

TO PUBLIC EDUCATION SUPPORTERS: STAND UP OR SHUT UP

Anyone who has casually perused this space knows I am a strong advocate of public education. I am a product of public schools. I have a son and a son-in-law who teach high school science in public schools and four beloved grandsons who attend public schools. All by choice. Both teachers could make a lot more money outside public education, but both feel that they are making a difference in young lives. The grandsons could attend any private school their parents wished them to, but they are receiving an excellent education where they are.

But today I'm not very happy with those who are involved in public education. Their silence is deafening, and I am wondering about their backbone. I have been listening to my friend — and I hope he is still my friend — Neal Boortz, the syndicated radio talk show host, continue to trash “pitiful government schools.” After hearing a steady barrage of criticism of public schools, I suggested some time back that Boortz come out from behind his microphone and debate Zack Wansley, my oldest grandson. Zack is a senior at Chapel Hill High School in Douglas County. He is an honor student, president of the student body and captain of Chapel Hill's cross country and track teams.

I had the idea for the debate on a day when Boortz was citing the dearth of economic education in our “pitiful government schools” and Zack was in an Advanced Placement Economics class at Chapel Hill, learning things I am sure Boortz doesn't know and I will guarantee you that I don't know.

Is there anybody out there besides me who wants to see somebody call Boortz's hand? So far, there doesn't seem to be. Let me write about President Peanut and his Killer Rabbit phobia and the mail comes flowing in like water. Let me tweak my buddies at Georgia Tech or pouty liberals who think the South is some jerkwater third-world country, and my e-mail yells “no mas.” But let me try to get someone to defend public education against one of its most severe and articulate critics, and mum is the word.

I am told that my musings reach about a million households throughout Georgia, but I don't know how many of those households hear the Boortz radio program. Maybe you don't know who he is. Or maybe you don't care that he said on a recent program that public schools are “hideous” and that “they suck.” (Well, he is severe, but I guess he isn't as articulate as I thought.)

Let me repeat my offer: I will personally underwrite any effort by any organization that will host a debate between Neal Boortz and Zack Wansley on the quality of public education. If you have someone who you prefer to face the Talkmaster, I have no problem with that. This is a fight that Zack is willing to take on only because his grandfather knows that he would kick Boortz's intellectual behind from here to eternity.

Here are the rules: The debate must take place at a public school anywhere in Georgia in front of a live audience. The group representing public education can get together with Boortz's minions and come up with a mutually agreeable time, format, questions, rebuttals, etc., etc. I will rent the space and buy the punch and cookies.

I am tired of hearing Neal Boortz run down public schools, and I am tired of feeling like the Lone Ranger on defending the institution of public education. I've got other things to write about, and I don't intend to bring up the subject of the debate again. If those of you in public education want to feel like an abused puppy, that is your privilege. I was hoping that somebody would take umbrage at Boortz's continuing characterization of public education as “pitiful,” because you and I both know that isn't the case. There are bad schools, no doubt. But they are not in the preponderance. There are also bad talk show hosts, bad columnists and bad ideas. And therein may lay the problem. Maybe the debate was a bad idea.