

It Simply *Must*
Be Said

g
u
t
t
e
r

It Simply *Must*
Be Said

A View of
American Public Education
from the
Trenches of Teaching

by

Hank Warren

iUniverse, Inc.
New York Bloomington

g
u
t
t
e
r

**It Simply Must Be Said
A View of American Public Education
from the Trenches of Teaching**

Copyright © 2009 by Hank Warren

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

iUniverse books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

*iUniverse
1663 Liberty Drive
Bloomington, IN 47403
www.iuniverse.com
1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)*

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any Web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher, and the publisher hereby disclaims any responsibility for them.

*ISBN: 978-1-4401-3400-5 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-4401-3399-2 (ebk)*

Printed in the United States of America

iUniverse rev. date: 12/17/2009

For my wonderful wife
with love and deepest gratitude
and to our son who makes life
such an adventure

g
u
t
t
e
r

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
The Reality of Teaching	xiii
1. Would You Care To Speculate On The Assumptions Heard Thus Far?	1
2. Learning to Swim by Drowning	7
3. Reality Bites	13
4. Teacher Shortage	16
Merit Pay	21
Mentor/Master Teacher	25
Recommendation #1: Teach!	26
Guide to Qualitative Evaluation	27
5. Teacher Longevity	28
6. Teacher on Teacher	39
The 15% policy	45
7. Celebrity Musings	49
8. The Business of Education	54
9. How Shit Happens	61
10. The Others	64
Career Counseling and Teacher Skills	65
Teacher Survival Skills	67
Leadership Skills	73
Hank's Rule	80

Honesty	84
Blanket Dictums	85
Teacher Input	88
Principal’s Advisory Council	93
Resume Building Initiatives	96
11. The Joys and Perils of Broad Certification	99
12. No Hope of Parole	106
No Man	107
Recommendation #2: Class Size	113
Funding	116
Recommendation #3: Grade Leveling	119
Recommendation #4: College Reform	120
Essential Sidebar: An Overview of Grading and Evaluation Initiatives	122
1) Letter Grades	122
2) Numbering System	125
3) Portfolios	127
4) Narratives	129
5) Rubrics	130
Recommendation #5: The Development of a Comprehensive System of Evaluation	132
Federal Arithmetic and Reading Test	136
13. Pretend Education	138
Legislation	139
Implementation	141
Special Education “Modifications”	143
Individual Education Plan (IEP) Program Modifications	146

Cost	149
504 “Accommodations”	155
14. Creative Hydrodynamics	158
15. The Disconnected	160
16. Blind-sided	166
17. The Most Important Job in the World	173
18. NCLB	181
19. Conflict Resolution	185
20. Let’s Get Physical	194
21. School Survival Skills	200
22. Why We Don’t Brush Teeth In School	206
23. Duties	208
Lunch Duty	209
Bus Duty	213
Pickup Duty	216
24. Lawsuits and Legalities	219
Blurring the Line Between Home and School	224
False Molestation Accusations	229
School Lockdown Procedures	234
25. Tales of Misadventure	238
26. Tools for Living	245
References	253

Acknowledgments

Heartfelt thanks to those dedicated teachers who made such a difference in my life and to the thousands upon thousands who do the same for their students every day.

Sincerest appreciation to the veteran colleagues who took the time to share their expertise and help me learn the necessary skills to become an accomplished teacher.

Deepest gratitude to my “editor” KJ for all of the time, energy and courage it took to dissect this manuscript and tell me what I needed to hear. As a non-educator, I hope your conviction that this book will speak to individuals from all walks of life proves prescient. Needless to say, it’s incredibly, amazingly, astoundingly fortuitous, on the other hand, how *inherently* and poignantly extraordinary is the encapsulation of permeation.

Many thanks to my in-school IT “expert” for her incredible patience in teaching me computer skills and helping me to realize that the “book” is indeed better than the “scroll.”

Much appreciation to my oracle of special education proficiency. Regarding my continual inquiries, the answer is “Yes,” and you’re reading it right now.

Thank you to my former colleague and dear friend ML for her editorial help and enthusiastic support.

Also, to all who previewed this book. Your insights, suggestions, expertise and encouragement were indispensable.

And most definitely to MN who, despite having a business to run, takes the time to do the computer tasks that I could never dream of doing myself. So much of this wouldn't have happened without you.

Last but not least, to the wonderful friends in my "lunch crew" who help to keep me sane. If it weren't for the laughter, where would we be?

g
u
i
t
i
e
r

The Reality of Teaching¹

Then *Jesus* took his disciples up the mountain and, gathering them around him, he taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
Blessed are they that mourn
Blessed are the meek
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
Blessed are the merciful
Blessed are the pure in heart
Blessed are those who have been persecuted
Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great

Then Simon Peter said, “Are we supposed to know this?”

