



An Appeal to Stop Using Education as a Pawn and Four Issues Where Advocacy Could Help

By: By Dr. Don Phipps, NC 2023 Superintendent of the Year

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I want to make an open appeal to anyone who reads this to please stop using education as a political pawn.

Time and time again, education is used to push a political agenda or further a particular narrative. Too often, the perspective that is shared is not objective and often not completely true. It seems that the value of education is not the traditional value that we should acknowledge, but rather is the political collateral that is created when education is used as a political tool. In addition to that, advocacy could make a difference on these four issues.

1. Public school calendars

Number one is an issue that seems so simple, yet for years, has been a no-go in our state, and this is changing the school calendar law. The law should be amended to allow an earlier start date, even if limits are imposed, but local boards of education should be allowed to choose the best start dates of school for the systems they represent.

In Caldwell County, the late start has several impacts on us that are negative. First, we have unbalanced semesters. There's a large discrepancy between instructional time between the fall and the spring as we attempt to end the semester at the Christmas break. Second, we have a very limited number of days inside the school year for professional development and valuable events like parent teacher conferences. Third, the number of required and optional teacher work days fall outside of the academic year and are not as useful as they could be if they were placed inside the instructional calendar.

It should also be noted that this law is not required of charter schools or private schools that receive state money through the opportunity scholarships.

2. Assessment and accountability

Number two is assessment and accountability. It is shameful that we continue to use a single test on a single day as an indicator of quality and success for a school year, for students, teachers, administrators, and schools. The school report card uses the results of those tests. The teacher bonuses use this data as well.

We had some momentum on this topic. DPI and state board need to keep this issue as a priority. Our students and educators deserve better. Imagine your job performance, whatever you do, being publicly reported and based on your performance over a two hour period on a single day. It's shameful that we do that.

Again, I think it's important to note that private schools that have received state funds through opportunity scholarships are not required to participate in our assessment or accountability models.

3. Educators should be held in high regard

Number three, our educators — and in that term I include teachers and administrators and support staff, including certified and non certified, and this means bus drivers, teacher assistants, cafeteria workers, custodians, and the maintenance team — should be held in high regard and respected for their professional work.

I mean truly respected and highly regarded, and as Eric Davis, the chair of the N.C. State Board of Education, said recently, “tenaciously revered.” We need to look at pay to start — from beginning pay to long-serving veteran pay. And if you really want to show educators that you revere them, return health benefits after retirement and restore masters pay.

If we truly revere education, it will be reflected in our actions, including compensation.

4. Address funding inequities

Number four, please continue to advocate for steps to address the inequities that exist in our state with respect to funding.

Fully funding Leandro will address many of these needs and inequities, and I believe unless you're in a rural or a poor district, the intense burden placed on local funding may not be evident. While supplemental funding is a genuine help, there is much more that needs to be done.

Every child deserves a quality education regardless of where they live.

Highlighting the importance of local public schools

Even if you don't have the authority to make these changes, you can advocate and highlight the importance of these issues.

I'm proud to be associated with the public schools of North Carolina and the Caldwell County Schools specifically. I see great things happening every day, and I'm amazed at what's accomplished across our state.

Let's resolve and commit to make our public schools the best they can possibly be.

Dr. Don Phipps is the superintendent of the Caldwell County Schools. This piece was first published by EdNC on July 9.



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