can be. Despite their learning problems, these students have mastered a great deal, and had to work harder to do so. But our State Superintendent and the State School Board will negate every academic advance these youngsters have made!

If these students are silly enough to stay in school until graduation day, they will all be publicly labeled as failures. These students may be failures in the Superintendents' and the Boards' eyes, but not in mine, nor in the eye's of their parents and the teachers who have worked with them over the years.

Given the present laws, most of these students will take their teachers' advice and drop-out. We know the consequences of that decision: higher incarceration and pregnancy rates, lower wages and therefore lower taxes paid, more social services needed and no opportunity to join the military.

Does it have to be this way? Of course not! There is a simple solution. The state can create a third degree. We have a regular certificate for passing the AIMS test and an honors certificate for exceptional students. Why not add a certificate of high school completion? This would provide hard-working kids who have done their best a chance to graduate with their classmates. They deserve the recognition we ordinarily bestow on people who do their best.

In a marathon, after the first three runners cross the line, the officials don't stop the race. They wait many hours for those who did their best and finished. The thousands of individuals who did not win are all proud of the certificates attesting that they stuck it out and finished. Why can't we do the same?

I urge state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne and the Board of Education not to push these students out of school. Please don't label these kids failures because they cannot pass a college entrance test (which is what AIMS resembles).

For working hard these students also have earned our recognition. Let them also walk proudly across the stage to receive a certificate of high school completion. In this way we can reward all the children who run the race, no matter where they place.

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