

Remarks – Montclair Board of Education May 4th, 2015

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When I began to serve on the Board of Education a wise friend, Jon Alter, said to me: “Always ask yourself before making a decision: Is this what is best for children?”

It seemed such an easy guideline: Just do what is best for Montclair’s public school kids.

I began to focus on the character of public education in Montclair 26 years ago as a mother. My three children were all very different learners, each with distinctive challenges and gifts.

I quickly added to my understanding of the schools beyond my own kids’ experience as a volunteer. As a class parent at first, I began to spend more time in classrooms, and I took on various roles in various schools from there.

I got to know teachers all over the district, and I observed teachers working very hard and caring deeply about children. They sometimes struggled to master classroom management, to more ably teach children at various levels, as they wrestled with the complex challenge of conveying ideas and helping to build intellectual skills.

I also saw from early days, that our teachers were largely left to face these challenges in an environment in which they were isolated from their peers and from others who could have helped them evolve as some of the most important professionals we have.

An excellent article in *The Atlantic Magazine* by two University of Michigan professors published in 2012 entitled, “Alone in the classroom” quotes a study indicating that only 3% of most teachers’ days includes collaborating with colleagues. This data led the authors of the article to conclude that the majority of teachers plan, teach and examine their practice alone.

This isolation begins day one for most new teachers. Imagine a recent medical school graduate practicing medicine, without the benefit of an internship, a residency, or without the consistent daily guidance and mentoring the profession requires for years on end.

Our public education system does not offer our teachers the same professional support. Most teachers are left to figure it out on their own.

Some do figure it out – and not surprisingly – some don't.

In my opinion, this lack of support defines a system set up to fail children.

Of course economic disadvantage, absent family involvement, and the lack of early exposure to quality educational programs play a part in creating the challenges we face, but I have seen over and over again that great teaching can overcome these obstacles.

Some say transformational teachers, who are able to transcend challenges so as to be able to teach all children well, are simply born that way.

I disagree.

I believe caring and innovative teachers who change children's lives for the better can become so by being taught to be not just good teachers, but great teachers.

A great teacher's ability to teach ALL children – not just those with natural intellectual and cultural gifts or economic advantages - was always, to me, the key indicator of any successful classroom. Effective teachers and school leaders are the most critical factors for improving outcomes for students.

I urge you to look closely at the results in the School Performance Report, the DRA 2, or the Achievement Gap panel findings.

You will see that something is clearly very wrong.

How can so many of our 5th graders remain unable to read at grade level?

How many of our kids enter college and must take remedial, non-credit courses, because they didn't learn how to write or acquire basic math skills?

Why do we have two Focus schools, in which student proficiency gaps have marked them as in need of remediation? Why do our African-American students consistently score well below their white peers?

This is not about blaming anyone. The challenges are complex, even if it is also clear that inspired teaching, with the help of masterful support structures, can indeed address these challenges.

But to resist efforts to create positive change or to pursue innovative new ways to change the often dire status quo – particularly when this resistance is motivated by fears that are not about the kids – is simply a terrible thing to do.

I am a fan of the Common Core. I would have loved for my children to have been taught in a way that would have allowed them to acquire academic critical thinking skills in Montclair that they instead had to learn on their own in college.

I also do think it is important to publish a roadmap that outlines levels of knowledge and academic skills appropriate to each grade. This does not need to kill creativity or individualized instruction.

And believe it or not, I am not a fan of standardized testing. But as has been the case for decades, the state mandates standardized tests, and as a board it is our fiduciary responsibility to support this.

And yes, I find it sad or even morally questionable that resistance to the new PARCC system, a phenomenon born of resistance to its use as a teacher evaluation method, has undermined what President Obama and so many others set out to do when the Common Core standards were first launched.

Adult resistance to change because of resistance to accountability, or fear of common measurement designed to raise the bar for all kids, has led to tragically destructive behavior on the behalf of too many adults.

Throwaway trigger terms like “corporate agenda,” “teaching to the test,” “increased testing,” and “charter schools” abound. This has been maddening to me, because discussions dominated by these deflections have nothing to do with teaching our children in Montclair and helping them learn.

I came into my position on the board of education with so much hope for our schools. I began to work as hard as I could on behalf of those isolated

teachers and less advantaged children I'd known and observed in the system over the years.

I was hopeful because I had become aware of new ways to support teachers and disadvantaged students, new ways that were working, and because Montclair was a place I loved because people banded together to do the right thing.

I am not so sure I can say that I still have that sense of hope, though I will continue to hope that others who can effect positive change will find the moral courage do the right thing.

I do want to acknowledge my family for their support over these last few years. It is very difficult for children to read lies about their parents' real intentions or actions -- lies penned by anonymous writers who are either tactically lying on purpose or haven't taken even a moment to discern the truth.

I want to thank the many teachers and administrators I have had the good luck to work with over these six years. I want to thank Linda Mithaug, Gail Clarke and Brian Fleisher in particular – three consummate professionals, all of whom have taken on very challenging and complex jobs during a time of change.

I also want to thank Shelly Lombard, Robin Kulwin and David Deutsch – for your friendship and for the leadership of each of you as board President. This is never an easy job, especially when you are trying to challenge an entrenched status quo.

To the rest of the board, it has been an interesting journey. You all work very hard, spend countless hours, and I respect all of you for your commitment.

Dr. Bolandi and members of the board, I wish you luck and I ask you to always ask yourself – as you approach each and every decision point – is this decision what is best for the children?

There is much work to be done.

I leave today knowing I tried my best to do what was right for children.