

Editorial

Every once in a while it is good – no, necessary – although painful to take a step back and look at the bigger picture of things. The news today that a handful of our English Language Learners will not be graduating with their peers this June has brought me clarity, and so I am sharing this with you. You can agree or disagree, but I do invite you to pause and ponder my perspective on reality.

The following are the stories of six students who will not graduate because they did not “meet standard” on the state reading and writing tests. This statement requires clarification. These students did not have the skill set to pass a white, middle-class, western-thought oriented exam in their second or third language. The reality that this situation has thrust before me is a frightening commentary on public education: schooling isn’t about students. As you read these students’ stories, I invite you to wonder, are these the students we really want to keep from graduating from our high schools?

Lee is 20, and spent the first 18 years of his life in a refugee camp in Nepal. Despite living in deplorable conditions, when he arrived in Spokane at the age of 19, he was placed into a pre-calculus math class. His culture and family so valued education, that even though they lived in refugee camps, they still provided education for their children. This May Lee presented his culminating project about Bhutanese refugees, and my colleagues were floored by his story, and how well he commanded himself as he presented in English. He aspires to continue his education at the community college next year, but since he was not able to pass the state test on his first try, that is now a “dream deferred.”

Anna is 19, Marshallese, and in her 5th year at Rogers. She has a one-year-old child. When Anna arrived, she sat silently at her desk, scowling if you asked a question, transplanted from the warm breezes of tropical islands to a cooler, ocean-less, climate. Like most of our students who go through the stages of culture shock, Anna eventually blossomed and now aspires to be a dental hygienist. She has been doing a training program at the skills center. She is literate, bilingual, and has improved her scores each year on the state test, but was still unable to “meet standard.” No Marshall Island student has graduated in the last two years. She has come back for an extra year of school, and has modeled to her peers, persistence. They are watching to see if her hard work has paid off. Sadly, though she has passed all of her classes, completed a culminating project, and has a vision for her future that would make her a pioneer for her cultural community in our city, she will not graduate. Her story will testify to our students that you are better off dropping out and joining a gang, sitting at home living off of welfare, and getting pregnant as young as possible so that you gain some kind of reward as a teenager. Hard work in school doesn’t pay off – all that matters is being able to jump through hoops, and the last one is the state test. They feel it’s just not worth the trouble.

Her fellow Marshall Islander, Rene, will reinforce this thinking in the 40 plus Marshall Islanders at our school. Having transferred from a private Christian school in Oregon last spring, Rene will have 23 credits at the end of this year. She’s passed the required classes, and did her culminating project on hair design. Like Lee, since she was not able to pass the state test on her first attempt, she will not graduate.

Robert, also from the Marshall Islands, is in his 5th year of high school. He became a dad this spring, and wasn’t able to juggle that new role, pass his classes, finish his culminating project, and pass the state test. It is hard for students like Robert to focus on the many requirements of U.S. high schools, when the prospect of having to pass the state test looms. His journey in high school is likely over, having come back for an extra year, but not being able to pass the state test.

Faisal is 21, a refugee from Afghanistan, and anyone who has been around knows him. He is a character, and has a smile and personality that endears him to people instantaneously. Three and a half years ago, Faisal laid in a coma at Deaconess Hospital after nearly asphyxiating from carbon monoxide poisoning. Miraculously he did not die, he re-learned how to walk, and somehow recovered without visible permanent damage (though he is a little clumsy). He has hung around Rogers for an extra 2 years trying to earn a diploma, as he knows that it is essential to his future life in America. Anyone can attest that Faisal is not the best of students; he isn’t even a good one. In fact, he is probably a bad student. Nevertheless, he has persevered, asked for help, pulled strings, and hoped against hope. Faisal’s road is over at Rogers, and we will not reward his perseverance and progress with a high school diploma.

Dina has been in the states for five years and is in her fifth year of high school. Her Turkish people group has been mistreated for decades, since Stalin forcibly removed them to Uzbekistan. She was married (probably arranged by her parents) this summer and moved away from her family in Seattle to live here in Spokane. She did not smile in class for six months, but finally late this winter she warmed up. She did a job shadow at an adult day center in Spokane because she was interested in being a nurse's aid. After the job shadow she realized that she couldn't do the labor of love that is required by a nurse's aid, but she wrote in her culminating project research paper that she hopes to find a job where she can love people in practical ways. Though she has passed all her classes this year and passed one section of the state test, she barely missed the passing score on the reading test. She will not graduate this June.

These are six stories of English Language Learners who were willing to hold out until the very end. For each of them there are countless others who didn't bother sticking around to come up short at the bitter end. Yes, there are a few who did make it, but these are the ones who were already university bound. What the state test has done is keep ELL's who are not yet "university material" from graduating. According to research in second language acquisition, it takes 4-7 years for learners to acquire academic language proficiency. Why are we penalizing these students?

This is why, as I take a step back and survey the landscape, I realize that schooling isn't about what is best for students anymore. I'm not sure I want to know what the real purpose is. It is increasingly more difficult to come to work when some of my best students are denied a diploma; students who have the potential to become great contributors in this multi-cultural society. It is hard to be part of a system rife with injustice. Yes, I can rationalize why all these students didn't make it – even come up with a list of poor choices they made. Nevertheless, this testimony stands: for these students, hard work, consistent progress, and perseverance were not rewarded by our education system. Standardized testing is not based on progress, effort, character, and future promise, but instead on factors outside of a student's control, like what country they were born in and at what age they were able to move to America.

The amazing thing about these students is that most of them will fall back upon the great resiliency their difficult lives have taught them, and they will keep pressing forward to become healthy, respectable, and successful American citizens. It is the few ELLs who break and give up when they watch what this system does to their peers that I am most concerned about. They will be the ones to perpetuate our high-drop out rate and juvenile delinquency.

I know that we all as teachers have the potential to impact students' lives. The problem is we are already doing everything we can in our classrooms. The question is, what can we do about leaders who are making decisions about classrooms, when they have never stepped foot inside of one, or listened to stories of students like these? It doesn't just negatively impact these students, it impacts all of us. When will we demand a change? Until state legislators recognize that standardizing testing as a graduation requirement unjustly penalizes non-traditional students and widens the achievement gap, the least they could do is provide fair modifications for English Language learners who do not enter the American educational system prior to high school.

- Cory Johnson, Rogers, EDL