

# Varying Collegial Views in Preparing Today's Graduate

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## **Preface**

There are two basic types of “prepared graduates”:

(1) First are those with high grades, who easily pass the state's high-stakes test. They are the obedient ones, following orders, doing their assignments, and causing no problems. These students, by external standards are “prepared.” Identified as the “silent majority,” they often lead lives of quiet existence, avoiding conflict, but are ill-prepared for advanced problem solving.

(2) Second are those receiving passing, but not always outstanding grades, and they often ‘march to a different drummer.’ They are sometimes vocal and obstinate students, debating every rule or assignment. They submit mediocre work, or none at all, rebelling to what they see as “busy work,” a teacher's need to control, or the plain, simple fact that, to them, the assignment is “stupid.” They have their own circle of friends, not in the mainstream of popularity, perhaps, enjoying challenges, ridiculing the hypocrisy of adults and schools. Often, they appear to swim upstream. They do think, and they do take a stand, but not always the popular one.

## **What distinguishes the two types of prepared graduates?**

A difference is that the second type challenges the status quo, and makes his/her own decisions, often contrary to what adults want. They learn by experience that it feels good not to agree with conventional opinion. Taking these attributes to adulthood, they use them successfully. Why? Because what appears to adults as rebelliousness, or stubbornness, or the inability to accept orders, mysteriously changes when these same students become adults. We've learned that *rebelliousness* becomes “independent thinking”; *stubbornness* becomes “determination,” and the *inability to follow orders* becomes “initiative.”

## **Preparing for a Productive Adulthood**

How, then, can we channel the qualities that students possess, building on their strengths, preparing them for a productive adulthood, while at the same time keeping organization and respect in our schools? This is the major question addressed by this discussion.

Long standing research indicates there is no correlation between grades and success in life. If this is true, and multiple studies have so indicated, why do schools place such a strong emphasis on grades? An unquestioned goal of education is success in life and not simply excellent grades. Thus, this discussion begs the question; what then, is “success” in life?

The basic measure of success is not money, power, or prestige. It is, as Dr. Abraham Maslow expounded over a generation ago, “self-actualization,” reaching one's potential and Arthur Combs' self-direction. A ten-year old may be self-actualized, while a 50 year old may not be. Drug use, alcoholism, low expectations of oneself or by others, fear of failure, poor socialization skills, low academic achievement lead to the lack of self-actualization in a person of any age.

Schools need change. Teachers need change. There *are* educators guiding students to develop and reach their potential. From the researchers' experiences, unfortunately, with an n=80, only 2 out of 10 teachers are ones that most reasonable parents would want their own children to have. It's not that teachers are really “bad;” it is that they lack appropriate interpersonal communication skills to engender joy in teaching and learning causing learners to tune-out. They cause students' spirits, and inquisitiveness to hibernate. If students are lucky, they may have a teacher who excites, interests, and challenges them, forcing them to think. One great teacher, periodically, can inspire students to

reevaluate their negative thoughts about school. Nevertheless, having one great teacher periodically is like putting a finger in a dam leak. Ultimately, it will not hold. What we need is systematic change.

In the postmodern world, parents have relinquished the role of teacher and given the responsibility of education to our school systems. However, preparation for adult life does not begin in high school. Nor can preparation for adult life take place merely at home with our over reliance on the psychological trappings of sexuality, violence and substance abuse so prevalent in our mass media. No one is naive enough to believe that a great high school program is enough to prepare students for adult life in a postmodern world. Formal school preparation begins in Kindergarten, and continues throughout the child's school experiences. Informal preparation for a productive life begins in the home with no certain societal rules. Excellent schools, which depend on excellent leadership and teachers, can promote a sense of love and belonging among the students, which will un-do most harm caused by difficult family circumstances. We know that love and belonging are the prerequisites of self-esteem, which, in turn, is the basis for reaching one's potential.

To produce prepared graduates, with academic knowledge and skills, who are industrious workers, involved community participants, and team workers, with depth of understanding that promotes advanced problem-solving abilities, we need changed emphases in our schools, accepting that without conflict, there is no growth. Our goal should be how to *manage* conflict, not how to *avoid* it.

