



Amy Domini

Teach your children well

Public schools have helped produce many of our most successful political and business leaders. We should be proud of that.

SOMETIMES I HEAR A CASUAL COMMENT, AND IT NEARLY consumes me. This happened recently, costing me a full day of research. I was sitting on a yoga mat waiting for a “gentle” class to start, when the conversation taking place next to me drifted into my thoughts.

One woman was talking about having been a stay-at-home mom for several years and how slow the process was getting back into meaningful work. She had my full sympathy as she discussed the passion she had for nutrition, particularly for schoolchildren. I almost joined the conversation but was glad I hadn’t when she announced, “I mostly work with private schools. Well, really, those kids are the ones that will graduate and make a success of life and be able to give back.”

I was rocked back on my heels. I’ve read an awful lot about the problems our schools face, but as the daughter of one public school teacher and the stepmother of another, I felt her statement to be horribly blind. I was upset by the idea that the millions who attend public schools had no hope, but I didn’t have all the facts to know if she was really wrong.

Does public education hurt or help success? And what did success mean to my fellow yoga student? I guess she probably meant material success. And so my research began. I started with the 10 largest publicly traded companies in America. Despite hours of phone calls, I was unable to find all the data I wanted, but I did find that only one CEO of these 10 large companies definitely went to a private high school. Five definitely attended public high schools. Specifically, I learned that Apple’s CEO, Tim Cook, son of a shipyard worker, graduated from Robertsdale High School in Alabama. Exxon Mobil’s CEO, Rex Tillerson, graduated from Huntsville High School in Texas. And Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric, graduated from Finneytown High School in Ohio.

By this point, I was filled with righteous indignation. I decided to look into U.S. Senators on the theory that maybe being able to give back meant not corporate power but political power. The chairs of the standing committees are the most powerful. The

Appropriations Committee is probably the single most important, since it decides how federal funds will be spent. Daniel Inouye, its chairman, is a graduate of President William McKinley High School in Hawaii. Ah, you say, but what about the ranking Republican, Thad Cochran? He graduated valedictorian from Byram High School near Jackson, Mississippi.

And while I was on it, Forbes magazine’s richest 400 were worth a look. It seems that of the top 20, the very richest are about half self-made and half born that way. Self-made billionaire Warren Buffett, casino mogul Sheldon Adelson and Oracle founder Larry Ellison graduated from public high schools. The richest of all, Bill Gates, did attend a private school. Well, suffice it to say that our public schools have served the nation well, if graduating people who become financial or political successes is your guide. Now this isn’t meant to be a slam on private schools, nor is it praise for public ones. It is meant to say, don’t judge too quickly.

In thinking over my reaction, I realized that my annoyance with my yoga neighbor’s comment was tied to a feeling that it was terribly unfair. I will grant you that our nation’s founders created educational institutions largely out of a belief that each individual needed to read the word of God in order to feel His purpose. It wasn’t until the decade

following 1837 that Horace Mann introduced a system of schools that used grades and offered uniform education across the towns of Massachusetts. In fact, mandatory education was only a dream until 1918. And look at the 90 years since then. The United States has been a powerhouse of innovation and success. Freed from the historical confines of breeding, the non-elite had the doors opened to them, and in turn sought fortunes and built much.

The victory of universal education is less than 100 years old in this nation. It has succeeded beyond its founders’ imaginings. Let’s not dismiss the majesty of it. Let’s show some pride. ■

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