

November 12, 2007

Dear colleagues and friends,

I have struggled over the last few hours about whether I should pen this email or not, but I think this is something that should be said.

Sitting over dinner the other night Max informed me that his "school got a level F"( as we know children talk to each other) and though I had not told him this, he was asked what does that mean, he said, "My teacher said that there are things that are not good at our school that have to be fixed."

While I agree that there are things that are not good at schools throughout New York State and the United States that need to be fixed, a grade A-F does not help us fix those things. What a grade does, is that first it either makes you feel good (if you passed), or relief if you got a C or D (at least I am not an F) or you feel demoralized if you fail with an F (I'm really bad at this). (This from someone who sat in remedial math class in H.S. for 4 years and 2 years in college because I could not pass the test). I sat there feeling horrible for him and the teachers because the grade worked and the message was sent. You are not good, you must be fixed!

As someone who was a teacher at the Muscota New School for many years and a parent who chose to put my child and keep my child at Muscota, I do not; do not recognize the recent grading of schools. I clearly see this grading as yet another way to harm and dismantle the small progressive schools that have fought for years and years to maintain the good, positive work that they do with valuing, visualizing and keeping children and families at the center.

Small schools are not easy places to work in. Relationships are intense and the dailiness of keeping the outside forces at bay, while continuing to do the authentic work of curriculum, is challenging at best. But do not confuse this hard teaching work and the daily work of schools with something that needs to be fixed.

We live in a time where teachers are being pushed to get children to pass tests, to keep money for schools, and to get money (incentives/ bonuses). I understand that this is the reality. But I chose to send my son to a school where the philosophical value of the school was that testing was not our focus and that we believe in the work of childhood. The testing and grading movement is pushing childhood out. (This I live as I help prep my son for his upcoming 4th grade tests in his homework and the test- prep books that I have for him) This is also a reality, his and mine.

Some facts:

- The Muscota New School was named one of the top 100 schools in the city ( its in a book)
- The staff at Muscota is licensed to teach and practice their craft, some with multiple licenses and specialties
- They are almost all descriptive practitioners able to discuss children using non-evaluative language.
- They are almost all able to use the descriptive review process
- Many of the teachers on the staff have affiliations with universities and colleges in the city and out

Turn over →

- Many staff members have relationships with philosophers and educators who are recognized nationally and internationally. Teachers are doing current work with these colleges and educators.
- The practices that are used at Muscota are discussed in conferences and inquiry groups' through-out the United States.
- The children that move on from Muscota go to the best middle schools in the city, they go on to some of the best high schools and founding children at Muscota have all gone on to college, often Ivy League. A Muscota child was recently hi-lighted as a student of the week on NY 1.
- The foundation that Muscota was built on is supported by the most cutting edge thinkers in education. Here is just a few:

Debbie Meier, Pat Carini, Vito Perrone, Hubert and Becky Dyasi, Maxine Greene, Karen Worth, Eleanor Duckworth, Cathy Fosnot, Diane Mullins, Rhoda Kanevesky, Lillian Weber, Elaine Avidon, Elsa Weber, Cecelia Traugh, Andy Doan, Miriam Dorn, Jane Spielman, Mitch Bleier, Yvonne Smith, John Dewey, Jane Andrias, Liza, Leslie, Taeko, Grace, Adrienne, Holly, Kathy, Patrice, Louisa, Elisa, Sangeeta, Sarah H-B, Sarah, Daniel, Emmy, Marilyn, Lailany, Francesca, Victoria, and Lesia, and the parents who stayed the course trusting the process and the deeply reflective work over time of small progressive schools, as well as the many families and children that we gave back their dignity after other schools had devalued them ( there is no percentile grade for that on the DOE rubric).

These folks, through their work in other schools and venues and at Muscota and their support of Muscota and schools like it, have shaped the true essence of Muscota and small progressive public schools, the part that can't be graded, or tested. (My tax dollars go to funding this school and parents like me choose to have our children educated in these kinds of schools.) . These folks kept Muscota alive through the attacks both overtly and covertly. Their words and work nourished us, they will continue to do that through the practice of teaching and the work they have left for us.

To newer folks at Muscota I say continue the work, stay the course, look for the cracks. If you believe the grade and the message it sends, they won. If we value choice, and the work of children, trips and play, then this work of teaching is also political, purposeful work, and where you are matters. At this time it is crucial that the message from us is that yes, we are different and that these differences are not grade-able and that no letter or number grade can or should stand for the very important work that we do with children and families.

Muscota was founded on so much more, that is the message I want my son to understand,

Maia Starcevic  
 Max Starcevic-Castro's mom  
 Lillian Weber's Grand Niece

Please see also Sunday Times (11/11/07) Op-Ed section "The System Flunked We Didn't" CPE 1 parents say something similar and touching