

MYD and the New Economy

We've entered into a new era in 2009 - new politics, new economy and new problems for educators. We've recently discovered that the weapons of mass destruction the previous administration focused on finding were actually imbedded into the fabric of our own economy. Bankers, portfolio managers, and mortgage companies were able to bring us to our knees financially. The legislation designed to remedy the wrongs of the financial institutions will mortgage our children's future and change the definition of fiscal responsibility. The idea of honoring contracts and honoring your word may not be the societal expectations for our children. When not paying your mortgage gives you greater advantage than paying your mortgage, basic values will change.

Talk about Bizarro World. Several of our friends and colleagues have reached negative equity on their homes. Some continue to pay and others have stopped paying. Those who continue to pay have contacted their lending institutions seeking to renegotiate their rates. They are all being told the same thing – you have continued to pay so you don't qualify for renegotiation. Those who have stopped paying are being courted by the lenders to reconfigure their mortgages. You honor your obligation and you don't qualify for help. Quite the disincentive to do the right thing.

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What does this have to do with Make Your Day? I'll put this into context as we discuss the impact the economy and societal change has on education and the family unit.

The new economy has given rise to the number of unemployed and the number of retired that are now forced to compete for work again as their retirement funds have been depleted. Our children are reading and hearing about corrupt CEOs and politicians who are walking away with golden parachutes and favorable legal treatment. Another ethical issue that is contrary to MYD. See a pattern developing?

It's bad enough that the state and federal retirement for teachers may also be threatened, but we are now told that in the future we can count on being expected to do more with much less.

This concept is not new to educators. As we have recently come through the "No Child Left Behind" era with limited financial help to get there. While we may experience a greater level of empathy from this administration it is not likely that education will ever top the list for financial help.

OK. Much of what I said was rhetorical, obvious, and predictable. A new economy is evolving and we have several choices as to how we can

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deal with it. The easiest route might be to seek early retirement, sell all the property and investments, stock up on dried banana chips and guns, and then move to Belize. Although, it is an attractive thought – it will not be the route of most teachers as they generally are not willing to “leave their students behind.” Interesting, as this phrase now takes on a new meaning.

In order to plan strategies to counteract the changing moral and ethical values, as well as the impact the new economy will have on the daily life of the average family, we must first examine the changes in greater detail. We must also figure out what changes in our personal and professional lives may occur that would affect our judgment and our ability to help.

We know that jobs are being lost. We know that homes are being lost. We see that the structure of the average family is changing with the uprooting of family values, coupled with their diminishing fiscal well-being. As this happens, we are likely to see an increase in overt behavior problems in the classroom. Our students may act out more frustrations and seek more negative attention. Extended families and community resources are forced to focus more on survival mode than emotional support. There is more of a need for counseling but it is viewed as an unaffordable luxury. As we pair greater emotional stress with class sizes that may double in the next five

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years we can expect greater challenges. More bodies in a smaller space do not encourage intimacy.

We can assume that with more nonworking parents, Step 4s may look different – a mixed blessing. The parents may arrive more quickly but be less cooperative. Student issues may not be the greatest source of frustration to parents. During Step 4 or 5 conferences, it becomes that much more important to stay focused on student behavior and avoid secondary issues such as homework or grades. Offer alternative times with parents to discuss other issues, if necessary. The Step 4 process must be used for the major issues and not become a catch-all for insignificant behavior. Students study teams and shared ownership contracts with parents and students will become the more frequently used consequence.

Our student population will become more transient as families are forced to move more often for job relocation or for affordable housing. The need for the initial orientation and re-upping the program for re-establishing ownership will increase. We can no longer afford the luxury of waiting for new teachers to learn the program while on the job. Immediate mentoring for new teachers should be available beyond the training and is a need that we are also addressing.

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We can expect class sizes to increase with budget reductions. Our supplies and physical plant will also be affected. The pool of substitutes may increase but the ability to hire them will decrease. And, if it gets too bad, we may face not just hiring freezes and adjusted pay, but the threat of eliminating tenure as is now being discussed.

OK. Enough of the bad news. Let's talk about the good – let's focus on what we can control, not what we can't. It's just as easy to find the half-full and if we want to maintain personal sanity we have no choice.