And Andrew said, “Do we have to write this down?”

And James said, “Will this be on the test?”

And Philip said, “Will there be a study guide?”

And Bartholomew said, “What came after poor?”

And John said, “The other disciples didn’t have to learn this!”

And Mark said, “How come you’re still using an overhead projector when Mr. Baptist has a Smartboard?”

And Matthew went to the bathroom.

One of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus' lesson plan and inquired of Jesus: "Where are your anticipatory set and your objectives in the cognitive domain?"

And Jesus wept.

g
u
i
t
e
r

1. Would You Care To Speculate On The Assumptions Heard Thus Far?

On November 12, 2001, just two months and one day after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, American Airlines flight 587 went down over the borough of Queens. Apparently, the plane started falling apart in midair and pieces ended up over a wide area. Coming so close on the heels of 9/11, the frenzy surrounding this tragedy was extraordinary! Speculation of another terrorist strike splashed across the airwaves. The uproar of semi-information, misinformation and outright babble from both reporters and pundits was prolific. Nobody knew a thing, yet the need to continually fill air-time took precedence over any concern for factual content.

Although this event occurred around 9:00 a.m. eastern time, evidently nothing could be released by American Airlines until their CEO could fly from the west coast to New York to hold the official press conference which finally took place around 5:00 p.m. It quickly became obvious that in the course of eight hours very little of substance had been confirmed. After a brief statement to that effect, the CEO began to field questions from the hundreds of reporters cramming the room. It was truly remarkable how many variations of “I don’t know” this gentleman was able to espouse. Eventually, however, came the *coup de grâce*. A female reporter asked, “Would you care to speculate on the assumptions heard thus far?”

Hank Warren

It wasn't until later in the evening, when Jon Stewart began to dissect the day's insanity on "The Daily Show," that the absurdity of this statement began to sink in. The reporter was basically asking, "Would you care to make something up about what has already been made up?" In the ensuing days I began to realize how precisely this notion applied to the entire realm of American education. At the time, being well into my 27th year as a teacher, I had long been contemplating the puzzling nature of this unique enterprise we call "teaching." Because the classroom experience is so insular, the opportunity for misunderstanding and misconception abounds. There is perhaps no other profession so clearly unique as that of a teacher, and the enormity of this truth did not become clear to me until I finally stood in front of a classroom. The simple fact is, there are few experiences that can be so isolated while, at the same time, so extraordinarily public.

Consequently, the ground is infinitely fertile for the formation of every conceivable opinion from every possible perspective, with the exception of the most important one—that of the Teacher. It is the one key viewpoint that only comes with the attainment of the position. Because we have all been students at some point, each of us has an opinion on education from that singular perspective. And, since everyone's experience in school is distinctly personal, there are as many different opinions as there are citizens who have attended school. Therefore, as we become parents, business people, politicians, bosses, workers, and general participants in every walk of life, these experiences shape our perceptions on education. However, because the reality of teaching itself is so unique, none of these perceptions apply to actively "teaching." They are *only* the product of having been in the passive position of "student." As a result, everyone has an opinion about how it should be done, while having absolutely no idea of what it is like to actually do it. In other words,

It Simply *Must* Be Said

everyone is “speculating on the assumption” that they possess complete understanding.

Perhaps you may recall the huge splash that the movie “Pleasantville” made during the 1990s. By all accounts, the film’s combination of black and white with color imagery was a major technological breakthrough. The plot concerns a squabbling brother and sister who mysteriously find themselves transported through their television set into a “Leave it to Beaver” world in which they are forced to live. Aside from the ever-timely message of needing curiosity and creativity in life, I was most struck by the depiction of the school children sitting at their desks with perfect posture, rapturously absorbed in the classroom lesson.

This image became even more meaningful as I began to contemplate the attitudes towards public school education that pervade our society. Regardless of how any individual behaved or misbehaved, contributed or detracted, achieved or squandered during their high school years, somewhere around the age of thirty this image of sitting quietly at desks, as if they had been sucked through the TV into “Miss Lander’s” class, takes over. On a regular basis there are TV commercials for any number of products portraying the classroom setting as one filled with fresh-faced, eager, cooperative, enthusiastically engaged students. Even if only by wishing it were so, we all seem to want to picture ourselves in that environment. In fact, it is precisely because pop culture plays such a huge role in the public’s perception of teaching, that I will be referencing pertinent films, television shows, etc., throughout this book. In addition, I have included a number of my favorite parodies and anecdotes that I’ve collected through the years. If you happen to be familiar with them, I hope you will enjoy the “modifications” I’ve infused.

