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# The clarity of a mother's voice

By WILLIAM J. MATHIS

I was presenting standardized test scores to a group of parents when I unconsciously parroted an often-heard phrase, "In order to be economically competitive in the 21st century, we have to have high test scores."

A mother's hand shot up, "But I don't want my son to be an international competitor in a 21st century global economy," she declared. "I want him to be a good man."

The room fell silent.

She went on.

"I want him to hold a good job, carry his own weight, and give a little bit more to his community than he took. I want him to get along with others. I want him to love and be loved. I want him to be happy."

With stunning and simple eloquence, this mother brilliantly defined the purposes of education.

In contrast, the Vermont state Board of Education has initiated a "public engagement process" to define the future of education in Vermont. Alas, the state board's invitation does not ring with the clarity of a mother's voice. It clangs with dire warnings about 21st century learning environments and a world of rapid change. In a bureaucrat's vision, it talks about implementation plans and stakeholder involvement. It uses phrases like "allocate resources in a way that will support desired learning results" and "Parents are encouraged to be meaningfully participating [sic] in their children's learning."

As we lament the decline in civic participation, governmental processes build walls on the other side of a great divide from the people. Incomprehensible funding formulas and pages of costly mandates build the walls higher. Parents talk of the well-being and happiness of their children; bureaucrats talk of global competitiveness. The people know the dangers to our economy are the national debt, lack of health care, crises of corruption, and Asian countries paying pennies per hour in wages — not test score differences.

The annual Gallup polls tell us people are increasingly unhappy with a state-imposed standardized test score regime. While ideological think tanks spew negative reports about public schools, the people find the faults of our state and federal education laws to be greater problems than the condition of our schools.

The people are deeply concerned about an educational system that squeezes out the arts, social studies, and even playground in favor of test preparation. Yet this intrusion is never mentioned in the state board's vision.

Contrary to political proclamations, the Economic Policy Institute, buttressed with Department of Labor statistics, says we do not have a math and science shortage. Parents' opinions concur. In a Public Agenda poll, parental support for their children getting more math and science has steadily declined since 1994. (Only 32 percent said students were not getting enough science and math.)

In another disconnect of political rhetoric from reality, the people say the biggest problem in the schools is lack of financial support. More than 85 percent say low-performing students must receive extra help and preschool opportunities. By a two-to-one majority, they are willing to pay more taxes to close the gap.

Perhaps our problem is in Montpelier's vision for schools. According to the American Institutes for Research, if we set aside the Asian city states (such as Singapore and Hong Kong) and if Vermont was ranked as a nation, we would score third highest in the world in math and fourth highest in science.

The educational problems we face in Vermont are clear. Schools identified as not meeting standards have higher proportions of poor children and are more racially diverse. They spend less per pupil than higher-achieving schools. Yet neither the state board nor the Legislature addresses this most fundamental issue.

So what is our vision of our future educational system? As the Vermont state board recognizes, we cannot define

the jobs of the 21st century. Building a house on shifting sands is a speculative and risky enterprise. Yet, there is a base, there is a core. We can agree that skills for the 21st century include fundamental knowledge areas, adaptability, working with others, and contributing to the common good.

Our goals are also the goals of the mother: that our children be good men and good women; that they are enabled by us to lead richer and fuller lives; that they are boosted higher because we lifted them; that our success is measured by what our children do to improve a globe threatened by warming, diminished resources and factional wars. These must be our vision of the future. Whether the 18th century or the 21st century, these imperatives abide.

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