

Ignorance more expensive than education

Jacques Barzun was born in 1907 and spent most of his long life as an educator. He taught history at Columbia University and wrote books. In the fall of 2001, at age 93, Barzun lectured on "The School is a School" at Trinity University. Barzun explained that schools have a specific function and a specific purpose.

Barzun answered his own question. "What is a school? A place where teaching and learning go on steadily and systematically" (the function). The purpose of the school is to "remove ignorance" which, he warned, is more difficult than removing tonsils.

Today at age 95, Barzun sounds like an old-fashioned teacher. He

is not alone. Many retired teachers share his viewpoint about "what is done and what is proposed in the name of schooling."

Barzun believes Phonics is the path to Reading. He would call the present-day literature based reading programs in the lower grades "lunacy." I remember the transition from the Look-Say Method of reading to Phonics and basal readers. I agree with the old professor.

Barzun reminds me of Dr. Lawrence, the teacher I had for "Tests and Measurements" at Marion College (now Indiana Wesleyan). Dr. Lawrence insisted that "a test must measure what it purports to measure," otherwise the test is not a valid test. For example, a math test should be about math only; nothing else.

Likewise, Barzun insists, "Fairness demands that examining should fit what has been taught. Today, if children should join in a class-action suit against present-day testing, a righteous judge would award them damages." Has

Barzun heard of ISTEP? No doubt he would label ISTEP "a prefabricated test made up by remote merchandisers."

There is an on-going debate about year-round school. I have a teacher-friend in Evansville who has taught there in a year-round school for more than five years. Barzun would not approve. "As for the school year, eight months is enough. A longer stretch of bad schooling is not improvement."

I agree with Barzun about the need for formal teaching of handwriting. Handwriting books disappeared from my school system before 1995. Some of the students I now tutor from private schools, public schools and home schooling don't know how to form most letters of the alphabet. "You have to be carefully taught."

Barzun makes a very important point when he talks about the talents of students that go unnoticed, unappreciated and undervalued. Not everyone can make straight A's. Not everyone can be or should be in the Key Program. In Evansville it

was called the Horizon Program.

"Not everybody feels at home with words and ideas," Barzun declared. Some students are gifted with their hands. They have an excellent sense of space and size; they have an affinity for the make-up and workings of machinery. Some students excel in areas of finance, clerical and managerial tasks. They should not be short-changed in their schooling.

Harvard University researcher and psychologist Howard Gardner further explains the talents that Barzun listed. Gardner defines those talents as abilities: spacial, body-kinesthetic, and musical.

Spacial is the ability to see visual and spacial relationships. Students strong in this area are sensitive to color, line, shape and form. They like to draw, design and build. An excellent example is the students' Art Display now showing at IUK's Art Gallery.

The body-kinesthetic talent manifests creativity and coordination. It is excelling in movements of dance, athletics and drama. It is

also working with one's hands.

Imagine a world without music. The traditional straight A students and the Key Program Kids are not always the best musicians. Those "other students" have innate musical sensitivity to non-verbal sounds, rhythms, pitch and tone even without access to formal music lessons and/or musical instruments. Are they being heard?

School has an impact on students and teachers, the parents, the community and the nation like no other American institution. "School has a duty not only to the individual but to society, namely the handing down of the Treasury of Knowledge," said Barzun. "Without schools to perform this task a civilized nation would turn into a mass of illiterate barbarians in 30 years."

Barzun's chilling statement reminds me of another chilling remark, one I heard years ago: "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

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