

The Fault in Our Schools **By Casey Chaffin**

“The sky is falling,” said Chicken Little. “The whole education system is crumbling,” said Casey Chaffin (who, in this case, is me). Why am I comparing myself to Chicken Little? Because Chicken Little was overzealous in his declaration, and so am I. The gravitas of both statements, if proven true, would be equally catastrophic.

In a society that truly believes that the only path to success (i.e. wealth) is through the academic corridor, the way they treat academics is alarming. The new “reforms” (that’s what the proverbial “they” say, although I feel that word implies a note of improvement that isn’t there) that have been slowly consuming America’s schools take the focus off learning and individuality and put it onto standards that, under the microscope, turn out to have little to no educational value.

Let’s start with that newfangled four point scale the Common Core tide has been washing in. How can you take something that is as complex and diverse as individual thought and distill it so much that all you are left with is four points? There’s no meaning there. In the four point scale, a student is either crappy, mediocre, adequate, or perfect. (The district calls it “not proficient,” “almost proficient,” “proficient,” and “advanced.”)

Let’s look at the higher end of that: adequate or perfect. That’s a big difference. There is no “job well done” (in the traditional scale this would be somewhere in the neighborhood of a B-plus or an A-minus). You’re either average or perfect. Guess what, District: there is no perfect! Which means the newer teachers who have never had the opportunity to give a student a 93 percent balk at the expectation of a student who is “advanced”; in the rubric’s own words, a person’s assignment must “outline *all* the major claims” and “identify *all* false statements” in order to be labeled as advanced. Basically, the assignment is supposed to have no errors and evaluates *all* information flawlessly. This means that kids who deserve that 93 percent are slapped with an adequate, because they aren’t perfect. Is that how we’re rewarding the hard workers who put real thought into their assignments, by nitpicking and designing expectations that no one can meet?

Here’s the other problem with the four point scale: since perfection is unattainable, teachers end up encouraging kids to shoot for adequate. Listen to how that sounds: the Board of Education is rearing Generation Adequate. No, not the Greatest Generation or Generation X--Generation Adequate. And, in addition to that, the standards set out simple, narrow-minded goals for kids that reprimand them when they wander outside the limitations in search of deeper thought. Such rigid outlines prevent kids from exploring new ideas and going after topics they truly care about. What ever happened to being passionate and shooting for the stars?

There’s a new mantra floating around (that the Common Core standards embrace wholeheartedly) that preaches, “Don’t be passionate. Be practical.” This removes any meaning the kids who actually appreciate school can derive from modern education. The district seems to be just fine with implementing standards that turn kids into robots that can complete a task, and pass the SBAC, but can’t form and defend their *own* opinions and arguments. What matters in

the long run--being able to properly fill the requirements of a prompt or being able to take a coherent stance on their own, independent opinions?

One can find multitudes of TV ads that claim that current school policies are preparing the leaders of tomorrow, and yet all that can be found in curriculum are limitations on what outside-the-box thinkers can get away with. The only leader that can truly lead has the passion, courage, and originality to push against the boundaries. Anything life-changing, anything that has truly reformed our society, came from those revolutionaries that thought "outside the box"--the people that weren't afraid to look societal injustice (or standards) right in the face and go against them.

The men and women that led the American Revolution, women's rights movement, civil rights' movement, and the current LGBT movement all possess two common denominators: individuality and passion. They have the will to have a unique voice and the deep-seated conviction that screaming it from the rooftops no matter what opposition is encountered will bring satisfaction. Those are the two characteristics four point scales and Common Core standards smother the most.

What will happen to the education system if the values preached by the Board of Education fatally conflict with what it means to be an individual in a modern, free, constantly changing society? If unfailing conformity and disdain toward depth of thought is what the standards put the most focus on, where will the passionate, forward thinkers be able to find their place in the world? The sky hasn't fallen yet, but the foundation that holds it up is shaking.