

Two readers challenge recent columns

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Two people wrote last week disagreeing with recent columns. I'm glad they did. They raised important concerns. Their questions will help me do a better job in the coming year. Readers deserve to hear thoughtful disagreements. So here is a summary of their criticisms, along with brief responses.

Tom from Apple Valley wrote, in part,

"You clearly promote teaching students one side of the global warming > debate. You applaud Eastview High School for inviting Paul Douglas to speak to students about climate change but do not suggest that students listen to global warming skeptics like Mike Fairborne or Dave Dahl. And after praising our public schools for indoctrinating our students, you suggest that they are merely allowing students 'to learn to be independent thinkers.' Did you write that with a straight face?"

Tom's comments show that I need to be clearer. I DO agree that students should hear from people representing different perspectives on controversial issues. (Educators with whom I have talked at Eastview High School agree. They do present different views). In my teaching, whether in high school or college, I've had students read and talk with people representing different viewpoints.

A second person named Bill questioned the column noting that most of the schools that US News and World Report rated as the best in Minnesota were small. A teacher named Bill responded that he is 'skeptical about how they are ranking schools. Schools with small populations are much more likely to do better (or worse) compared to the average just by 'luck'."

He also wrote 'it is nice to see two of my district's schools on the list as well as my wife's (Edina) although none of them made AYP last year!'

Bill makes an excellent point about different ways to judge schools. Some of the schools on the US News and World Report magazine list as being among the best schools in Minnesota were judged as "needing improvement" by criteria developed by Congress and implemented as part of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. Many people, including me, have suggested changes in this law. Among proposed revisions is the law's feature that says a school can be placed on this list if any group, such as students with special needs, are not making the expected progress.

We need to do the best possible job with students with some form of disability. But the fact that not enough of these students are meeting statewide standards should not be enough to place their schools on the statewide "needs improvement" list. Congress will re-examine the NCLB law in 2010.

What about Bill's other concern? The US News and World Report list is only the latest of many studies coming to similar conclusions — overall, small high schools have higher graduation rates, better rates of improving achievement, higher levels of student and faculty satisfaction, and lower vandalism and violence rates than large schools.

Thanks to these and others who wrote this year. Hope many of you will do this in the coming year — and happy holidays to you.

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