

Different Perspectives, Common Ground and Democracy

On Sept. 17, we celebrated Constitution Day with two dozen local residents sharing their individual perspectives on “What is the Role of Public Education in our Community?” Our founders advocated for the creation of public education systems. President Washington, in his last annual message to Congress, added that expanding education was essential to the perpetuation of nation’s common values and the chance of a “permanent Union.”

We invited independents, Republicans, and Democrats from throughout Centre County to take part in face-to-face democracy in a deliberative roundtable. It seemed like a daunting task given the polarized rhetoric nationally, statewide, locally, and online.

But for two hours on a sunny afternoon, these residents, indeed, listened to each other, gave their viewpoints, and found common ground on key points about public education. As an observer, I noticed the positive tone of the conversations and the mix of personal perspectives. People of different viewpoints can share ideas civilly, while hearing viewpoints they hadn't considered. After the roundtable concluded, a dozen people continued to talk personably for some time.

This is vital to the success of our democracy and the Constitution, which has continued for 235 years. These residents took part in three groups examining each of three approaches to public education. Following is a sampling of comments.

- *College and Career Ready*

The approach is too narrow; we cannot forget about the students not going to college and the benefits of vocational training.

Education must adjust to how jobs are changing; most people today have more than one job/career. We seem to be overly concerned about testing scores.

We need to keep students engaged; to emphasize problem solving and collaborative skills; we want students to be thinkers.

We need to continue to hear the public; make sure parents are in the equation.

We need to broaden students’ ideas for careers; the value of generalists vs specialists.

Our priority should be to prepare students for life; we need both job skills and life skills.

We need to meet the needs of all students.

Curriculum in education is always being added to but rarely is anything taken away.

Can education be done in other venues, especially for the youngest?

School funding is very unequal.

The school year should be longer, as in other countries.

If we only prepare for the workplace, then what happens to democracy?

- *Prepare Students to be Active and Responsible Citizens*

What skills or knowledge do our students need to be become good citizens?

What is the role of family? We need to leave parents in the equation – students, teachers and parents must work together.

We need good listeners, good communication skills, good writers and creatures of the arts.

We want our children to understand civics, pay attention to elections, debates.

Community service is often a better teacher than school. Hands-on experiences are important.

It is inappropriate for the public educators to teach any political point of view.

We need more support for education; education is a national security issue.

Empower students to solve problems.

Public schools are only part of the equation; we want and expect schools to do everything.

Some of today's students are afraid of the world, therefore we need to know each other better.

We need to celebrate everyone's culture.

Some people will never want to know what the other people think, but it's still worth a try.

If subject matter is not on a state test, curriculum is watered down.

What is the role of school in regard to social media?

We need to understand history to understand the present and the future; history needs to be accurate.

Schools should help students and families to belong to a community and that being a member of a community has responsibilities.

Schools need to fill in where families do not.

Schools need to be accepting of everyone. Teach kids that we don't know everything!

- *Help Students Discover and Develop their Talents*

We want our students to know that he/she has a variety of talents. Do we do a good analysis of our students' talents?

Education's goal should be to draw out the individual talents and interests; we shouldn't dictate a path.

We need to provide a basis with skills and knowledge, so that students can choose their path with guidance.

Good teachers allow a variety of evaluations, depending on the student.

We need to look at our common humanity rather than our differences.

We need to encourage all students to be better human beings.

Teachers learn from each other.

We need to better support students with special needs

Overall, what are the common threads expressed by our participants about public education?

1. There is a variety of aptitudes in our young people.
2. Adequate funding is crucial.
3. We need partnerships to educate our students well.
4. Everyone is important.
5. We need to develop students who can solve problems; are good citizens and who are dependable in the workplace

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