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Alabama Voices: Three key components

By Ken Scott

There is no end to the discussion of teacher responsibility/evaluations for student learning, from general assessments to tenure-dependent student learning outcomes. As a community college instructor for 25 years and university professor for several years, I'm not convinced that the teacher is solely responsible for student outcomes. I am not dismissing the idea that teachers are the primary source for student learning and achievement; however, those same teachers have students who live apart from the schools in homes and communities and those same teachers practice their profession in the framework of an institutional culture. The reason this is important to me is that once students leave the K-12 system, I see them every single day in my classroom.

I *am* defending all teachers everywhere who come to work every day, give it 110 percent, and go home exhausted but fulfilled at what they have given to their students. But giving 110 percent does not create an absolute positive outcome in the educational system, from K-12 and also in postsecondary classrooms. I refer to this phenomenon as the 33.3 syndrome. There are three major factors at work: the teacher, the student/family/community and the institution. Each factor provides a 33.3 percent impact component into student achievement.

Discounting poor teacher performance for a moment, when students, families, and communities don't participate or do so poorly, that becomes a 33 percent learning deficit at the outset; if the institution fails to provide resources, professional development and direct support for the teacher to maximize teaching-learning, that contributes an additional 33 percent deficit, or a potential path to failure at a rate of 66 percent -- even before the teacher is involved. Should a teacher do his/her best at 33.3 percent (100 percent exemplary performance, for example), the student will only achieve between 33.3 percent and any variable contributions that are derived from those outside the classroom, e.g., family, community, student and institution.

To say that failing schools are the result of poor teachers is only 33.3 percent potentially correct, assuming the school has hired only poor teachers. When will the issue cover the responsibility of the student/family/community and the institution itself, as these two factors are responsible for their own 33.3 percent input? If you want true measurable assessments and a path to drive down record dropout rates, provide an assessment in which each 33.3 percent contributor is *fully responsible* for their specific contribution to the maximum possible impact towards the success of the student.

A teacher who gives 100 percent to help students achieve while a student only provides 10 percent effort and the institution contributes 15 percent, leaves the learning outcomes success rate at about 58 percent. If it does take a village to promote prepared graduates from our high schools, it cannot be achieved without a full-scale contribution by the three factors noted. If you omit any of these elements or allow deficiencies in any area, the threshold for student achievement suffers -- not *might* suffer, but *shall* suffer. If we assume all learning is within the walls of the classroom without regard for the 33.3 syndrome, I will continue to see students ill-prepared for college-level work or the workforce, inclusive of a valid set of work ethics, academic preparation, or an ill-prepared service-learning or community-oriented individual.

Valid assessments are necessary for feedback and continuous improvement of the teaching profession, e.g., improving poor performance; however, when schools fail to assess all factors which impact student achievement, the assessments become a method to place blame on some and allow others to escape their respective responsibilities.

The village is only as successful as its composite functions allow. So it is with educational institutions.

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