### **Suggested Practices**

We suggest the implementation of the following practices:

1. **De-emphasize high-stakes, standardized testing at state and school levels.** Just as not all humans fit into the same shoe size, not all students test well. It does not mean they don't know the material. It simply means they are not able to exhibit their learning via multiple-choice tests. High school requirements should be based on several criteria, evaluating students' readiness for graduation.
  - State academic tests
  - Portfolio of creative accomplishments
  - 85% average in course grades over 4 years of high school
  - Attendance/active participation: 95% attendance required over 4 years
  - Teacher recommendations, supported by a video-taped presentation by the student

***Each of these five areas needs to have equal weight.***

There are areas that need to be considered when we evaluate the reasonableness of conducting high-stakes testing as researched by Hachar and Alaniz, 2004.

- A. In the school systems studied, there are several days each month where benchmark testing is conducted. Students practice sample tests, over and over again, with the intentions of raising scores. Often, however, this backfires, because the students and the teachers get so bored with the repetitiveness, that scores are lowered, not improved.
- B. How much time is wasted on benchmarking that could have been used for increased teaching/learning time? By the researchers calculations, seven weeks of school, 35 days, (the equivalent of an entire marking period) are wasted on test preparation and test taking. Furthermore, the children who have not done well on the benchmark tests, are urged to stay after school for 2 hours, two to four days per week for test practice tutorials. When do the students have time to simply relax and be kids?
- C. In some schools, 20 minutes of each and every class is devoted to test practicing, even in courses that do not have the required TAKS tests, such as drama. The teachers and students hate this intrusion into their subject matter, so do not put their best effort into the tests.
- D. How many students drop out of school without receiving a high school diploma because they are frustrated with their testing results?
- E. How many students initially qualify at 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> grade for special education, solely so they can become exempt from taking the state tests?
- F. How much quality teaching time is lost to test practice and scoring?

- G. How well did students do on college entrance exams, college board scores, and college acceptances before and after state tests were required?
- H. How many teachers have left the profession because of frustration and low impact they have on students' successes and graduation rates?
- I. How many students feel they are learning more now that tests have been implemented? How many feel they are learning less?
- J. Since algebra is required of ALL students (not only college-bound), and general or consumer math courses have been practically eliminated, except for special education, are students performing better in math? Or worse? And by which standards?
- K. Can the legislators of Texas, who have pushed for these state exams, supposedly in the thrust towards accountability, then helping to raise the academic level of our schools, pass the exams themselves? The rhetoric sounds good, and gets votes, but testing does not reflect all that our students are learning? Have they even tried to take them? This writer seriously doubts that politicians who are promoting high-stakes tests would reflect a much higher rate of passing than the students themselves.

For more than the past decade, Texas and other states with a high percentage of Hispanic population, such as California, Florida, Texas, and New York, have been testing students and labeling schools on the basis of testing results and sociological aspects of the school's population. In Texas, categories that are scored and rated include not only the actual academic test results of students, but other sociological data such as:

“African American, Hispanic, White, Native American, Asian Pacific, Gender, and Special Education.”

The final ratings also include attendance and drop-out rate reports for each individual school as well as the district as a whole. Overall scoring labels by which a school may be identified vary in each state, but, basically, they are similar. “Exemplary, Exceeding Expectations, Academically Acceptable, and Non-performing,” are four typical categories, listed here from best to worst.

The authors decided to investigate the state of Texas because it is the state where there appears to be the most publicity about state high stakes testing, promoted strongly by President Bush, and implanted firmly in Texas since he was governor there. States that indicate high-stakes testing have made test-passing mandatory for graduating from high school and for passing from a specific grade level to another. For example, any child that fails reading in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, as determined by the Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System Report in Texas, must be retained in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Any student who does not pass the high school test cannot graduate. It is not important that he or she had perfect attendance for 12 years and has passing grades in all subjects. If the high school exit test is not passed, the student cannot graduate. He/she cannot even receive a certificate of attendance. That is the harsh reality of high-stakes testing.

While it is true that the student can retake the test, several times if necessary, many choose not to because once they miss graduating with their class, they lose interest.

