

The key to a good education: parents

'Reformers' blame teachers for failing students, but family background often directs a child's academic trajectory

By Patrick Welsh

A lot of the truths about education in this country were on display Saturday as I watched the Class of 2011 graduate from T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va. To me, none was more obvious than the fact that parents and family culture are the most important factors in a child's education. It's a fact that school administrators and the ever-expanding industry of "reformers" are loath to admit, lest they appear powerless in the face of the staggering academic differences among the kids who have been handed diplomas from America's high schools this month.

Take Ben Goodwin and Emma Kemler, two of the best students in my senior English classes this year. Both are voracious readers who write with sophistication, insight and grace. Ben was accepted early to Bucknell, and Emma is going to Wesleyan. They are the kind of students whom teachers and administrators love to take credit for. But I know that neither I nor any other educator had influence on Ben and Emma close to that of their parents.

I taught Ben's mom, Priscilla Zanone, in 1979. I can still remember the brilliance of Priscilla's writing. After graduating from Duke, she married a fellow T.C. student, Mike Goodwin, who attended the University of Chicago and Harvard Law School. I also taught Emma's dad, Tom Kemler, in 1975; he also ended up marrying a T.C. student, Lisa Bondareff. Both were top students in high school. Tom went on to Kenyon and founded a software company; Lisa went to the University of Virginia and is now a Virginia circuit court judge.

Benefits of diverse school

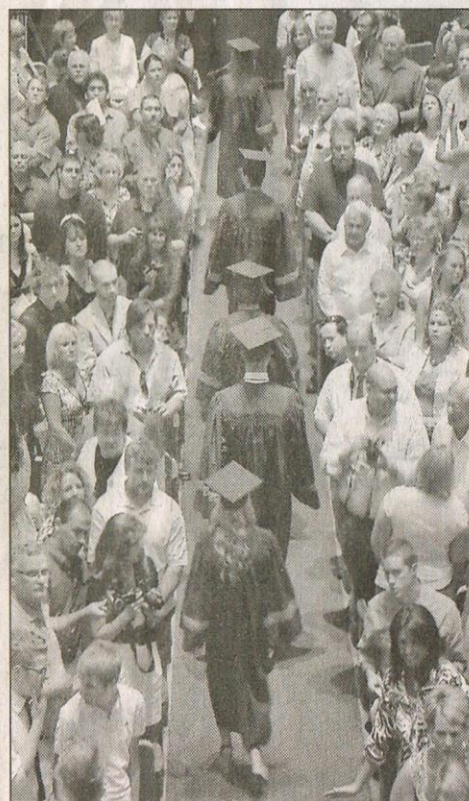
There are Alexandria parents of the same educational background and financial means of Ben's

and Emma's parents who think that it is child abuse to send a kid to T.C. Williams, a school where minorities are in the majority and 57% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and that has relatively low test scores compared with neighboring schools where property values freeze out the poor. What the Goodwins and Kemlers know is that a bright, motivated kid with vigilant parents cannot only get a first-class academic education at a school like T.C. but also a rich social education money cannot buy.

It's in vogue for reformers to blame the achievement gap not on poor parenting but more on poor teaching. New York City, encouraged by the Obama administration, is leading the way. Just last month, it announced that it will spend more than \$25 million to devise special tests students will take to measure the effectiveness of their teachers.

Reduced to its simplest terms, the rationale behind the attack on teachers is this: Children born to single, semi-literate, poverty-stricken 16- or 17-year-olds can, with the right teachers, reach the same level of academic skill as children born to parents such as Ben's and Emma's. Teachers would love to have such power, but statistics and common sense show that with few exceptions, things don't work that way.

It's laughable to see "reformers" berating the quality of public schools as they did when the Program for International Student Assessment results showed that the 15-year-olds in the U.S. ranked 17th among the 65 systems worldwide participating in the literacy test. Little mention was made of the fact that when the results were broken down by ethnicity, Asian-American students came in second in the world and white American students came in sixth. This too has to do with parenting, and a family culture that values education.



By Mark Felix, AP AP

Commencement: Congress has introduced an act that would set a graduation rate goal of 90%.

I saw those same values in many parents of first-generation immigrant graduates. Take Joe Massaquoi, one of the few black males in my AP English classes this year. Joe is 6 feet, 4 inches and 230 pounds. He played football, basketball and lacrosse and will go to Marshall University on a football scholarship. Yet he defies every stereotype of the high-profile jock. His father came from

Sierra Leone to, as Joe says, "live the American dream. He has always wanted me to have a better life than he did and knew education was the key."

Surrogate parents can also play an enormous role in a child's education. Filomena Reyes came here from El Salvador five years ago. I later discovered that Filomena's home life was so intolerable that she went to a social worker who had her placed in a foster care home with Charlotte Spinner.

'She never gave up on me'

"I always had a hard time with math, but Charlotte would sit with me every day to help me understand every math concept. She never gave up on me," says Filomena, who will enter Old Dominion University in September. But whether it's the home of Massaquois from Sierra Leone or the home of the Goodwins from Duke and Harvard Law, the role of parents is remarkably the same.

"Growing up, it was just a fact of life in my house that school was the most important thing," says Ben Goodwin, echoing Joe Massaquoi.

As I watched the graduation of our 634 seniors with 2,500 parents and family members packed into the gymnasium, I thought that one would be hard-pressed to find such a diverse gathering in such a small place. At least 77 countries were represented in that crowd. There were big-time Washington lawyers and lobbyists as well as parents from public housing and some who live in the shadows of illegal immigrants. And what many of their children had in common were parents who valued education — and who paved a brighter and wider path for their future success.

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