

When Education Reform Gets Personal

Confessions of a policy-wonk father

By SCOTT JOFTUS

Over more than 20 years in the field of education—including two with Teach For America—I have helped promote state standards, the Common Core, the hiring of teachers with strong content knowledge, longer class periods for math and reading, and extra support for struggling students, to name a few. I have recently discovered, however, that what I believe as an education policy wonk is not

always what I believe as a father. I am incredibly fortunate that my two young daughters are ready learners who attend a high-functioning school. That said, I make the following confessions:

As a policy wonk, I push for high academic expectations for all students. I know that American competitiveness requires excellence in subjects such as math and science that our schools do not teach very well. As a father, however, I find that what matters most to me is that my daughters are happy in school.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, where I live, academic expectations are extremely high. Our school district aims to teach math, for example, in a rigorous way. I appreciate this goal, but to date “increased rigor” has primarily meant that some students skip grade-level math classes and enroll in classes meant for older kids. Basic skills that are taught and reinforced in the grades being skipped are often given short shrift. In 2nd grade, my daughter brought home worksheets on probability before she had any real understanding of the concept, or even a strong foundation in simple division. Her frustration with probability, and consequently math, grew as we substituted times-table drills for play dates. Last year, to my horror, she said that she hated math. This year, which has included an increased focus on math facts and an inspiring teacher, math has become her favorite subject.

With my policy hat on, I know that a teacher’s academic background is critical. As a father, however, I want a teacher who manages a calm, safe, and fun classroom, and who loves children. One of the best teachers my children have had is our regular babysitter, who speaks English as a second language and never graduated from high school.

Of course, there are some gems at our school (thank you, Ms. Bederman, now retired) who are knowledgeable, skilled, passionate about learning, and passionate about children. To a father, Ms. Bederman was a gift from heaven; to a policy wonk



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she is the Holy Grail. Why can’t we identify and train more of these treasures? Why wasn’t every teacher in our school crowded into Ms. Bederman’s classroom to witness her magic? Why didn’t the principal *require* every teacher to crowd into her classroom?

As a policy wonk, I believe that student learning flourishes in classrooms that include students with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds. As a father, I want my daughters to appreciate diversity of all types. But I also want them to be surrounded by children who come to school ready and eager to learn. These goals come into conflict when some students are constantly disruptive; the policy wonk must preach patience to the father who wants the class disrupter out.

My daughter’s kindergarten class included a troubled boy who was going through the foster-care placement process. He is exactly the type of child that can benefit most from an excellent education, but he regularly disrupted class. One day, when I was in the class-

room, the teacher—talented, but inexperienced—spent more than half of her time trying to keep this boy on task.

I feel for children like him; my company works with schools and districts to improve outcomes for these kids. But I was angry. The other children were clearly uncomfortable. His disruptions reduced learning time for my daughter, and seemed to steal some of her innocence and excitement about school.

The tension between my understanding of good education policy—driven by a deep commitment to equity and the belief that an outstanding education can transform lives, and this country—and what is right for my daughters makes me both a better policy wonk and a better father. The tension also illustrates why school reform is so difficult.

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