Accountability is a valid concern in education, industry, and in government. With the enactment of No Child Left Behind, the whole issue of high stakes assessment surfaced rapidly. This new law promotes implementation of accountability measures. This federal legislation reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Originally, this legislation was intended to remedy the academic performance of students considered to be low achievers. Accountability, however, that is based on one exam is neither just nor valid. We are not talking about passing the bar or a driver's license test which can be re-taken. We are talking about the future of a 17-18 year old youth. Accountability can be much better served by basing graduation on several items, not solely one. An exit exam is acceptable to use if the students' grades, attendance rate, and a portfolio of work are also considered, allowing a full profile of the students' capabilities.

2. **Eliminate teachers' certification testing.** There are many excellent, motivating teachers who do not pass the exams. There are many cruel, or, at best, mediocre teachers who do pass the test. Teaching, if it is to be regarded as a profession like law and medicine, must be based on practice, experience, and high standards. A six week, or six month, student-teaching

assignment does not prepare a teacher for the responsibility of shaping the lives of children. We need new standards, described below:

**3. Changes in teacher certification requirements**

- Bachelor's degree in an academic area
- Master's degree in educational theory and practice, psychology, human growth and development. This can be earned during the apprenticeship years.
- Three-year apprenticeship where new teachers have a mentor, with eight + years of successful teaching experience. The mentor and new teacher are scheduled 90 minutes daily for conferencing, observing, and/or planning. Pay scale for an apprentice should be 20% less than for a certified teacher.
- The mentor must be compensated for his/her crucial role in the development and retention of new teachers. A \$1,000 a month extra, for 9 school months, is recommended, based on 7.5 hours per week at \$33.33 per hour, which is less than some car mechanics, carpenters, and plumbers earn (all worthy professions, yet, not involved in teaching our children).
- After three years, the apprentice teacher either is employed by the school district, receiving state certification and full pay status, or is not hired. This assures that students have teachers who meet strict criteria to be in the classroom.
- Teacher development: 20 hours documented annually. Ten hours can include a written, documented report submitted to the principal based on travel/experiences that broaden the teachers' expertise, such as a summer job at IBM, or a trip to Spain.

**4. Quarterly reports/grades summarizing five areas. This teaches students that they need to be well rounded.**

- An average of grades on written class work in each subject, (with tests, homework, daily work and quizzes given equal value so students can see that everything they do is important)
- An average of grades in oral and projects participation, as a team member and individually
- A portfolio evidencing activities that highlight Gardner's Multiple Intelligences: music, art, dance, sports, environmental, poetry, etc.
- Initiative and completion of all school work without reminders
- Evidence presented in visual or auditory format emphasizing character and values development learned in this component. Based on Goleman's "Emotional Quotient," students practice self-awareness, leadership, mood management, empathy, and managing relationships. Fifteen hours of social service is required each semester, 120 hours for graduation. Students work with organizations (such as hospitals, schools, homes for the aged, charity groups, Boy/Girl Scouts, churches/temples) that certify students' volunteer hours.

Ultimately, the students should be accountable to themselves. A single test takes the responsibility away from the students, placing the state in a role of giving scores, increasing the passing requirements at whim, and leaving teachers and students in a weakened position. When attendance, grades, and a portfolio are added to the state tests, then the students and teachers are empowered. People who are empowered invariably work better (Kouzes & Posner, 1990). That should be the goal of any school system and any state that intends to look for accountability. Accountability that rests with the students is the only kind that really matters. Anything else is purely political rhetoric.

**5. Subjects need revamping. Reading, speaking, writing, mathematics, science, social studies, physical education, the arts, learning skills and world languages need to be the basis of each state's curriculum. Students stop learning when they stop being interested in learning. Student interest is generated by an emotional connection to the material presented in the class. Emphasis must be placed on making an emotional connection between the curriculum and the student. Recent curriculum restructuring has targeted the removal of those very things that create an emotional connection between the student and the curriculum. Art,**

Music, Literature, Foreign Language, and Cultural Experience must be reinserted into the curriculum in order for student learning to excel exponentially.