Ultimately, the teacher is in charge of his or her classroom. This is what we call teaching. On the other hand, the teacher has absolutely no control over the abundance of outside forces

Hank Warren

that so powerfully influence all that occurs in the classroom. Whether it is the extraordinary consequences of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation, right down to if a child has had breakfast; all these elements have a tremendous effect on learning, but are factors over which a teacher holds little sway. Against all odds, the teacher is expected to run an efficient, educationally sound classroom while having virtually no input into the policies that govern the process. Take, for instance, this simple example: An administrative directive goes out that there is to be “no food in the classrooms.” It has been proven time and again that students who are physically comfortable are apt to learn better. Hungry students don’t. While certainly being mindful of healthy nutrition and children with food allergies, if a teacher is okay with having food in class, shouldn’t they be allowed that professional discretion?

I was recently reading an article about the former South African President and Nobel Laureate, Nelson Mandela.² He attributed much of his success to attaining a level of comfort with contradiction and expressed a concern about the inclination of Americans to see things strictly in black and white. It was striking how clearly he understood that the world is infinitely nuanced and every problem has many causes. However, in our public discourse there is a tendency to try to identify the *one thing* that is the cause of all our problems, and public school is a perennial favorite. While all the finger pointing goes on, the truth is, America’s public schools are actually doing *more* for a more diverse student demographic than ever before in our history. We serve an increasingly varied population: ethnic, socioeconomic, and disabled. But, in our current fast-paced society that expects instantaneous results (quarterly measurements—not long term five to ten year plans), schools simply can’t measure up.

Compare the overall school population in the 1950s and 60s to today. Each school tended to have a characteristically similar student makeup and, even though grouping was

It Simply *Must* Be Said

heterogeneous, it was understood that, while there would be some slow kids and a few really smart kids, the vast majority would be “average.” Now we have the severely handicapped, the emotionally/socially disturbed, the mentally disabled, and the special needs. In short, we service students with every conceivable diagnosis, *as well as* the slow, average and smart ones, all grouped together in the same classroom. In addition, each one is expected to be highly successful, regardless of ability, interest, effort, desire, parental involvement/control/concern, home life, or background; whether or not they speak English, are living in a mansion, a car, or a cardboard box; have two parents, one parent, or no parents; are living with one parent while the other is in jail; have foster parents, are being abused by parents—the list is endless. While in the 50s and 60s it was commonly accepted that some kids would be auto mechanics, a select few would be doctors, and the vast majority would be in the middle, now the expectation is: They are all going to Harvard!

There is an absolutely wonderful sequence in the 1975 film “Monty Python and the Holy Grail,” that should be required viewing for anyone interested in gaining even the slightest understanding of the world of teaching. The scene in question occurs directly before the wedding at Swamp Castle when the prince is hiding in his room because he doesn’t want to marry the princess with the “huge tracts of land.” Concerned that the prince may try to escape, the king attempts to instruct two guards to watch the prince until he (the king) returns. However, no matter how many ways the king tries to rephrase the order, one guard just stands there hiccupping while the other keeps misinterpreting the directions in every manner possible. The saintly patience of the king as he repeatedly explains the instruction to the ever-increasingly confused guard is absolutely priceless! Yet, similar to the previous parody where Bartholomew asks “What came after poor?,” this is exactly what teachers confront on a daily basis.

Hank Warren

I saw a bumper sticker the other day which stated “Everything is Connected.” Considering the vast number of interconnected topics related to education, discussing every issue in detail would require volumes. In order to avoid a treatise of encyclopedic proportions, I have tried to adhere to these main topics:

- Separating the facts from the myths about teaching.
- Analysis of the chasm between “educating” (teaching) and “education” (the entrenched bureaucracy).
- Examination of crucial teacher, student and parenting issues.
- Analysis of the impact of legislation and case law decisions concerning children with disabilities on the school/learning environment.
- Presentation of five core recommendations to improve American Public Education.

My ultimate goal is to initiate thoughtful dialogue which hopefully will result in truly meaningful improvements to the educational process. The teachers who previewed this book prior to publication, found it served as a catalyst for sharing additional experiences and ideas. I hope these kinds of discussions abound. Equally encouraging was the enthusiastic response from those outside the field of education. This makes me hopeful that, should both educators and the general public ever unite in common purpose, meaningful change may well see fruition.

As this book was nearing completion, it became amusingly apparent that there were at least two dozen places where I had written something to the effect of “This is the honest truth,” or “Believe it or not,” or “I’m honestly not kidding.” In order to avoid this unnecessary repetitiveness, I can emphatically state from the outset (cue “Dagnet” theme): The stories you are about to hear are true, only the names have been changed to protect the instigators.