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To Reach A Goal, It Must Be Attainable

SPRINGBORO, Ohio – Traditions are great. Every family I know has at least a couple of things they like to call their own. One tradition that I think everyone does – or at least talks about – is New Year’s Resolutions.

I recently was reading a newspaper article about why so many people fail to complete the promises they make to themselves on January 1. If you have ever dieted or tried to quit smoking or other addictive habit, you will know this to be true. Most people fail on their New Year’s Resolutions because they set the bar too high. They make goals for themselves that are not attainable, and as a result, quickly fall back into their bad habits.

As a public school superintendent, I am constantly being reminded that we need to “raise the bar” in education. In fact, the two new “buzz words in education right now are “rigor” and “relevance.”

Of course, we want to teach our students at a higher level. Courses that students can breeze through may help their current report cards, but they certainly do not set the kind of foundation our students will need to succeed in the universities or work place.

Rigor would indicate that students will have to study much harder, and learn at a much higher level.

Relevance is a concept that has often been overlooked by educators, but never by students. When you were a student, how many times did you ask a teacher, “but when will I use this in the real world?” I don’t know that I have met a person yet who didn’t ask that question, either out loud or to themselves.

As the lead educator in a school district with more than 5,000 students and 300 teachers, I can tell you that I am all for building a stronger academic foundation for all of our students. But I also think we need to use some common sense when we make such decisions.

Just like our New Year’s Resolutions that fail, we must be careful that we do not fall into the same trap where we are asking our students to do something that they simply cannot. The recently passed core curriculum wants to make it mandatory that all students take four years of math, and graduate at a minimum of an Algebra II level.

For many students, this is absolutely the best thing for them and their academic careers. They will go on to college, where they will learn to become teachers, engineers, doctors, architects – you name it. Having a solid math background in high school will allow them to grasp their chosen field’s concepts at a much stronger and quicker rate.

Here’s the caveat – not everyone is going to college. Not everyone has the learning capacity to grasp higher math concepts, including calculus and geometry. Not everyone is planning on entering career paths where algebra II will be used.

Imagine your life today if everyone who graduated from high school did go to college and graduate with a professional degree. Who would install and fix your plumbing and electric? Who would be our laborers? Who would do any number of jobs that none of us could live without? And more importantly, if these people all had professional degrees to pay for, what would they cost us financially?

According to the new law passed by our House and Senate, that doesn't matter. Everyone should receive the same education at the same level. I think they have a strong understanding of rigor, and I applaud our legislators' interest in the public education arena.

I question their concept of "relevance."

Perhaps it is easier and more constituent friendly to "fix" the academic portion of public schools than the funding issues which have beleaguered Ohio for decades.

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