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U.S. Truly The Greatest Country, Everyone Gets A Free Public Education

(This is the sixth column in a series Dr. David D. Baker, superintendent of Springboro Community Schools, has written to the community. If you would like to view past columns, please visit our website at www.springboro.org and click on "District," then "District Offices." Then click on "to learn more about the office of the Superintendent.")

SPRINGBORO, Ohio – One of my pet peeves as an educator in the United States is studies that show that American students far exceed their counterparts worldwide, until they reach high school, where American students traditionally trail off. What these studies forget to tell the American public is the reason for the decline. The countries that all of a sudden shoot to the top of the list do not allow students who are lagging behind and/or with special needs to continue to receive a free public education. Imagine how high Springboro Community Schools would rank in the state – and the nation – if we removed the bottom 50-percent of our student body.

One of the many reasons the United States of America is such a strong country is that we give everyone – regardless of their abilities or economic class – the right to 13 years of public education. It is not only a right; it is the law. While not making good grades in other countries will tag a person for life as a laborer, we in the United States work diligently to find out why those students are not scoring as well as they should. We give them the help that they need, whether it is tutoring, special education assistance, accommodations for their specific needs, etc. Can you imagine the type of students the United States could churn out if after the eighth grade, we spent all of our funding on the elite 1/3 to 1/2 of the student body, and then only the top students from this group would be given the opportunity to go on to the top universities? I think our numbers and standings in the international grouping would be astronomical.

Last week, I explained the importance of literacy in this column, and why we at Springboro Community Schools are taking this portion of academia so seriously. One of the knocks the American public education system has taken is in the area literacy. Schools districts do a decent job overall promoting literacy in kindergarten through fourth grade, but then it drops off markedly in junior high and high school. Basically, the emphasis disappears.

It is important to know that up until the fourth grade, students are taught reading. They are taught phonics, strategies to figure out what words are, and what their meanings are when they are grouped together. In fourth grade, textbooks change from a heavy reliance on pictures to help explain the story and simple sentence structures, to a mindset that students should already know how to read. Thus, at fourth grade, students read to learn, not learn to read.

Here is where we may need to rethink the way we are doing things. If our major employers of industry are telling us that students are graduating from high school and college, unable to read a technical manual, then maybe we as a school district are not finished teaching reading in fourth grade. It is not uncommon in our primary and elementary schools for teachers to have at least three different reading groups in the classroom. Teachers will work with individual groups at their level, with books that correspond to their ability. A child cannot learn if we give them work that is not appropriate for their developmental stage, which for many children does not match their chronological age. Based on this knowledge, why should we expect a class of 400 sophomores to be reading the same social studies book, and learning at the same rate? Even as adults, we all work at different speeds and different levels. Recognizing these differences, should we be teaching social studies and other curriculum at different levels? To some extent, we already are doing this. For those with special needs, there are Individual Education Plans (IEPs) written to accommodate physical, mental or emotional needs of specific students. At the other end of the spectrum, we have Advanced Placement courses. Those typically are not offered until a student is at least a junior in high school. There are five or six years then when the bulk of our students are receiving identical lessons, with identical homework assignments, with – you guessed it – identical expectations (i.e. exams).

Again, back to the three questions I have been asking people to think about this school year:

- 1) Is there a crisis in public education?
- 2) Is what we are teaching relevant?
- 3) How do we change?

While these are academic questions, they also reflect community values. We need to decide – as a community – the direction Springboro Community Schools should take.

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