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NewPolitics

Chuck Raasch

Teachers, parents, outside world are key to classroom civility

WASHINGTON (GNS) — Besides the Catholic Church, it is hard to find any institution that has undergone the scrutiny that public education has over the past decade. Corruption has rattled corporate America (Enron) and journalism (Jayson Blair), but still it seems that public schools are more constantly under the microscope of politicians, parents and taxpayers.

With school doors opening again for another year, the annual "what's wrong with public education" stories are certain to come forth this month.

They'll follow familiar themes. Schools are struggling to meet new learning standards. Teachers are chafing at the cookie-cutter approach to education. Teachers are underpaid. School buildings are falling apart. Politicians will point fingers at the other side for not spending enough money (the Democrats' typical charge) or blame the teachers unions for protecting bad teachers (the Republicans' usual claim).

So it may be a good time to think about what the teachers, kids and parents agree on. One thing stands out: the need for simple civility in the classroom.

According to a Public Agenda survey taken earlier this year, 43% of teachers say they spend more time keeping the peace in class than actually teaching. That's a stunning acknowledgment that some kids today simply don't come to school ready to learn.

Even more stunning, 70% of kids say disrespectful behavior is common in their schools, according to Public Agenda. Before you pooh-pooh the findings as yet another "kids being kids" complaint, remember that students are a school's primary consumers. If seven of 10 are complaining about behavioral problems in their

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classrooms, then it is a problem.

Teachers are wary and weary. In the same Public Agenda survey, 81% of teachers place the blame on parents for not urging their kids to study or behave in class. In other words, the problems in classrooms begin far before kids get to school. Three out of four teachers say they feel like scapegoats for all the problems said to be facing education.

Public Agenda is a nonprofit public interest group formed more than 25 years ago by social scientist Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. The group has surveyed extensively as the debate over the quality of education has escalated in recent decades.

Coming from a family of teachers — uncles, aunts, cousins and siblings — one can easily conclude that the teaching profession is one of the most underappreciated, overexamined, overpoliticized and misunderstood professions. There is no greater parental ally than a good teacher. Conversely, a bad teacher often can be the difference between success and struggle in a young child. But all that as a caveat, having had children in schools for 13 years has made it easy to see that many problems in classrooms often come from one or two or a handful of disruptive kids.

This problem does not occur in isolation. It's the product of absentee parenting and a lot more. It reflects the larger world these kids are growing up in. Life outside their doors is coarser and more savage and, despite all the paeans to tolerance, less tolerant than any generation should face. Just get a gander from what passes as civic debate on talk radio and TV these days.

When the evening news is splattered with the blood of innocent children in Israeli buses and the blood of United Nations aid workers in Iraq, civility vanishes on the big scale. When the public airwaves are polluted with violence and confusing sexual images, when the norms of language, public decorum and debate are dumbed down, the job of parenting is that much harder. So, too, is the job of teaching.

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