

By Bill Husfelt

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Unfortunately, politics are becoming more and more divisive and nowhere is the “great divide” more evident than in education ... a fact that is incredibly sad for our children and for our employees who have dedicated their careers to supporting students.

I read an article recently entitled “Two Competing Visions for Education are Tearing Us Apart” which really resonated with me (<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-two-competing-visions-for-education-are-tearing-us-apart/2022/04>). In his article, Virginia Superintendent John Gordon discusses the damage we’re doing to public education by “seeing” it from the “left” eye and from the “right” eye instead of with both eyes. I think his article really captures the essence of our issue. Regardless of political affiliation, although most of this does seem to follow party lines, there’s a large group of people who think we do too much in education and that we need to stay in our lane and just focus just on academics (the right eye). There’s an equally large group that thinks we don’t do enough and that we need to expand our social services, community outreach and social work to ensure all children have an equitable educational experience (the left eye).

The truth is that it takes both eyes to see clearly but I am afraid that many of us aren’t taking the time, or don’t know how, to engage both eyes at the same time to see what’s **really going on**, what’s **really needed** and how we can **really help**. In our community, I think you can see a textbook example of “the great divide” when you compare most charter and non-charter schools or non-charter schools that are surrounded by high-end homes versus those surrounded by subsidized housing.

Let me remind you, however, that I am a supporter of school choice and I believe parents/guardians have the right to choose their child’s school IF there’s capacity at the school for new students. I grew up in subsidized housing and attended the neighborhood public schools and so I know that education is the great equalizer and a strong educational system is the foundation of any great community. All students deserve equitable opportunities and a chance to succeed.

That being said, if you look at the demographics of those who are able to choose charter schools or non-charter schools in neighborhoods where houses sell for \$450,000-plus you’ll find them to be mostly upwardly mobile, two-parent families who have placed a high value on education. Their children attend school regularly, are on time, well-fed and dressed and have access to educational resources like tutors etc. outside of school.

That’s in stark contrast to the world in which most of our Title One students live. Title One is a federal designation generated by the number of students at a school who qualify for free- or reduced-price meals at school. It’s the federal government’s way of noting that poverty presents challenges and that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds may need additional support and resources. At our Title One schools, you’ll find students from homes where one or both parents are working two or more jobs just to survive. You’ll find children being raised by grandparents and foster parents and even, in some instances, their teachers and you’ll find children who need our help with hygiene, laundry, food, tutoring, therapy, and academic support.

Before I go any further, please note that I know those children also exist at some charter schools but it's a fact that they exist in far fewer numbers than they do at the non-charter schools. In 2008, BDS had nine schools that were classified as Title One schools. By the 2022-2023 school year that number will have risen to 24. This is the result of various economic factors, the hurricane and shifts in enrollment of middle- to upper-income students from non-charter to charter schools. Don't get me wrong, poverty is NOT an excuse and it's not a barrier to achievement but poverty does present challenges for children and educators to overcome. Those challenges are real, daily and sometimes feel insurmountable.

Almost all of our elementary schools have washers and dryers, for example, and there's an employee at the school who spends part of his/her day doing laundry to ensure children have clean clothes for school. Those viewing education from the "right eye" will say that those tasks are not our job and we should mind our business. The truth is, we must ensure all children have an equitable educational experience and that means we must help many of them with hygiene and clothing and counseling. Additionally, our local churches and non-profit organizations work diligently to prepare more than 1,200 bags of food each week so children who rely on free breakfasts and lunches at school can have food during the weekend. None of these responsibilities are in the standards we're supposed to teach but we must do what needs to be done.

At schools where all of the children arrive on time, attend daily and are able to do homework in quiet, supportive environments, educators can definitely focus their time on academics. At schools where the children arrive late, attend infrequently and come hungry and traumatized, educators must focus on other things BEFORE academics.

It's sad but true.

Our schools, and therefore our employees, are being asked to do more than ever before in a society that often vilifies them. None of us asked for divisive political elections, a hurricane, a global pandemic or inflation but that's what we have to deal with. You and I probably can't fix ANY of those things but we can choose to approach educators, and our schools, with empathy, compassion and support. We can seek to understand before we judge and condemn and we can join those who are doing the important work instead of criticizing from the sidelines.

What we MUST remember is that our children are looking at us with clear vision in both eyes and they are listening and watching as we "role model" dispute resolution for them. I, for one, don't like what they are seeing and I am so concerned about the impact all of this in-fighting is having on them.

We have choices. We can change certain aspects of our current reality. We can lead the way to a better future for ALL students. But we're going to have to work together to get there and we're going to have to see our shared reality clearly, with both eyes, to discover what really needs to be done and how we can help.

Stay safe and God Bless!