Failure to educate

The Boston school system is churning out illiterate students whose only skills are to pass predictable standard tests

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I DID not attend a graduation ceremony in 25 years as a Boston public high school teacher. This was my silent protest against a skillfully choreographed mockery of an authentic education — a charade by adults who, knowingly or unwittingly, played games with other people’s children.

I knew that most of my students who walked across the stage, amidst the cheers, whistles, camera flashes, and shout-outs from parents, family, and friends, were not functionally literate. They were unable to perform the minimum skills necessary to negotiate society: reading the local newspapers, filling out a job application, or following basic written instructions; even fewer had achieved empowering literacy enabling them to closely read, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate text.

However, they were all college bound — the ultimate goal of our school’s vision statement — clutching knapsacks stuffed with our symbols of academic success: multiple college acceptances, a high school diploma; an official transcript indicating they had passed the MCAS test and had met all graduation requirements; several glowing letters of recommendation from teachers and guidance counselors; and one compelling personal statement, their college essay.

They walked across the stage into a world that was unaware of the truth that scorched my soul — the truth that became clear the first day I entered West Roxbury High School in 1979 (my first assignment as a provisional 12th grade English teacher): the young men and women I was responsible for coaching the last leg of their academic journey could not write a complete sentence, a cohesive paragraph, or a well-developed essay on a given topic. I remember my pain and anger at this revelation and my struggle to reconcile the reality before me with my own high school experience, which had enabled me to negotiate the world of words — oral and written — independently, with relative ease and confidence.

For the ensuing 30-plus years, I witnessed how the system churned out academically unprepared students who lacked the skills needed to negotiate the rigors of serious scholarship, or those skills necessary to move in and up the corporate world.

We instituted tests and assessments, such as the MCAS, that required little exercise in critical thinking, for which most of the students were carefully coached to “pass.” Teachers, instructors, and administrators made the test the curriculum, taught to the test, drilled for the test, coached for the test, taught strategies to take the test, and gave generous rewards (pizza parties) for passing the test. Students practiced, studied for, and passed the test — but remained illiterate.

I also bear witness to my students’ ability to acquire a passing grade for mediocre work. A’s and B’s were given simply for passing in assignments (quality not a factor), for behaving well in class, for regular attendance, for completing homework assignments that were given a check mark but never read.

In addition, I have been a victim of the subtle and overt pressure exerted by students, parents, administrators, guidance counselors, coaches, and colleagues to give undeserving students passing
grades, especially at graduation time, when the “walk across the stage” frenzy is at its peak.

When all else failed, there were strategies for churning out seemingly academically prepared students. These were the ways around the official requirements: loopholes such as MCAS waivers; returning or deftly transferring students to Special Needs Programs — a practice usually initiated by concerned parents who wanted to avoid meeting the regular education requirements or to gain access to “testing accommodations”; and, Credit Recovery, the computer program that enabled the stragglers, those who were left behind, to catch up to the frontrunners in the Race to the Stage. Students were allowed to take Credit Recovery as a substitute for the course they failed, and by passing with a C, recover their credits.

Nevertheless, this past June, in the final year of my teaching career, I chose to attend my first graduation at the urgings of my students — the ones whose desire to learn, to become better readers and writers, and whose unrelenting hard work earned them a spot on the graduation list — and the admonition of a close friend who warned that my refusal to attend was an act of selfishness, of not thinking about my students who deserved the honor and respect signified by my presence.

At the ceremony I chose to be happy, in spite of the gnawing realization that nothing had changed in 32 years. We had continued playing games with other people’s children.

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