
Excellence: What Is It? Whose Job Is It? IRA/ARF Cosponsored Session

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Excellence—Today's Buzzword

In the last year or two, *excellence* and *literacy* have been our educational buzzwords. I just dare you to ask somebody to define those two words. Each person you asked would give you a different definition. So I looked up *excellence* in a dictionary; after all, I wanted to be absolutely correct. The suggested meaning was "with quality" and "outstanding" and "extremely good of its kind." To me that sounded like a dog show!

I also have become aware that it is okay to change labels or titles. In 1987, the National Food and Drug Administration decided that we were not going to call our beef *Good* anymore. We're going to call it *Select*. So now, the very same cow is going to become select instead of good! We move terms around to suit our whim or need.

Therefore, I am concerned that our teachers and those students you are teaching to become teachers, and the teachers with whom I work do not and will not know what we are talking about when we say, "We want excellence." I am most concerned, however, about our governors who are meeting now to decide what we educators ought to be doing—decisions that are ultimately made in terms of political, not academic, criteria!

Those of us here at ARF may understand excellence in education, but how will we be able to get the message to the people out there—the general public? Everyone knows that we all want excellence. Of course

we do. It's amazing that it would even be insinuated that we don't. We have always wanted excellence, and I think teachers have always worked toward it. But let's not forget, excellence is a journey, not a destination.

One statistic that came out of NAEP and Department of Education a few years ago was that in the *olden days*, reading and being competent in mathematics was *literacy*, and was *excellence*. Today, what are we talking about as excellence? In 1910, the average 25-year-old in this nation had an eighth-grade education, and we called that excellence. I know, because my grandfather was one of them. He was a southern preacher, and as he went from town to town preaching, they thought he was excellent. He never blamed a teacher for not teaching him more; rather, he always commented, with fondness and respect, about those wonderful teachers who taught him and enabled him to be who he was. I'm sure you have some of those same types of memories.

By 1950, we had moved ahead in this nation. The average 25-year-old had a ninth-grade education. But by 1978, and every year since then, the average U.S. 25-year-old has had a twelfth grade education. True, that doesn't mean that all students graduate, and, yes, we do have adult literacy problems and other educational concerns. But my concern is that we don't understand and share with the public out there what we mean when we talk about excellence is. I want to suggest to you what parents and the public think excellence is, and then let us decide how we can help to change these false impressions.

Public Conceptions of Excellence

Every summer, I teach at Utah State for Bernie Hayes. Several years ago, we brought in more than 150 parents, from all over the state of Utah. We asked them, "If schools could do only one thing for your child, what would be the one thing that you would want schools to do?" How do you think parents in your community would respond to this question? I confess, I was hoping that reading would be their major concern and desire.

The number-one answer of those parents was, "Get them to grade level." Now, folks, if you stop and think about it, that's also what they say in Pennsylvania, in Florida, in California—throughout the U. S. I am sorry to say, but it is we who have caused that! We have caused it by making *grade level* more important than anything else. At least that is the message we send. For example, a parent conference may begin like this: "Johnny is reading below grade level." True? Of course, it is true. Grade level dominates everything we do: report cards, special services, grade placement, retention, remedial assistance, etc. Who determines grade

levels? Not the teachers, not the superintendents—but publishers! Again the noneducators setting the standards. I have authored for a couple of basal reading programs. When we wrote the third-grade-level materials, whatever it was that we said was third grade became third grade! Every kid who completed that level was supposed to know what we put into the third grade book.

So you see, we haven't really defined what *excellence* is, and so lots and lots of people speak of it and expect that it will be whatever happens when, and if, their child "is at grade level." The message we are giving to the public is that if schools would try harder we could actually have all students nearly equivalent, and above the midpoint on the normal curve. The normal curve would have only one part, the upper half—the above-level part! So what I'm trying to say to you today is that we, as educators, have to become more knowledgeable about what *excellence* is and how to convey this information to the public.

