

WHAT WAS I THINKING?

RCSBA Legislative Breakfast - January 31, 2004

In his book, *The End of Public Education*, Neil Postman wrote, "public education does not serve a public. It creates a public." [1]

The message our children get day in and day out from the media is a message that emphasizes personal gratification, withdrawal from public life, political apathy and cynicism.

Contrast that to the message that public education was created to convey and continues to convey day in and day out across this nation.

It is a message which talks of openness to other viewpoints, respect for the rights of others, realizing that every right brings a corresponding responsibility, understanding the democratic process, and participation in public affairs. We are not born with this knowledge and understanding ... they are lessons to be learned.

Allison Tropiano, a young woman in the Nanuet school district who had just turned 17, responded as follows when she was wished a happy birthday. -- "I have one more year before I turn 18, I can't wait ... then I'll be able to ... VOTE."

Today, we take public education so much for granted that we undermine and under fund the only institution whose primary mission it is to prepare our children for citizenship.

Have you ever done something that makes you stop dead in your tracks, hit yourself in the forehead and ask, "What was I thinking?" If you're lucky, you recover with a little mid-course correction and move right on along, thank you very much. If you are really lucky, no one else even notices what you did.

Have you ever known someone who couldn't recover from a, "What was I thinking?" episode?

Or worse yet, hadn't yet asked the question.

Consider Governor Pataki who asserted that, "An eighth grade education is sufficient to meet the needs of our students." Is the complexity of living in, and maintaining, a democracy possible with eighth grade educations? Not to worry, an elite group of individuals will be educated for that task ... the others can go along for the ride and spend their off hours watching "The Simple Life" or, better yet, "Survivor".

Do you think that Governor Pataki has had his, -- "What was I thinking?" -- moment yet?

In the movie, "A Wonderful Life", George Bailey, with the help of his guardian angel, Clarence, gets to see what the world would be like if he had never been born -- and then he gets a second chance.

"I love you, you old building and loan!" he exclaims.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no Clarence to show us what would happen if we were to turn our backs on public education.

But I am certain that we would get up one morning and ask, "What were we thinking?"

I am not certain how we would recover, are you? ...

"I love you, you old Public Education!"

1. Neil Postman, *The End of Education* { New York: Knopf, 1995 } : 18.

Posted by sachaucey at January 31, 2004 07:11 PM