- Reading is the base of all subsequent learning and must be mastered by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Daily oral story reading by the teacher in all primary grades is essential. It provides the base for expanding vocabulary and language development. Picture storybooks and short films can be used to provide the emotional connection with reading instruction. Daily phonics instruction in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade will provide students with a decoding system. By 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, the students will be independent readers, so by high school there are no struggling readers.
- Speaking, utilizing grade-appropriate vocabulary is a daily opportunity for language growth. There is too much TTT (teacher talking time). Pair work, group activities, oral student responses must be utilized frequently to reduce TTT. Allowing student to speak and have a choice in the direction of classroom discussions gives them ownership of their learning environment.
- Writing is not a separate, isolated subject. It needs to be integrated with reading, science, social studies, emphasizing style, vocabulary level, quality of expression, spelling, neatness, and use of correct grammar. Writing can also be incorporated into other activities such as student newspapers or poetry contest. If students don't read well and don't speak frequently, they have little foundation for writing. Writing is what you would have said orally, but is put into written mode.
- Mathematics needs visual explanation, using colorful, concrete objects, especially in grades 1-5 when students are not maturationally ready for abstract thinking. (Piaget) Only when the lesson has been preceded by a visual/hands-on activity should written calculations be attempted. Focus needs to be on accuracy, problem solving skills, and the ability to explain orally how a problem is solved. By high school, students arrive with a strong mathematics base.
- Science grades 1-5: forget the textbook. Preparing graduates means science will be based on the inquiry method. A weekly investigation or experiment, which students record, illustrate, and summarize in their science notebook promotes learning and curiosity. This also incorporates a significant writing component into science. Teachers need to emanate enthusiasm for the subject while teaching the corresponding science vocabulary through captivating experimental procedures. By middle/high school, students will be ready for detailed and specific learning, eager for science because they were not turned-off by tedious memorization of meaningless material in primary grades.
- Social studies should be lively, project-injected courses, where students see films about cultures/life styles, draw maps, organize data, learning about history in large chunks of time, not by memorization of names/dates of isolated/insignificant facts. Time lines, graphic organizers, outlines, and oral presentations with visual exhibits should be major modes of expression. Social studies include a strong component of social responsibility. Practice with real and hypothetical world situations needs to occur weekly so students have experiences solving problems. Simulated United Nations programs and debate strengthen the social studies curriculum. Students develop skills providing them with deeper understanding of our nation and world.
- Physical education as a life-long experience, practicing various sports, and learning about healthy choices for the body (as opposed to concentrating on competitions) will provide students with another window of learning.
- Arts include drawing, painting, photographing, and performing, such as chorus, band, orchestra, acting, stagehands, art/music appreciation, emphasizing group, and/or individual contributions. Goal: students are familiarized with varied possibilities in creative arts.
- Learning skills is a multi-faceted course offering students knowledge about how humans learn, with a metacognitive, eclectic approach, including computer technology use, recognition of learning styles, exploring various strengths students

possess. Emphasis is on identification of multiple intelligences and use of emotional intelligence in one's life, utilizing case studies.

- World languages explore concepts of worldwide language development, understanding of various cultures, and students study a second language at depth, with emphasis on oral fluency and writing skills.
- Exchange programs would allow students to explore opportunities to study in other parts of the United States or in other countries around the world. The obvious outcome would be cultural enrichment and a better understanding of a student's relationship to his/her world.

6. **Allow students a valued voice in high school.**

- Student Council, deals with school social events
- Principal's Council, elected students, grades 9-12, meet monthly with the principal, (eating lunch together), helping shape school policies.
- Students' evaluation of their teachers, (anonymously) each semester, giving insight to administration of what *really* is happening within the classrooms. Ten brief qualifiers, evaluated \*1-4, (such as: "Teacher begins class on time." "Teacher has interesting, dynamic classes."), shows students that they are heard, forming a foundation for being a practicing citizen.
- A cash bonus or reward (like dinner for two at a good restaurant), for teachers who receive 90% from 90% of their students, will prove that student opinions of teachers is valued, promoting students' growth of responsibility. An added PLUS is that teachers will regard their students from a different perspective.

### **Teacher's Role**

The following example is what occurred in a South Texas border school district in the 1994-1995 school year, culminating in May, 2002 as researched by Hachar and Alaniz, 2004. This is the same district from which the TAKS results are gleaned.