Second, the parents said that excellence was knowing all the skills. Parents felt that learning skills was a very high priority for their children. I'm afraid that is also the feeling transmitted by many school districts. Just investigate school districts' major goals and, I guarantee you, skills and skill tests will be high on the list. They can even be a whole-language school, or literature-based school, or integrated-language-arts school, and they will still have skill lists. Now, don't misunderstand me; I am not opposed to skills. But I think we have sent the wrong message by continuing to rank skill lists so high on our priorities. We have, as a result, given parents and the general public the idea that knowing these isolated skills is a large part of excellence. Are we busier marking little boxes (indicating that they know the skill) than we are in finding out whether or not they know how to use the skill in their everyday life? We're putting more and more money—\$3.5 million this year—into basic skills and remediation and hardly any into thinking or the application of skills.

Is *excellence* teaching children to want to learn? I think it is really interesting that the concept of *cultural literacy* has been introduced at this time and that we now have a list of things that culturally literate people should know while at the same time we are talking about the fact that we should teach students not 'things' but how to think, learn, apply and develop the desire to *find out* and to be informed, in order to be literate.

So we have a contradiction here in what it is we are asking of teachers. Should they be teaching students facts? Or should they be teaching students to *think* and to want to find and understand the facts—in other words, to be motivated? That was the third thing that parents said. "I want you to make my child want to learn." Well, folks, I grew up in Kentucky, and my Dad had a very interesting way of motivating us—he

opened the door each morning and said, "Thou shalt be motivated!" We knew what that meant. We don't do that with kids anymore. Teachers tell me that they spend more time getting students excited about what they are going to do than in actually teaching the lesson. Children are not coming to school eager to learn, but then maybe they are learning this attitude from society itself.

Recently I was in Albuquerque, and when we awakened one morning, there was a slight snowfall on the ground. I turned on the TV to catch the news. Instead of the newscaster saying, "There will be no school today," he said, "Kids, You don't have to go to school today!" When we approach learning with that attitude, we are telling students that there is no need to *want* to learn. Rather, just come to school and we will pour it in and you will learn with no effort on your part! Excellence suffers from poor attitudes about learning.

Fourth, and last, on the parents' list of excellence, they wanted schools to teach their children to be successful. I said to them, "What is success?" They responded that success was being able to get a good job—that is, to make money. So now I hope you see that everything that the parents listed is something that people see as being a part of excellence. Each person has a different opinion—a different goal for the schools and their children.

What is Excellence?

I believe that excellence in public education is when we work with youngsters so that they are learning at their own level. Their own learning level. We must help teachers to understand that we have a lot of children in our 'low' groups who are at, or above, their capacity. We are busier working with them than we are with the kids who have more potential and are doing little or nothing. So *attaining their own level of ability*—that is excellence, at least for the general public. As educators, we may set higher goals for ourselves. Those who eventually choose education for their profession will likewise eventually set higher goals for themselves. But in public education, I believe it is when we can help each student achieve his or her potential that we have an *excellent* program. Excellence is when we help a student to become a learning student, not a learned one. Nature does not demand perfection, only that we grow. That is how public education must be, as well.

Excellence Is a Journey

Excellence is a journey, not a destination. We talk about *excellence* as though it is somewhere we are going and as though when we get there

we will be finished. I want to remind each of us today that we finally *get there*, they'll want us to go further. So there will never be a level called *excellence* that we can reach. However, each day, with each student, we can continue along the path of excellence, if we will just be honest and share the true meaning of excellence with our public out there.

I would like to close now, with a poem that Jerry wrote for the conference.

What a lovely reading conference

At The Colony Resort.

We have meetings in the morning,

Then we hit the tennis court!

With the weather warm and sunny

Here in gorgeous Sarasota,

It's sure better in December

Than in frozen North Dakota!

We'll review and contemplate

Achieving Excellence in Reading,

And we'll gather information

For our nation's schools we're leading.

We'll be back again next year

Like any fine and worthy chef,

Making recipes for reading

And promoting A R F.

Jerry W. Koppman