July 19, 2010: Grampa Slee Says

As most of you know, I am highly concerned about America's under performing education system. I believe we are firmly entrenched in a least common denominator system, where students must learn the same things in the same way with the same packaged curriculum, and they must all get to the same place at the same time so they can all pass the same tests on the same day. In this weakest link world, academically gifted students need to be intellectually fed outside of the classroom.

But it wasn't always this way. At one point in our history, we offered a non-dummied down educational experience.

My grandfather – a person of such wit that Mark Twain had nothing on him - was a farmer who insisted that in his youth, all the learning anyone really needed to succeed was earned via an 8th grade education. Of course, I always thought that this was his way of rationalizing his own terminal degree (there is some dispute as to whether he indeed made it to the 8th grade). But these days I'm wondering if Grampa Slee wasn't on to something.

John Hull sent me a final exam that was used in 1895 to assess whether 8th graders in Salina, Kansas had learned anything. There are five sections to the test: grammar, orthography, US history, arithmetic, and geography. Here are some questions from just three sections of this 5 hour exam:

Grammar (Time, one hour)

1. Give nine rules for the use of capital letters.
2. Name the parts of speech and define those that have no modifications.
3. Define verse, stanza and paragraph.
4. Define case; illustrate each case.
5. What is punctuation? Give rules for principal marks of punctuation.
6. Write a composition of about 150 words and show therein that you understand the practical use of the rules of grammar.

Orthography (Time, one hour)

1. What is meant by the following: alphabet, phonetic, orthography, etymology, syllabication
2. What are elementary sounds? How classified?
3. What are the following, and give examples of each: trigraph, subvocals, diphthong, cognate letters, linguals
4. Give two rules for spelling words with final 'e.' Name two exceptions under each rule.
5. Give two uses of silent letters in spelling. Illustrate each.
6. Mark diacritically and divide into syllables the following, and name the sign that indicates the sound: card, ball, mercy, sir, odd, cell, rise, blood, fare, last.
7. Use the following correctly in sentences: cite, site, sight, fane, fain, feign, vane, vain, vein, raze, raise, rays.

U.S. History (Time, 45 minutes)

1. Give the epochs into which U.S. History is divided.
2. Give an account of the discovery of America by Columbus.
3. Relate the causes and results of the Revolutionary War.
4. Show the territorial growth of the United States.
5. Tell what you can of the history of Kansas.
6. Describe three of the most prominent battles of the Rebellion.
7. Who were the following: Morse, Whitney, Fulton, Bell, Lincoln, Penn, and Howe?
8. Name events connected with the following dates: 1607, 1620, 1800, 1849, 1865.

I'll save you from further embarrassment by not asking you the arithmetic or geography questions. Don't feel bad if the 1895 questions made you squirm: some high school graduates were tested and none achieved a score of even 20%.

So what happened to American education since 1895? Let's look at the expectations and behavior in those days: deferred gratification, constant threat of a parental beatdown for bad performance, and the need to achieve that comes with having nothing. Doesn't this seem light years from the instantly gratified, lack of parental oversighted, and entitled group of kids that typically walk America's school corridors today?

What can be done? I'll deal with this topic over the next few months. But you can imagine it starts with a Midas-type re-conceptualization of grades K-20.

Grampa Slee insisted that my generation was populated by students who were chasing a piece of paper, rather than digging down to educational bedrock. He thought our educational system could not be salvaged once the McGuffey Readers were shown the door. In his mind, this loss of pragmatism could only result in a nation of overly-educated idiots.

I wish Gramps was still around, so I could tell him just how correct he was.

-Rob

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