

October 2015

On the eve of parent-teacher conferences, I'm reminded of the complete triangle that forms a successful educational environment. The three members of the triangle are the teacher, parent and of course the student. It's no secret that public education is a passion of mine. I believe it to be the conduit on which the middle class of our great county was born. Public education is also the catalyst for upward mobility in society. The definition of "typical" for each of the members of the triangle have changed greatly over time and mirror many changes of our society. Despite the changes, all three members of the triangle must work together to provide the success we want for the student.

I greatly enjoyed the recent homecoming festivities at Guthrie High School. It is one of my two favorite events I get to enjoy as Superintendent (the other of course being graduation). Seeing the alums come back and talk about their great times together always takes me back to my high school days as well. This summer will mark my 30th high school reunion (sadly, my alma mater celebrates most reunions during the summer instead of surrounding a football game). It makes me ponder how things have changed in the world we call school and especially the triangle I described.

Teachers enter the profession with the same appetite for helping people that I carried almost 30 years ago. They have a gleam in their eye and a desire to "make a difference." I believe they are better prepared to teach but many still have little or no understanding of the challenges that lie ahead. If you ask teachers their future career plans, a much greater number than in the past, will tell you they do not plan to continue teaching for the duration of their careers. There are many reasons for that answer. The most prevalent answer centers around greater opportunities that exist for females in the workplace. While the teaching field has always been dominated by females, much fewer opportunities existed 30 years ago in other professions. The exit of seasoned teachers has provided a void in the field which is contributing to the current teacher shortage and ultimately hurting the instruction our students receive.

The students are not that different in their educational needs but are much different in the external support they receive. The disparity that exists in support of students has never been greater. We have more kids who have unstable living situations than ever before. In Guthrie, 67% of our students are statistically considered to live in poverty. In education today, we have a fewer than ever percentage of students who reside in a household with both biological parents. This means that single parent homes or grandparents raising their grandkids is more the norm than the exception. Pairing poverty with an untraditional living situation leads many students to an empty home in the evening because the adult is working more than one job. This begs the question: WHO READS TO THIS CHILD? or WHO HELPS THIS CHILD WITH HOMEWORK? Or more importantly, who praises this child for their success?

Parents or those raising our children are expected to work longer than ever before and in many cases have a lower standard of living than they had growing up. The families that place a value on education for their children find a way to support them but in many cases it is not what we remembered from our time growing up. The thing I've learned about my own children is they watch what we as adults do so much more than I ever expected. The behavior we model for them is what they believe to be acceptable. The time we spend with our children is precious and in many cases it is less than our parents spent with us. Because of this, the behavior we as parents model for our children is even more critical. When was the last time you read to your child or grandchild? When was the last time they read to you? When was the last time you discussed a newspaper article with your teenager that relates to their life?

I hope every parent or guardian takes advantage of parent-teacher conferences. As I advised before the school year started in this column, please communicate with your child's teacher. That communication strengthens the triangle for the benefit of our children.