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Our Best Hope in a World Filled With Emergencies? Education

By Barry Jason Mauer

UCF Forum columnist

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When we die, the knowledge stored in our brains disappears. But through education, each generation of people can pass their knowledge to the next via spoken language, books and other media, and this knowledge can accumulate through the ages.

Much of our valuable knowledge will live on in the brains of the next generation and in external forms, such as libraries and museums. Each generation has the same charge: We must ensure that our institutions continue to function after we die and thus we must repopulate the institutional roles we filled during our lifetimes. In other words, we need to replace ourselves so our knowledge and institutions can live on.

Without education, we would be unable to reproduce any of our vital institutions—medicine, architecture, journalism, engineering and art—and civilization would collapse. That's why *you* should pay your good, hard-earned money to maintain our system of education, even if you have no kids. Education benefits the entire society, of which you are a part.

Plato established the first school, the Academy, around 2,500 years ago, and his invention of this most amazing social apparatus led to quantum leaps in our ability to grow our knowledge, nurture young minds, build institutions, and manage complex societies. Although religious institutions preceded the invention of the Academy, they did not create the foundation of critical thinking, on which other knowledge institutions, such as mathematics, astronomy and rhetoric, could thrive.

Education is our most valuable enterprise, but it differs from many other enterprises. For instance, it is not a commodity. It doesn't typically produce immediate returns on investment. It can't be rushed because human beings are not machines, and building the capacity of each human being takes time.

You can load new system software into a computer in minutes, thereby changing its capabilities almost instantly. But it takes time and support to develop human beings into wise, responsible and productive adults, citizens and professionals. Your brain grows and changes over decades and education literally helps it grow by supporting the growth of neural networks. Without education, we would be stunted.

Education has two major aims: to nurture the student and to transmit the knowledge of the disciplines. People need nurturing environments in which to learn. They need shelter, safety, comfort, food, health, sleep, exercise, interpersonal connection, and routines. Many students lack some or all of these critical foundations, usually for reasons beyond their control, and thus they are severely disadvantaged in terms of their capacity to learn. Schools can and should provide this nurturing environment, but they can only do so much and thus our society needs a robust social safety net to provide the critical foundations students need to succeed.

As education provides nurturing, it also instills disciplinary knowledge by preparing students to assume institutional roles. In other words, education teaches students to become doctors, lawyers, administrators, engineers, scientists and journalists. By learning the specialized behaviors and values associated with these and other roles, students become socialized to their institutions. But schools also have an obligation to serve as gatekeepers of knowledge so that we pass on only good ideas and not harmful ones.

Education is one of the largest institutions in society, rivaled only by entertainment in terms of the number of people it affects.

But education as a force within society has been weakened by decades of anti-intellectual crusades, attacks on teachers' rights, and budget cuts. These attacks are aimed at weakening the gatekeeper function of education. In debates about public policy, even when they center on education, educators rarely get called on to consult and thus far too often bad and harmful ideas pass into public policy and corrupt our institutions. If educators united as a political force, we likely could restore our gatekeeper function and demand the prominent place we deserve in public policy debates.

Since the time of Plato's Academy, education has served not only to develop good people but also good institutions that act in the best interest of society. Because our institutions

need a conscience, educators need to teach more than the standard ethics lessons, which typically apply only to individuals. We need to instill collective ethics, and right now that need is urgent because of the dire emergencies facing the nation and the planet.

While many people chase fraudulently contrived panics, the battles over climate, biodiversity loss, severe income inequality and the slide of our political discourse into extremism go unresolved. Our vital institutions, meant to address our collective problems, have been failing in the face of attacks from zealots, bigots and plutocrats. Thus, education needs to fully assert itself as a key gatekeeper of information and bedrock conscience of the society as soon as possible.

To be effective in shaping the public-policy sphere, however, educational institutions need to unite around ethical principles. We must put the wellbeing of society first, and that means adherence to the truth at all costs, regardless of who might be offended by hearing it.

Educational institutions need to strengthen their own ethical guidelines and practices so that they will have the moral force they need to instill ethics in other institutions.

The world is in a state of real emergency. It's time for educators to act by demanding a place at the table of public discourse. We must organize to repair public policies that are corrupt, our institutions and our planet.

Education is our best hope.

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