

“It's not our job to toughen our children up to face a cruel and heartless world. It's our job to raise children who will make the world a little less cruel and heartless.”

– L.R. Knost

I sat down several times to begin to write the October newsletter, but I kept finding myself distracted by the normal interruptions of being a superintendent. In all honesty, October was frustrating month for me in general. I found myself getting ‘bogged’ down in the distractions I spoke about at the start of the year. These distractions began to invade my thought process: the frustration of attempting to create ‘technical’ fixes for things I thought were fixed, the constant bombardment of minute to minute issues about the smallest of things, and a sense of communication breakdown between myself and the district which I haven’t felt for some time. I questioned the belief system at the core of district; I questioned our commitment to the overall mission; and I questioned myself as the leader. As a district we seemed a little ‘off’ our game. As I said, October was frustrating and confusing month.

On Sunday Nov 8th I opened the Sunday Globe and began to read an article written by Sarah Schweitzer called *The Life and Times of Strider Wolf*. The story was troubling to read as it was about a young boy, and it depicted a life of poverty, abuse, homelessness, and abandonment. Strider’s story was tough to read over breakfast, but his story finally provided me with the focus I need to move beyond the distractions I was struggling with. This young boy was almost beaten to death at the tender age of 11 months by his mother’s boyfriend. After a night locked outside in a shed in the woods of Maine, his mother brought him to a Portland emergency room, and doctors would later testify that the boy sustained injuries they have witnessed in high-speed auto accidents. The abuse case made news beyond Maine.

Strider recovered from the physical wounds, but the reality is he may never recover from the emotional wounds inflicted over his young life. Strider ended up in the care of his grandparents who were also challenged by the constraints of poverty and many social/emotional/physical issues of their own. In the years that followed, Strider and his brother Gallagher were constantly on the move. Strider, Gallagher and his grandparents lived in camp grounds, trailer parks, and at times their twenty-four foot trailer came to rest in local parking lots. The author did good job demonstrating how difficult it was for the grandparents to manage the maze of social services agencies and their inability to provide financially for the basic necessities of a stable life. The author painted the pair as tired, limited, frustrated adults attempting to do the right thing by two boys they never asked to raise. After 30 years in urban education, the story and the characters in it began to take on the faces of families and students from my past.

The article addressed how research is beginning to support the idea that trauma could alter the body’s chemistry of developing brains. The research seems to point to a disruption in the development of the brain’s ability to deal with stress resulting in a heightened state of high alert. This chemical change could impact a child’s adult life also, creating anxiety issues, depression, heart attacks, and strokes. Researchers are now questioning if these traits can be passed down genetically. The remedy for such trauma in a young brain, according to the article, is consistency, security, and a persistence of love. All of which was difficult for Strider to possess.

There was one thing constant in Strider’s life: school. Strider enjoyed school, he liked learning, and he interacted with his teachers in a positive manner. It didn’t surprise me that Strider like school. There was consistency in school, he knew the routines, his social/emotional and physical needs were being met, and school held the most stable adults in Strider’s life, his teachers. As I read the article my thoughts kept going back to my hopes that with all his residential moves, he didn’t have to change schools. School was Strider’s safe zone, but at times he did struggle when his past would invade his thoughts. Something like not having a \$1.00, because his grandparents couldn’t afford it, for simple school event would cause him great distress, and he would retreat to his own thoughts, cutting himself off from others.

As I read on, the distractions that controlled my thoughts for several weeks seemed to be insignificant. One by one they seemed superficial, non-important when related to my true mission as a district leader, and by the end of the article I felt a little embarrassed. The reality is, my life when compared to this little boy's is a "cake walk." I grew-up in a stable home, my address never changed, my parents did the best they could with what they had, I was never cold, never hungry, and had significant adults who loved and cared for me. We weren't rich growing up in East Boston, but compared to Strider's life, I was living large. By the end of the article I realized how quickly we become distracted, to lose sight of what is important, how easy it is to allow our own egos, insecurities, and fears to drive us from the real work that must be done. Strider's story cleared my head, it brought me back to the realities of my job as superintendent, and it allowed me to complete this newsletter.

Also, in this Sunday's Globe was an article on veterans and the effects of post-traumatic stress syndrome disorder. I thought about the struggle these adults face returning from war, and I thought of Strider. His entire life has been a 'war zone,' and based on his article, I don't see any 'Rest-n-Relaxation' on the horizon for Strider. There is no 'post' trauma for Strider because he is still living with the trauma of poverty, and the impact it has on the social/emotional and physical well-being of all those it touches.

To date we have ambulated over 20 students out of our school buildings for social/emotional issues. It is an alarming trend. I believe the simplest way to confront this epidemic is through human kindness and understanding. Empathy and support are the strongest weapons we can use, and they are also the most cost effective. It costs us nothing to be kind and supportive of our students, families and each other, yet there are moments we struggle to provide these simple things.

I will do my best to keep the focus on what is important and hope that you will, too.

Dave