The example is about one 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher who had 18 students. She was from the northeast United States, and spoke English as a native speaker, learning Spanish at the age of 40 because she married a Mexican, and relocated to Mexico to immerse herself to learn Spanish. When they returned to the United States (Texas) for its better economy, she took and passed the Texas ExCET certification tests in both bilingual and ESL, eventhough, as she says, "My Spanish is functional, but not anywhere near native level." So began her career as a teacher along the Texas-Mexico border.

She was introduced to her class of 18 fifth graders, 17 of whom were born in Texas, and one from Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. The best speaker of both English and Spanish among the students was the girl from Monterrey who had attended a bilingual school there. Her counterparts, all of whom were born in Texas and had been in Texas schools since Kindergarten, were below average in language ability. Surprisingly, despite being native Spanish speakers, they scored equally low both in Spanish and English. The school system used the Language Assessment Scales of Oral Proficiency (LAS-O) test to evaluate language ability of its students. LAS-O rates a student's oral language proficiency on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest. Levels 1 and 2 are considered non-English/Spanish speaking, levels 3 and 4 are considered limited, and level 5 is considered fluent English/Spanish speaking (LAS-O, 1994).

In this particular class of 18, in August of 1994, only the girl from Monterrey scored 4 in English and 5 in Spanish. Every other of the 17 students scored 1 or 2 in both English and Spanish, yet 100% were native Spanish speakers and had attended school in Texas in a bilingual program for at least five years before arriving to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. This specific school system was using an early-exit transitional bilingual program, which research since the 1980s, has proven to be ineffective (Thomas & Collier, 2002). So, you may wonder, why use it? Good question.

In this class, the teacher was required to have a Spanish component of 45 minutes a day to sustain the students' native language. In order to provide students with the skills needed in their L1 (Spanish), she showed 10-minute filmstrips, with written Spanish underneath each slide. She used the filmstrips as a basis for oral and written language development. She did not want to create a situation in which loss of L1, subtractive bilingualism, would cause these students to perform poorly on

cognitive and academic measures (Lambert, 1984). She recalls that one of the first filmstrips she showed was entitled, "El Potrillo Gris." Her students asked the meaning of potrillo, and she replied, "A colt." They also did not know colt, so she had to say, "Baby horse," using first grade vocabulary with the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students because their English and Spanish skills were both sub-average (Birkey & Rodmen, 1995).

Her goal that year was to develop vocabulary, both oral and written (Bloom, 1956). She also had to teach mathematics, science, and social studies, but she made her priority language development. Every day she started with vocabulary which was tied to the reading lesson, as well as some science and social studies terms. This practice allowed students to make choices about some strategies that could be used (Oxford, 2003). Recent research upholds what this teacher was doing 10 years ago, techniques she had perfected during her 30 years experience. The background of her techniques was based on Benjamin Bloom and Madeline Hunter's frameworks as well as Abraham Maslow's and Dr. Joseph Renzulli's research. While these sources are not new, they are sound, without rivals, still providing guidelines in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

She developed the following pattern for her students, dedicating 15-20 minutes every day for vocabulary development.

On Mondays, 15 new words were presented, orally and using transparencies. The students saw the word, repeated it, and wrote it in their notebooks, skipping a few lines between each word. On Tuesdays, the teacher presented the definitions in writing. They were simple ones, sometimes accompanied by drawings, always explained by the teacher, with examples given. The students DID NOT have to look up the words in the dictionary and copy the meanings because, as the teacher explained, "This was not a dictionary usage lesson, nor was I looking for busy work. The students said the words, helped to think of other examples, and let the words begin to sink into their heads."

By Wednesday, they took out the list again, and talked more about the definitions: pictures, objects, examples, and sentences were used to clarify. On Thursday, students made their own flash cards for the words, first copying the word with the definition beside it, and then cutting them apart. The goal was for the students in teams to lay out words on their desks and match the definition to the corresponding vocabulary term. The flash cards went home for homework practice. On Fridays, there was a vocabulary test: NOT matching, NOT multiple choice, and NOT true/false. The teacher typed the words in a 1-15 numbered list, in different order than they had been taught, and students had to write and/or illustrate each word, in his/her own words, NOT a memorized definition list. Success came quickly. The system worked. Kids began to learn the terms well, and used them in everyday speech (Birkey & Rodmen, 1995 & Gardner, 1993).

