

Public Education's Economic Value to our Region

Thomas J. Strining, Superintendent, Webster Central School District; President, Monroe County Council of School superintendents

Genesee Valley
PTA

Monroe County
Federation
of Teachers

NYS United
Teachers

Monroe County
Association
of School
Business Officials

Monroe County
Council of School
Superintendents

Monroe County
School Boards
Association

National Education
Association
of New York,
Western New York
Region

Recently, a regional conference on biotechnology and its development was held in Rochester. The goal was to help link researchers, who are trying to develop viable products, with capital development resources. New York State ranks fifth in the nation in this area of study and, in many respects, Rochester is a leading center for it. As we look to the future, it is clear that sophisticated skill sets, particularly related to science and technology will be an essential element in the economic success of any area.

Because of our strong K-12 regional education programs as well as an excellent cadre of local colleges and universities, Monroe County has a much higher than average educated workforce. The United States Census Bureau estimates that in 2004 for our over-25 year old population:

- 15% have a graduate or professional degree;
- 29% have an associate or bachelor degree;
- 16% have at least some college, but no degree;
- 27% have a high school diploma; and
- 13% have no diploma.

Approximately 60% of Monroe County residents have at least some college education. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 70% of the fastest growing occupations will require more than a high school education. Seven of those occupations are



Tom Strining

related to computer system and data management, and all of them are expected to translate into higher annual earnings.

As Monroe County businesses turn increasingly away from manufacturing and more toward higher technology fields, the intellectual property of its citizens will increase in value. This trend is a driving force in changing the educational scenery of our schools. School districts across the county are providing rigorous courses in

reading, writing, mathematics, sciences, arts and music. More than 24 different Advanced Placement courses are offered in county schools. There are also multiple school/college partnership programs. From enrichment to academic intervention, educational systems endeavor to reach each individual student. It is also the mission of every school district to prepare students for responsible citizenship. The success of our schools can be measured by the ways a community values health, culture, literacy, and societal awareness manifested in volunteerism and political action.

Certainly the issues of poverty, inequality, and violence threaten many of our students; these challenges need to be addressed with creativity and hope. It has been said that a rising tide raises all boats. It is essential that as we move to increase graduation rates, we also focus on sustaining the rigor and relevance of our public education programs. The quality of the educational programs in Monroe County is a significant asset – one that will support our transformation from manufacturing to technology and science.

Our community as a whole is viewed nationally as worthy of investment as indicated by recent announcements such as biotechnology summit; our schools are an essential part of it.



Jody Siegle

Monroe County Education Coalition

.....Representing 60,000 Members
.....A force in our community

Skills needed for democracy

Jody Siegle, Executive Director, Monroe County School Boards Association

What should schools teach? What subjects will strengthen our nation and push us to the next level of justice and equal opportunity for all? Of course, all students need to be able to read and do mathematics, but in the current environment, the requirements around testing in these areas have distorted the nation's perspective on the role of education.

For a republic to thrive, it takes more than a population that can read and maintain employment; it takes a population that can evaluate the relative merits of ideas and people. Since the early days of our nation, the degree of active or passive participation of citizens has been the catalyst for social direction. There are always choices to be made. To make good choices, people need to understand the consequences of their decisions. Being able to think critically is essential for evaluating who to entrust with the responsibilities for our Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of government.

If our nation is to survive, let alone prosper, we must ensure each generation understands the principles that made our nation a light to humanity. I use the word *survive* because the future does not come with guarantees. Although much energy is spent to protect and ensure our well being, the truth is that every generation has to support democracy themselves. No generation can afford to become so complacent about our nation that they ignore their civic birthright. There are Senator McCarthys in every generation, ready to wrap themselves in righteousness while using fear to warp our basic liberties in support of their own ambitions.

Unfortunately, with so much emphasis on reading and math exams, other subjects are slipping in importance. Social Studies, that combined discipline of civics and history, is one area that is being neglected. Shocking reports on the ignorance of Americans about their history and the basic guiding documents of our nation – the Constitution and the Bill of Rights – are regularly published.

This historical illiteracy is allowing our nation's most basic rights to be challenged in the name of security. The 5th Amendment in the Bill of Rights reads "No person ...shall be deprived of life, liberty or property, without due process of law." Yet in times of national fear, American citizens suspected of enemy affiliations or terrorist connections have been confined or imprisoned and held indefinitely without being charged with any crime. In the same spirit the federal government produced a legal opinion that torture was an acceptable way to get information from a hostile individual. Rights and principles spelled out in the founding documents are being discarded, yet ignorance of them is making outrage a very scarce commodity.

Understanding the events that shaped our nation develops empathy with others. It was their empathy for each other's circumstances that allowed our nations' founders to conceive of a nation designed to respect the importance of individuals and their different choices. Without empathy, people will fail to truly understand that desiring respect for one's own personal values necessitates supporting other people's right to their beliefs as well. This is the basis for our laws and for the maintenance of social order.

Belief in the rule of law is the underpinning of our orderly society. Americans expect justice. The widely shared confidence in the orderliness of law is what makes our nation work, but our system is more fragile than we want to recognize. Regardless of whether an aggressor is a neighborhood bully or a marauding army, social order is vulnerable to attack. One group attacks another because they believe they can. Only the universal belief in, understanding of, and commitment to the law makes Americans resistant to such attacks and keeps our society stable.

If schools are to support our society, we need to produce people with a deeply internalized understanding of the nature of a democracy and the means to maintain it. The emphasis on standardized tests must not overshadow the real tests of our standards as a free, democratic society.

