Where Excellence Is Tradition

10/11/15

Making America Great Again
By David F. Larson, Ed.D.
Superintendent, Glenbard Township High School District 87

America is known as a land of opportunity, and throughout our history the escalator to achieve success has always been our education system. While European countries excelled at a first-rate education for the elites, the United States led the way in mass education. By the mid-1800s, most American states provided a free elementary education to the majority of children. In contrast, as late as 1870, only 2 percent of British 14-year-olds were in school. By the 1930s, the majority of U.S. children attended high school. By contrast, as late as 1957, only 9 percent of 17-year-olds in Britain were in school. By the 1970s, the U.S. was pre-eminent in mass education.

A quality, free K-12 public education was clearly the factor in enabling the United States to become the dominant economic powerhouse in the world. Public education became the escalator to achieve social and economic mobility – the American dream.

Unfortunately, due to a variety of factors, our country is slipping in the ranks in comparison to other western developed countries. Alarming figures come from a recent survey of education from the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (O.E.C.D.). Among young Americans whose parents didn't graduate form high school, only 5 percent make it through college. In other similar countries, the figure is 23 percent. As recently as 2000, the United States still ranked second in the percentage of the population with a college degree. We are now fifth. Among 25- to 34-year-olds, we rank 12th, while once impoverished South Korea tops the list.

While some criticize American teachers as having it easy, the O.E.C.D. report notes that American teachers teach more students and work longer hours than their counterparts abroad. Our hard working American teachers earn 68 percent as much as the average American college-educated worker, while the O.E.C.D. average is 88 percent.

Making both Illinois and America great again means ensuring that the "escalator" to success – our education system – has a high priority within society. This means:

- The state of Illinois adhering to its constitutional obligation of providing equitable and adequate funding for education. It would be wise for the governor and the Legislature to restructure our decades-old public school funding model so there is a balance of tax revenue from business, corporate, services, as well as local property taxes.
- Build collective consensus on the achievement targets that we value and desire

our students to achieve. Currently, we have too many masters, each focused on different assessments, resulting in a culture of "over-testing". Colleges and universities value ACT and Advanced Placement; the federal government focuses on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); the state of Illinois touted ISAT and the Prairie State Achievement Exam and now has shifted to PARCC. We should be like other western countries where there is one agreed upon testing system that everyone values and works toward high achievement.

- Elevate the role of and respect the status of teachers as they serve our students and families. Build incentives to interest the brightest and best to choose education as a career. Also, elected officials should avoid targeting teachers as scapegoats as they try to address the many financial issues caused by their own mismanagement.

Strong and stable funding structures, clear achievement targets and respect for teachers – these are the foundational elements to a great education system, a system that provides an escalator back to social and economic mobility.