Wheeler’s amazingly candid response is one that I will never forget. “Your question shows that you do not understand the purpose of the public education system,” Wheeler intoned. “The purpose of public education is not to educate students. The purpose of public education is to provide an education for those few who want it.”

“But what about the other kids?” I asked. “Why don’t we let them leave school so the rest of us can learn? They’d be happier, we’d be happier, and it would save the taxpayers money.” I thought I was the first person to come up with the idea.

“We can’t do that,” Wheeler explained patiently. “Crime would go up. Unemployment would go up. Parents would be angry. In 40 years in the school system, all I’ve heard from each generation is that the succeeding generation couldn’t read as well. I happen to disagree … and whenever we do require more homework and start failing kids, parents complain that their kids are working too hard.”

Wheeler’s sentiments are still shared by some educators today, though few would voice them in public. They just don’t accord with the bipartisan “leave no child behind” attitude rippling through public education. But, however offensive his remarks might have been, Wheeler had one thing right: Americans tend to want schools that teach the basics, provide a bit of “academics,” but add a lot of sports, dances, and other extracurricular activities. He had lasted six years as superintendent, a highly political position. A latter-day Horace Mann, who would want academic schools, couldn’t have lasted six minutes.

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After talking with Wheeler, much of what I saw at my beloved Woodlawn High School suddenly made sense. I now understood the teacher who slept through class, telling students that if they didn’t bother him, he wouldn’t bother them. I understood the goofy social studies teacher who taught us astrology rather than history; likewise, the math teacher who hated math, and so instead gave delightful lectures on libertarian philosophy.

Not all my teachers were turkeys. Coach Goudy both won most of his games and pounded modern literature into his students with a no-holds-barred Socratic method. Mr. George, a brash ex-football player, practically bullied students into sharing his enthusiasm for history. My journalism teacher, Miss Warfield, taught me to write clearly and on deadline. While not always scintillating, a trio of science teachers, Mr. Bryant, Ms. Albrecht, and Mr. Lawler, gave students a real appreciation for the scientific method, which served me well years later as a researcher.

But those dedicated and knowledgeable teachers were rebels, subverting the system by pushing students to meet high standards, or at least some standards. As a high-school student, I planned someday to join their ranks and to do my small part to make the purpose of public schools educating students, not just providing an education to “those few who want it.”

At least until I got to college. As a sophomore, I asked an education professor how to get certified to teach social studies. He explained that I would need 12 education classes, but only 4 in the social sciences. I had no need to understand the subject I taught, he insisted, since “the curriculum people will tell you what to teach.” That was when I decided to become a political scientist.

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