

Teachers are the key to a student's success

In last Saturday's Daily News, Robert Samuelson laments the failure of most school reform efforts over the last few decades.

As support for his thesis, he notes that scores on the reading and math sections of the National Assessment of Educational Progress have not improved since the early 1970s.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Samuelson correctly identifies the key reason for this lack of progress as lack of desire.

"The larger cause of failure is almost unmentionable: shrunken student motivation," Samuelson writes. "The unstated assumption of much school 'reform' is that if students aren't motivated, it's mainly the fault of schools and teachers."

Many well-intentioned legislators have worked to create a school culture that values only what can be measured on standardized tests. But students are not motivated when their self-worth is evaluated by such a one-dimensional yardstick.

Education, at its most fundamental level, has always been about relationships.

The extent to which students are motivated depends almost entirely on the quality of the relationships they have with their teachers.

Teachers must be able to relate to their students' individual circumstances. Only by empathizing with them as human beings and appreciating the complexity of their lives can teachers hope to create within them a genuine desire to learn.

If teachers want to create excitement about learning, then they have to understand and appreciate where their students come from; i.e., their family configuration, socioeconomic status, and racial/ethnic background.

In addition to content mastery and pedagogy, teachers desperately need training in the kind of positive relationship-building that sets the stage for academic and life success.

Education is not something we do "to" our students; it is something that we do "with" them.

Samuelson's interpretation of the root cause of school reform demonstrates that he knows more about education than most educators.

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