The best defense is a good offense and schools with MYD have the greatest offense available – commitment, continuity and community ownership. The initial commitment came when the schools first adopted the program. This commitment is renewed and strengthened every year MYD continues to be used. The commitment shows when we visit schools and the rule is visible in every classroom and often in the office where every teacher, student, administrator and even visitors sign the rule as a commitment to its understanding and adherence.

The continuity is evident as dedicated teachers individually and, often as a group, mentor new staff in the philosophy and logistics of MYD year after year, often surviving many changes in administration.

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However, commitment and continuity cannot exist for any length of time without shared ownership. Student committees, parent committees, and teacher trainers used in concert to maintain and articulate the unique needs of each school independent of one another is critical. The knowledge that an alive and responsive system exists that is not prepackaged or stagnant and can change with the needs of the community is a crucial variable. Whose rule is it should always be answered the same by all – “It’s mine.”

Responding to the challenges of the new economy will take the type of organization that we already have with MYD, while individuals have varying degrees of understanding and experience those of us who are committed to MYD share a similar philosophy. We have simplified the structure so that all students and parents can understand our expectations. That all students can expect to be emotionally and physically safe within our school’s environment is no small undertaking. It has, however, become more important than ever. We all need someone or someplace we can count on – count on to be fair, reasonable, logical, and most of all predictable.

Many of our kids are being punished daily – not by parents necessarily – but by the new economy. Differentiating a punishment vs. a consequence has become easier as the politics and economics have become

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more unfair and unpredictable. As our class sizes increase and we get the Fannie Maes, Freddy Macs and Bernie Madoffs in our classroom, it will be incumbent upon us to articulate a reasonable structure, while maintaining the integrity of Steps, regardless of the logistics of our settings.

We may be required to accommodate physical plant limitations as well as the impact that the sheer number of students can create, but the criteria for Steps and the focus on privacy cannot be compromised without destroying the basic premise that no one has the right to interfere with the learning, safety, or well-being of others. There will be a breakout group later to discuss the logistics for modification without compromise.

The most important part of MYD to me is Points. Nowhere else in the curriculum of every class can you build a component that takes us to the very heart of education. Allowing our students the opportunity to introspect and evaluate their own personal performance throughout the day, not just to review curriculum but to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately sharing these insights with others and becoming vulnerable and open-minded enough to accept feedback from others. Learning to resolve conflict and share compassionate insights with others in their vulnerable state.

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A return trip to Connecticut reminded us that some of our youngest students can be more insightful than many adults. A third grade classroom was introduced to the concept of validating both earned and unearned points. To validate earned points, they were asked to describe something they had done the previous period that made them proud. When students were asked for their feedback, one young man shared his insights. He said, we have all just complimented ourselves. If we do this every point period that will be six times a day, which is thirty times a week. For the whole year that would be...a lot. He concluded with, "If we compliment ourselves that many times, there won't be anything that we'll be afraid to try."

I've used the word vulnerable twice in the last two sentences. As our students become more and more transparent to one another we have an ever increasing responsibility to protect their emotional well-being of our students. As we continue to mentor our students by modeling transparency ourselves, the new economy will require greater sensitivity and understanding on our parts. Although, class sizes may require different reporting methods we cannot afford to fail to provide our students with opportunities to address the affective domain. As society seems to be moving toward punishing the righteous and rewarding the wrong doers – the MYD classrooms will allow our students an opportunity to find inherent

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good and walk out at day's end feeling fulfilled and better developed as individuals.

This proactive approach enables our students to develop higher levels of self-esteem. It allows them opportunities to internalize responsibility for their actions. It creates an atmosphere that encourages true “cooperative learning.” The time spent on points will have an inverse correlation with disruptive behavior. The more time spent on points, the fewer the disruptions, fewer students asking for steps, increased attending behavior, thus higher test scores and truly educated individuals.

Lofty goals but certainly not impossible. We have focused on the same goals for years. The players may change and the outside world may take differing paths but if we don't book our flight to Belize, we have committed to “leaving no child behind.” Congratulations!