

# Mailbox

Dear Editor,

As always, I read my *Horizons* cover to cover on the day it arrived. When I read "The Yellow Brick Road of Education" by Rodney H. Clarcken, to say I take issue with Dr. Clarcken's article would be an understatement.

It is interesting that Dr. Clarcken couched his article in a fantasy. I wish he would have prefaced his article with, "In my opinion." Since his article seems to be a statement of facts and perhaps university policy backed by his degree and position, I feel compelled to question several of his thoughts and positions.

*Education is a fundamental human right.* Education in the United States is a privilege, an obligation, a legislated entitlement; mandatory to a certain level, but certainly not a right. One must apply oneself to education; it is not given.

If I interpret the rest of this fantasy correctly, education and especially teachers are being unfairly blamed, reformers outside the education community have no business nor capability to reform education, standardized tests are deceptive, unfair and demoralizing, and pay for performance is materialistic and selfish.

To say that reformers today have limited knowledge or experience in education is perhaps the most hubristic statement possible. Are those same incompetent reformers not products of our education system? To listen only to those who know the secret handshake of education will lead us away from best practices applicable throughout the spectrum of business, industry, military and education. Look at any successful large corporation; seldom do the leadership or directors have degrees or experience in that specific industry.

*"Pay teachers a respectable wage and accord them the respect, honor and status they deserve. Pay for performance ... materialistic and selfish motives are counterproductive."* This is completely backward. As long as schools of education accept and certify new teachers who are in the bottom third of their contemporaries academically (nationally approximately 50% of new teachers fall in that category), where is the motivation or demand for higher pay? Would a business owner pay top dollar for such an employee? Should the taxpayer? Look to Finland, where only 1 in 10 applications for a teacher credential is accepted; there they are paid respectable wages and have the respect, honor and status spoken of in this fantasy. We must first elevate our culture. Ask teachers if they would exchange their tenure for higher pay. Require them to have significant outside experience in their area of expertise.

*Standardized testing is evil.* I do agree this may not be the best method, but what is the objective cost-effective alternative? My administrators specifically have told me not to worry about the Colorado standardized tests; if you are providing the



education we want you to provide, your students will do well on any exam.

New and innovative ideas ... they are all around us and the wheel does not need to be reinvented. What were we doing before that we are not doing now? We have lowered our standards, especially at the secondary and undergraduate level. What are the 26 countries rated above the United States doing better than we are?

While Dr. Clarcken contributes to an important, ongoing national discussion, I strongly urge my alma mater's faculty, staff and alumni to be open to, and enter, the other side of this discussion.

—John Burkhart, '71 BS, Colonel, USAF, retired

*Burkhart has been on the faculty and/or staff of the National Defense University, the United States Air Force Academy and a Colorado public high school. He currently teaches junior high science at The Classical Academy, a K-12 charter school, which was just rated the number 1 high school in Colorado by coloradoschoolgrades.com and in the top 2 percent on the 2009 Newsweek list of America's best high schools.*

To read Rodney Clarcken's response or to join in the conversation, visit [www.nmu.edu/horizons](http://www.nmu.edu/horizons) or write to us at *Northern Horizons*, Northern Michigan University, 1401 Presque Isle Ave., Marquette, MI 49855 or [horizons@nmu.edu](mailto:horizons@nmu.edu).

## A note about the Winter 2012 issue

We are happy to feature the wonderful work NMU alumni are doing as medical professionals. However, please consult your personal physician or health-care specialist before making any changes to your treatments, medications, supplements or diet and exercise routines.

February 13, 2012

Dear Horizons Editor,

Thank you for sharing Mr. Burkhart's response to my article, *The Yellow Brick Road of Education*, published in Northern Horizons, Fall 2011 issue. I appreciate that he took the time to share his views and the opportunity respond. I will try to be brief. First of all, a little background. The article was taken from a book I am writing entitled *Truth, Love and Justice: A New Paradigm for Education and Its Reform*. As such, only about 1/100<sup>th</sup> of the book was included in the article. The preliminary material to frame the parts that were included were left out.

Mr. Burkhart said he had wished I would have prefaced my article with "in my opinion". I appreciate his concern. It was "in my opinion" and I spend a great deal of the first part of my book making clear I am expressing my opinion, explaining how my opinions have been formed and exploring why and how our opinions differ.

As one of the key principles I explore in the book is truth, it is important that I strive to be as truthful and honest as I can be. I invite Mr. Burkhart, or any of your readers who would like to read the book, to write me ([rclarken@nmu.edu](mailto:rclarken@nmu.edu)) for a free electronic copy of the latest working draft. I would encourage them to give me suggestions for improving the book so that I may use those comments to make it better. When it is finished, hopefully by May 2012, I plan to make the book freely available online.

Mr. Burkhart felt the statement "Education is a fundamental human right" was not true. Both his statement and my statement can be considered as expressions of truth depending on how we define the terms. I make this statement in the sense of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says, "Everyone has the right to education". I suspect from Mr. Burkhart's response that he is interpreting "right" as something being owed without any concomitant responsibility. If so, we agree and discuss this problem at length in the book.

Mr. Burkhart's other concerns are a bit more complex and the primary reasons I started writing the book. The statements that he cites, like the one above, can be taken in different ways and are meant to promote an honest and fair understanding of our situation. We think, feel and act in diverse ways. It is only as we share our different viewpoints with due regard for others that we will grow. Among other things, this will require humility, open mindedness, integrity and courage. The above qualities, evidenced in Mr. Burkhart's letter, set the stage for both of us to learn and be better. I thank him for his presenting the "other side".

Mr. Burkhart questions a number of the statements in the article. It is legitimate that he do so. By what standards do we weigh my statements and those that contradict them? The standards I am recommending in my book are truth, love and justice. For example, take his statement, "If education and educators are being unfairly blamed, exactly who has been in charge for the last fifty years as the

United States slid from the pinnacle of education to a rank in the mid-20s worldwide?" If we use only the standard of truth, several questions arise. What standards were used to make these judgments? How reliable and valid are the data and the comparisons? What are we to make of the fact that U.S. students in schools with less than a 10% poverty rate out score every other nation in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, and those with 10-25% and 25-50% poverty rate rank second and fourth respectively (see *The 17<sup>th</sup> Bracey Report on the Condition of Public Education.*)

When we answer those questions, others arise. Who and what is to blame and how might we turn this around? How have reforms helped or hurt? Would #1 ranked Finland's reform policies, which seem diametrically opposed to market-based reforms work here? How has the cultural shift toward education as a "right" without responsibility influenced change?

I do not pretend to have a definitive answer to any of these questions. One of the points I am making is that the "truth" is not as clear as we sometimes believe and it is only as we engage on a path toward investigating truth shorn of our attachments and biases will be truly be able to make progress intellectually, socially and morally.

What is best for education depends on many changing factors. Many opinions about what should be done exist. We need to give serious attention to fully discussing what is best with all those affected by education. My article and book are meant to be a contribution to that discussion. Though it is an exploration of truth from my limited perspective, it is impelled more by the forces of love and justice. I do feel teachers and education are being unfairly attacked and I care about them both very deeply.

In closing, I note that Mr. Burkhart is a teacher. I applaud him and his school for the fine work they seem to be doing. His response suggests I must do better to manifest truth, love and justice, which I believe offer a way out of our problems. Just as Dorothy developed these qualities as she helped the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion find their minds, heart and courage, we can each do the same.

Rodney H Clarken