

shouldn't want that), our communities are simply too small. A person can live in a large city and never once interact with the school system. That is simply not the case in a rural place like my own. City leaders have family members who are employed by the school, who attend the school, or who are elected to the school board. If city leaders own a business, they probably support school activities whether they have any children attending the school or not. A school's extracurricular activities are our community's front porch. Outsiders may have never set foot in our city limits but still know us by the accomplishments of our students. Families can and do move to towns where a school is thriving and provides opportunities for children like their own. When the school is struggling or full of dysfunction, the job of revitalizing the community at large becomes that much more difficult. I'd assert that a rural community will not prosper over the long term without a quality school.

But by what standard do we judge the "quality" of a school? Our state and federal politicians and bureaucrats have plenty of metrics. They wield them like a cudgel to allocate and withhold funding and threaten local schools to stay in line with their mandated ideals of the moment. Politicians parade around their metrics in electoral circuses and legislative sessions centered around education REE-FORM with a shamelessness that has me waiting on someone to eventually break out a broom as a campaign prop like the ridiculous gubernatorial candidate Homer Stokes in the cinematic classic "O Brother, Where Art Thou?"

These metrics are based on

"reasonable" sounding data like standardized test scores, graduation rates, college readiness, and job placement, among other things. Reasonable they may be, but who (or what) do they benefit? Do these metrics help build an educational system that is integral to a local community, raising children to be responsible citizens of their local place? Or do they simply help train an army of workers to serve The Economy?

In the 1960s, Wendell Berry critiqued the purpose of American schools in his uniquely provocative manner. He wrote that schools resembled a combination of "babysitting, job training, and incarceration." Yikes! Like many of Berry's critiques, he is not wrong, uncomfortable as it may read. To be clear, this is a criticism of a flawed system with misbegotten purposes, not of local teachers. When Berry describes a good teacher, it is some of his most beautiful writing:

"Like a good farmer, a good teacher is the trustee of a vital and delicate organism: the life of a mind in his community. The standard of his discipline is his community's health and intelligence and coherence and endurance. This is a high calling, deserving of a life's work."

Berry rightly envisions education as part of a community's ecology, concerned with the care and cultivation of a local place. Local people would educate their children with local values to become responsible members of the local place. Sure, those children have free will to move on to a new place, but the school would not manufacture their exit. Yet, our modern society does exactly that. A society that views rural places as archaic trains rural

youth in a sanitized, industrial manner to leave those archaic places as soon as possible and never look back. It is incumbent on local people—both inside and outside the school—to encourage our children to grow in a manner that does not alienate them from their place.

I distinctly remember a moment in junior high when I was asked to write down some career goals. My stated plans involved building a life and career in Stamford. This was reviewed by a particular administrator who was not from here, only worked here a short time, and thankfully moved on shortly thereafter. He lampooned my goals in a private conversation, informing me that I could "do better" than that. Even as a teenager, I thought he was full of it and promptly dismissed his advice on that topic and all other topics. I have just enough of my grandfather's irascible spitefulness in my DNA that I wanted to prove otherwise to that guy and a few others along my journey (mostly at the post-secondary level) who doubted my goals.

To be clear, I had many people in my path in the Stamford school system who were NOT like that guy. Many of those people are still my friends in adulthood. They encouraged me to follow my dreams, whatever those dreams might be. Yet, I know that my experience is not unique. I cannot help but wonder how many other rural children devalued their local place when they were told they could "do better." This is why it matters for a community's people to have passion for their place and to impart that on the children of the place as they grow older.

What is the meaning of local education, then? And by extension, what is the purpose of our local community at large?

Do our communities exist for their own sake, as a place for people to love one another, love God's creation, and build relationships and prosperous lives together? Or do our communities merely exist as an exploited colony, enriching a distant land by shipping away our wealth, natural resources, and young people?

As a new school year dawns, may we focus on the purpose of our place and see our local schools as an integral to the local ecosystem of life. May our communities give the support, encouragement, and protection to our schools, so that our teachers can nurture our young minds in the powerful calling that is their work.

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Stuff from the Pastor

Sunday evening approximately forty folks, some older and some younger, gathered together in the school cafeteria and prayed for the students, faculty, staff, and all others on the campus at Robert Lee ISD. I thank the clergy folks who offered their attendance and words of support for the school year. To all the folks who showed up, and you have no personal connection with a person on the campus, you have enlarged your spiritual footprint.

Well done. I want this year to be without incident and be dedicated to the entire purpose of teaching our youth. Channel Change.

I have been in sports overload because after the Olympics comes my favorite sports period of all times. The Little League World Series is on the tube for the next few days. These young boys and girls play for the pure fun of the game, and show great sportsmanship and athletic skills during their time on the diamond. The first day of the tournament a young pitcher threw a no hitter. Boerne, TX is representing our area. I urge you to take a minute and watch a game, and don't forget, the Paralympic Games are coming up soon. Very worthy of watching these athletes. Channel change. May I ask you a question. When was the last time you spoke with your best friend/s? Why so long? Call 'em this week and I want to hear what they had to say to you. Do things now before they become 'wishidas'. Wish I had called them sooner. I thought of them last week but I didn't call them. Life is to be cherished. Moments of reconnecting with lost favorites are special. Savor the memories, but don't be afraid of making new memories. STOP... I just had a flashback of my days of motivational speaking at dinners and seminars. Glad to know that info is still in a file someplace in my brain. That is a bunch of 3x5 index cards. Now go and make that phone call you have been putting off. Keep praying for rain. Ask that person on the phone if it rains at their house. I dare you to now tell them of our dry crisp earth in Texas.

Be Well, Gary Karschner

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