The Excellence of Our Schools

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The General Assembly deals with a myriad of issues at every level of complexity. On a single day during a session legislators may cast votes on fine details of the criminal code, restructuring of electric utilities, refinements of the tax laws, and appropriation of billions of dollars of tax revenue. Legislators draw upon their own expertise and experiences as well as the advice of legislative staff, executive department experts, lobbyists, academicians and the general public to understand issues and the implications of proposed legislation.

There is one instance, however, in which all 140 members of the General Assembly seem to be self-proclaimed experts: public education. Every member has been to school, remembers how great schools were in the past, and usually has a fairly fixed and simple solution to return public education to its former luster. A recent visit to our Reston schools reminds me just how little most legislators understand what goes on in the schools and what the real issues are in public education. Too much of education policy is driven by opponents of public schools who proclaim a continuing crisis in public education and by politicians who look for simple and cheap solutions that too often are another testing program.

These same critics and politicians should have been with me on a recent visit to two local schools. At Langston Hughes Middle School I attended a reception recognizing the acceptance of the school into the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. This is no small honor! Langston Hughes joins South Lakes High School in offering course work on rigorous international standards. It is great to see that students are being challenged to excel to the maximum of their abilities rather than simply having the entire school hunker down to a single set of standards that have been set at a level of a politically acceptable passing rate. The IB program is truly exceptional, but I was also genuinely impressed with the young musicians in the Langston Hughes Middle School orchestra who played during the reception and with the two eighth graders who showed me around the school. These students showed a level of maturity and academic excellence beyond anything I remember about eighth graders I knew in the past.

On the same day I visited the Singing Star Opera Company at Hunters Woods Elementary School. Seldom have I seen such creativity and enthusiasm as demonstrated by the fourth graders who entirely wrote and produced six operas. I am relieved to see that the rote learning required by the Standards of Learning did not interfere with this incredibly meaningful learning experience for the children. The communication and teamwork skills are invaluable building blocks for future learning and will remain with the students well past the recall of bits of information. And the "friendship is the key" theme of the operas demonstrates important values that help in interpersonal relationships and teamwork in the future.

The next politician who offers a simple solution to solve the ills that are supposed to beset our schools will get a suggestion from me to visit the schools to see what is really happening. Our schools are quite good, but just imagine what they could do if the state funded them to the level of the most basic standards!