

June 1, 2009

## **AN OPEN LETTER TO GEORGIA'S PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS**

Congratulations on completing – no, make that “surviving” – another year in Georgia’s public schools. As some of you know, I have a son and a son-in-law who are high school science teachers. I don’t know why they – and you – do it. On second thought, I do know why. My family schoolteachers tell me of students and former students who come up to them and say “thank you.” Thank you for making them learn, being influential in their lives, giving them discipline, inspiring them to be the best they can be. There are not many jobs in this world where one can impact young lives as well as schoolteachers.

In my own case, it was an English professor who saved my bacon. Dr. Raymond Cook now retired and living in Valdosta got hold of me in my freshman year of college and turned me around. His scolding got my attention and his lessons helped me survive the corporate jungle for decades to come. Dr. Cook reads this column every week and I still get a nervous stomach thinking he is going to find a comma out of place or a subjective complement that ought to be anywhere but in this space.

There are some in this state who are down on public education. They seem to believe our public schools are different from society in general and that you should be able to shut the door on all the problems and educate our kids successfully while dealing with poverty, drugs, gangs, single-family or no-family homes. Those who write me in righteous indignation when I applaud our public school teachers (and be assured I will hear from them when they read this) can’t seem to understand this.

Fortunately, I hear also from those whose children have succeeded in our public schools. Young people who ended up at Harvard, Yale, MIT as well as our own prestigious state institutions and earned academic honors while doing so. You won’t hear much about them because their success tends to poke holes in the myth that our public schools are failing.

I would like to propose that critics of public education, including that self-promoting blowhard radio yakker I kicked in the pants a couple of weeks ago, spend some time in a classroom and see how well they do standing in your shoes. In addition to coping with society’s ills, they will have to deal with principals, central office staffs, superintendents, dysfunctional boards of education, state and federal bureaucrats while getting kicked around like a political football by the Legislature and the governor. There are more self-serving agendas in public education than there are acorns in an oak tree.

You probably already know this, but there is an election coming up in 2010. Suddenly, as if by magic, you are going to become the politician’s best friend. All the gubernatorial candidates will try to convince you that they will be the next “education governor” like everyone else that has sat in the governor’s office with the exception of the incumbent. To his credit, Sonny Perdue never claimed to be a proponent of public education and he wasn’t. But he will be known forever as the governor who gave an elephant a physical and the state a bunch of unwanted fish ponds. Maybe it is just as well that he didn’t muck around much in education.

One education lobbyist told me the reason legislators jerk you around during the session is they think you will forget what they did by election time when they rhapsodize about their undying strong support for public education. If they can prove it, return them to office. If they can’t, flunk them. But whatever you do, don’t let them get away with saying one thing and doing another. Make them walk the talk. This is not a game. This is about our kids.

In the meantime, enjoy a well-deserved rest. Never forget that yours is a noble profession. You are making a positive difference in young lives. And don’t let the naysayers, the radio yakkers and the politicians get you down. You and I both know they couldn’t carry your schoolbooks.