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Red X's and Private Schools: An Informal Essay on Today's Education

"Dawn, what is this? What's wrong with these sentences? These are beautiful, creative sentences, and the teacher has marked them all wrong." my friend's voice trembled with rage as she held the school paper of her nine-year-old daughter, Caroline, aloft to show me. Glaring red ink smeared each carefully written sentence. "As a professional writer, I cannot fathom the reasoning or integrity behind this," she continued.

A quick glance over the top of my coffee cup at the paper answered the question for me. The directions on the ditto asked the student to take one sentence and add other words to create three more sentences. Implicit in these directions, apparently, was that the words needed to remain in the same original order. Caroline had created not three, but five richly creative sentences using the words provided. But she'd committed the error of mixing up the words, thus the red ink slashed her page.

"This, Sarah, is the trend in education in the United States. The current forces driving educational policy promote simple tests and exercises in which there is only one right answer. No more critical thinking, no multiple solutions to problems, and no questioning. Rather than fostering creative, critical ways of looking at learning and the world, emphasis is now placed on what is wrong rather than what is right, according to the unassailable test makers," I explained to my friend.

"But, how can that be? Parents don't know about this, Dawn. You have to write about this," she responded to me.

Sadly, this is too true. We in the education field are only too aware of the increasingly limited ideas and teaching methods allowed in classrooms across the United States, but many people are not. Therefore, this month's essay focuses on the current state of education for lay people.

We do know what it will take in the 21st century to thrive-the ability to think critically and adapt creatively and quickly to the ever-changing technology and world in which we live. So, why are we educating young people to search for a static answer that must be achieved in a standard way?

Private schools remain outside many of these national mandates, allowing teachers to continue to teach passionately about subjects and ideas they care about. They can teach students how exciting learning and discovery can be. Many parents have the option of sending their children to private schools. Many parents do not.

In my community in New Mexico, increasing numbers of upper-middle class parents choose to send their children to expensive private schools. It is almost assumed that if you are educated and can afford it, it is not whether your child will attend private school, but which they will attend. The effects of this over time has been to create class-based education within our city. In general, the children from upper-middle class enlightened homes full of books and learning attend the schools that encourage them to soar through meaningful and challenging curriculum. Many of the students who attend public schools do not come from

homes full of books and enrichment. Instead of receiving it at school, they are subjected to the one-correct-answer dittos and tests. Essentially, we give the "haves" more of what they already have, and the "have nots" less of what they need. In the broader political arena, if we know how people learn, and we do, then why are we intentionally teaching certain segments of our populace not to think critically, nor question? Why are we teaching that there is only one correct answer?

I believe whole-heartedly in our public school system. I believe all children have the inherent right to an excellent education without their parents having to pay to send them to a private school. Imagine what could happen if all of that money and intellectual and physical resources were invested in the public school system, creating a dynamic, vibrant, enriching environment for kids of all backgrounds. Imagine the magic that could take place.

Public school teachers find themselves frequently between a rock and a hard place. Mandated from above to teach the prescribed curriculum, for many the cost is the creativity, energy, passion, and love of teaching that initially drew them into teaching. Standards-based curriculum drives teachers from the profession. Many feel it immoral how they're being required to teach students. Ironically, it is precisely the teachers you want for your children that either are leaving or are so highly discouraged that they are considering doing so.

The picture I've painted is bleak: a standards-based curriculum that allows for little true learning or joy in the classroom, the continued creation of a class-based and unjust educational system, and a generation of children being taught to accept information blindly. To quote linguistic human rights advocate Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, "I am a pessimist who takes optimistic actions." And so shall we.

All of this begs the question, "What do we do as parents, teachers, and community members?"

- Become aware of your school's curriculum, and give voice to your thoughts and opinions. Are students being taught to think or to memorize?
- Read to your students and/or children from a variety of genres, encouraging them to see there is usually no one right answer, but instead life is composed of multiple perceptions, solutions, and ways of thinking and living.
- Become active in the politics of your school. We live under the fallacy that schools should not be political places. Of course they are political! Every bit of curriculum taught, or not taught in a school is founded in some political belief.

My friend, Sarah, and I sat in silence finishing our cups of coffee that morning. That was over a month ago and her daughter's educational experience has continued to devolve, with more emphasis placed on minutia that is wrong than what is wholly beautiful. In celebration of the wholly beautiful, let us all take optimistic actions.