

TIMES COLONIST

Geoff Johnson: Teacher-student bond vital to learning

[Geoff Johnson](#) / Times Colonist

May 14, 2013

There is likely no more abused phrase than “it’s just common sense.” Politicians use the phrase to justify even the most unlikely proposition as, do activists of every stripe.

Economists who can tell you that what just happened is “common sense” can rarely describe what might happen next to our economy.

So it is with jaundiced eye and ear that we regard a “common sense” CNN opinion piece about education, followed by a TED talk about common-sense teaching from speaker and writer Rita F. Pierson, who taught in elementary schools, junior high schools and special-education classrooms for more than 40 years.

Pierson is refreshingly direct in her comments: “If a child is not present at school, he or she cannot possibly learn.”

Schools that consistently report high student achievement consistently have students with great attendance, says Pierson, adding that parents are not exercising common sense when they claim it is not the school’s business to be critical of adults who fail to get their kids to school on time and ready to learn.

Pierson is critical of policies that fail to pursue anything less than excellence in teaching and the provision of learning opportunities.

School administrators who tolerate, ignore or who do not know how to intervene with marginally competent teaching in their schools don’t make sense to Pierson, either. “I am not aware of any corporate entity [other than schools] that passes incompetence around in a circle,” she says.

Teacher compensation? “I believe that if we paid for excellence and then insisted on it, the academic complexion of our schools would change dramatically.

“Championship schools and classrooms are deliberate, not accidental.”

Pierson’s brand of common sense is sometimes a tad abrasive, but well worth considering.

She writes that children who drop out of high school often read far below grade level, adding that it would make more sense to focus instead on teaching students to read effectively.

But it is in her eight-minute TED talk titled “Every Kid Needs A Champion” that Pierson speaks most genuinely and movingly about the true nature of teaching.

Just a few minutes into the talk, most educators will set aside their cynicism about “common-sense teaching,” because what Pierson says is uncommonly reasonable.

She speaks convincingly, not about ways in which the system can be improved, but about the importance of teacher-student relationships. The simple humanity of her brand of common sense will resonate with many teachers.

“Kids don’t learn from teachers they don’t like,” she says, and she is not talking about teacher popularity. She is talking about the unerring ability of kids of all ages to recognize good teaching — even from teachers who demand a great deal from them.

If we were lucky, we all had some teachers like that from early grades to postgraduate days.

I know I did, and I learned more about teaching from those influential teachers than I ever did from any number of “methods” courses during teacher training.

Those teachers did something very sensible, but not necessarily all that common — they raised my sense of myself as a learner.

My best teachers did not do that by giving me a passing mark when I did not deserve it. They did it by knowing what I needed to do next and showing me how to do it.

And they did it by recognizing my disappointment and frustration, and by exercising their own humanity and professional experience to lead me to success.

That kind of thing is not educational magic, just common sense.

Check out Pierson’s talk on YouTube. And think about teachers like Pierson that you had.

Geoff Johnson is a retired superintendent of schools.

© Copyright 2013