Reading was done the same way, as a daily pattern: Introduction of the theme, setting, main characters, plot, using graphic organizers on Mondays. Tuesdays, the students read silently certain passages designated by the teacher, guiding the students to read aloud ONLY to answer a specific question. For example, "What does the story say about the house in the second paragraph, Thomas?"

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the entire story was completed in this format. There were NO traditional 3 reading groups with some kids doing busy work while the teacher had a smaller group read aloud to her. Everyone participated actively in this format. On Thursday, they worked on workbook pages that accompanied the story. The teacher had transparencies for every workbook page, and they were completed as guided practice, together in class, not as homework. (Bloom, 1985) In fact, this teacher gave NO homework in any subject except to study for tests, figuring that the students were going to work and think in class, and they needed time to just be kids after school. Plus, she knew that some students had home responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings or cooking dinner for Mom who was at work.

On Fridays, prior to the test over the week's story, the students listened to a tape of the week's story, read by experts, with sound track and auditory settings, such as birds, the wind, soft music, etc. Then there was a test over reading concepts, plot, theme, characters, author's motives, etc... Fridays, in this class, were spent on tests in vocabulary, reading, and math as well as the Spanish component. The afternoon was devoted to art and music connected with science and social studies, so that the day would not be too pressured. Months went by with the same pattern, students getting more and more confident in their speaking and reading and writing skills in English, as well as expanding their vocabulary skills in Spanish (Resnick, 1989).

By May, as end-of-the-year testing took place, the Language Proficiency Assessment Committee Clerk (L-PAC clerk) was amazed and questioned the progress of this particular group of students, asking the teacher, "What did you do with those kids this year?" The teacher remembers being surprised by such an inquiry and simply replied, "What are you talking about?" The LPAC clerk went on to state that of the 18 students re-tested on LAS-O since August, that 17 now scored 4 or 5 in English. The only student who did not increase scores, had been identified that year as severely dyslexic. "The most severely dyslexic child I have ever seen," as confirmed by the district's dyslexia specialist. Ironically, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher that had spotted the child's problems, and, therefore, requested his records, discovered that the boy had been exited from the dyslexia program in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, "because his dyslexia was too severe, so our district did not have a program for him." So, until he arrived in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, with this teacher who finally dealt with his learning disability, he quietly, year by year, moved along, but not ahead.

The boy (A.S.III) was sent on to 6<sup>th</sup> grade middle school, where finally special programs were established to help him. His learning disability was recognized by Social Security, funded by Supplemental Security Income, and he became exempt from state TAKS assessments. He went on to graduate from high school in 2002. Yes, his 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher went to his graduation, and he since has completed a welding career program at a community college. His reading is still low, but functional. What would have happened to him if the 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher had not pushed for his re-admittance to special classes for dyslexia. The student's mother says it well: "He'd be a drop-out in a gang, and living on welfare."

Meanwhile, with no extra help, no aides in the classroom, no administrative support, no special programs, this 5<sup>th</sup> grade class, in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood school, succeeded. It can happen in ANY class that has a teacher modeling dedication and hard work. This teacher proved that ANY teacher can accomplish real success with their students IF they truly believe in their bilingual and dyslexic students' ability to succeed.

### **Summary**

By making changes in the focus and expectations for students, and restructuring teacher preparation programs, we will raise the level of pride and responsibility in our students, beginning in the primary grades, so that by high school graduation, they will be ready for the challenges of the postmodern adult world.

### **Acknowledgments:**

At first glance, the reader may be awestruck by what may be perceived as a somewhat Draconian examination of the American Education System. The authors, too, agree. If, however, any part of the recommendations cited is implemented, our schooling practices can only succeed.

A combined 80 years of public, private and university level experiences has guided the preparation of this paper. To those teachers who inspire, motivate, and continue to challenge students by instilling a love of learning, we salute you!

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