



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
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‘Critical Questions’ Series October 2011

How Can We Be Like Bob?

I had the opportunity lately to travel back to Washington, DC as part of ASCD’s legislative committee. Our sixteen-member committee spent a day on the Hill, meeting with representatives from the Department of Education, Democrat and Republican aides from the House Education and Workforce Committee and the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. This was a day for us to hear their perspectives in prepared remarks, followed by open question and answer sessions. The next day involved an intense committee work session alone at headquarters, where we debrief what we heard, and begin the crafting of ASCD’s legislative agenda to be revealed in the spring.

In recent years, the focus has been on reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, (ESEA), nicknamed No Child Left Behind in 2001, and is now four years overdue. This year, the majority party is different in each chamber, and the committee chairs have different approaches to reauthorization. The Senate chair wants full-scale reauthorization, and the House chair is preferring to address one aspect at a time. As we listened to our speakers, it became readily apparent that there was far more similarities than differences in what all of the sides wanted to fix about the law. Supporting career and college readiness standards, (including the Common Core), making accountability more flexible and less punitive, and addressing teacher effectiveness rather than teacher licensure were clear themes.

On this particular September day, President Obama held a press conference announcing the Department of Education’s waiver plan. In it, he stated, “Our kids only get one shot at a decent education. They cannot afford to wait any longer. So, given that Congress cannot act, I am acting”. This was a ‘throw down’ to Congress – which made the rest of the day quite electric. Although the Department, and House, and Senate committees had far more in common than different about the reauthorization, they appeared to be at a stalemate – again.

As the day ended, we remarked about the apparent lack of collaboration and dialogue amongst the lawmakers, and discussed nuances of policy. We walked out of the House office building, and into a charter bus to take us back to the hotel. It was there that our day changed.

Bob was a large man that appeared to be in his late sixties or early seventies. His hands were gripping the wheel while he waited for us to board – but his body was dancing to the Isley Brothers. As we pessimistically boarded that simple bus, we were immediately engaged by Bob. Soon, we were singing and dancing in our seats, and enjoying the moment. Shortly after departing though, our bus began to experience difficulties. We could go a few blocks, or maybe a mile, only to break

down again. Even through this hardship, the music was playing, and Bob was present in the moment. His radio calls back to his headquarters were like stand-up comedy, and he had a way of keeping us calm and enlisting us as co-problem solvers.

What is the lesson? It is easy to get lost in the complexities of education. What is the algorithm used to calculate safe harbor? Must we defer to supplemental educational service providers as a mandatory intervention, or is it a promotion of untested private business with public dollars? A growth model is a better way to gauge student achievement, but what are the details and nuances of a potential model and is it fair? Who is in power in DC, who is running for re-election, and how does that influence decision-making? But, despite the 'noise' of all of these issues, the real question we need to focus upon, is how can we help our students (and ourselves) be more like Bob? How can they find a role in society in which they can find joy? How can they be of service, no matter their profession, to their fellow man or woman? How can our education system keep its focus on what is important and not on distractions? How can we attend to the needs of the whole child with a well-rounded, high quality education?

I can assure you, that the following day was highly influenced by Bob. When you see the agenda this spring, you will likely see words such as 'citizenship' and 'statesmanship'. By this, we don't necessarily mean the study of governments, but what it means to take care of one another, show compassion, to find joy in our contributions, and to truly *reason* together to make our country a better place for everyone. Reauthorization of ESEA is critical to us on a daily basis, but I challenge you, as I am challenged, to try to remember Bob – and what our mission is all about.

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