

A Public Service fiasco

Lefty toured all twenty schools while running for school board, as he was particularly interested in their technology use. He discovered one computer lab that housed twenty ten-year-old Apple IIe's in a high school of 2000 plus students, used mainly for a business education class. At that time during the late 1990's, an elective keyboarding class was offered using a ten-year-old textbook with photo of a typewriter on the cover. It was taught in the typewriter lab rather than in the typically empty computer lab in the next room over. When questioned about this seeming dichotomy, the principal indicated that this was due to *teacher preference*. Apparently, the teachers determined whether the kids would learn about white out and corrective tape, or the cut and paste commands of word processing software. These same teachers promoted but did not model, lifelong learning, nor use what anyone could possibly call a standards based curriculum.

He found no curricular use of computers, for math,¹ science, or English language classes, outside of a lab environment. In the middle and elementary schools, teachers deposited the kids with a lab teacher to go on break. The kids played a lot of Oregon Trail and some drill and practice (aka drill and kill) software in the grade schools.

His years serving on the school board were only an exercise in frustration, being on the losing end of 5-4 votes for three years. Some board members were attorneys seeking voter name recognition for future judgeships or those who were intent on running for higher political office. There was also a local corporate element, perhaps related to taxation. They did not want to make any waves, or be involved in any controversy. There was also the occasional political crackpot whose spouse and friends apparently become bored with their rants, and thus they sought out new audiences. They all often knew what was the right thing to do, but lacked the necessary courage and political will. As a result, the five votes typically favored the safety of the status quo, an unaccountable, untenable, and unsustainable twenty-year decline of public education in the community. This of course mirrored the decline of the local economy. This economic slide was of course a reflection of the national loss of an industrial manufacturing based economy, and the job loss this created. This also shone a spotlight on the limitations of public school self-governance, and the many issues involved with public labor unions. On his way back home from those meetings, he frequently listened to Tom Petty's Rhino Skin track at full volume for some comfort, as he screamed in disgust.

School district administrators were career professional long-tongued liars, who often exhibited a distant and casual relationship with truth. These soft-shoe-shufflers frequently danced around the facts, and well-practiced in the art of deception. As a school board member, Lefty had responsibilities, but limited ability or authority to influence or effect the operations of the district.

Later it became clear that these failures also meant the continued creation of and acceptance of a school to for profit prison pipeline, and the resultant permanent criminal underclass. As one school board member put it while cutting funding for

¹ *This is rather ironic, since a computer is the ultimate math machine.*

school programs, there will always be a need for people to wash our cars and collect our trash. He likened his school board experience to slamming your finger in a car door each day. It turned out to be the same type of self-inflicted abuse. The near fifty-year decline in the nation's public education system portends a future where the citizens are unprepared to support a viable economy, nor effectively participate in self-governance. He thought it was expedient for them to set low standards and harbor low expectations for students. Because this required much less work of the administrators and teachers, but at the same time it fully exposed the soft bigotry in these low expectations.

The hard work of teaching and learning to him was to set high standards, provide the required support, and then revel in the progress when they reached those high expectations. He did the best he could to shift the focus from buildings and budgets, to classrooms and children. He won an Unsung Hero award for his support of the local Hispanic community, and was active in advocating for the eventual building of a new central city neighborhood school.

A dramatic increase in the number of minority non-English speaking students, the ever-growing number of special education students, in addition to state funding cuts, hammered the school district financially. Making something positive happen with their four-vote block was not remotely possible. This group of four simply tried to prevent the worst of the bad things from happening, or at least delay the inevitable for the kids using parliamentary tactics and tricks. They would run the discussion past midnight and use other parliamentary tricks to run out the clock. This effort allowed middle school students a continued choice of two classes between the foreign language, technical education, and music electives, at least for another school year.

He was successful forcing rhetoric into action, by having the board adopt a public charter school policy. He viewed public charter schools as the introduction of a virus into the stagnant bureaucratic system, to help bring about positive change. This was one way to build a school teaching staff not overly focused on careerism and credentialing. Charter schools also allowed for alternative environments for those like his earlier self, who did not fit comfortably into the public factory school environment.

Lefty believed in the concept of having taxpayer funded tuition money follow the kids, wherever they chose to attend school. At the same time, he believed in raising the level of competence, accountability, and transparency for everyone involved in these schools. As a former mayor of Milwaukee once put it, "The history of tax money following students into private, public, or parochial schools is a long one. This dates back to the origin of the GI Bill of Rights education benefits." Highlighting the extremes using his dry sense of humor, the mayor pointed out that returning veterans used this taxpayer funded benefit to attend conservative private religious schools like Marquette where you could become a Jesuit, or attend, the notoriously liberal, public university in Madison where you could become a communist. Lefty also came under relentless attack by union and political forces when trying to improve instructional technology for the tens of thousands of public school students, and achieved no real success here.

As a board member, he first came to realize that computers would not, and did not change the way subject matter was being taught in classrooms. This was not because these were not the right tools, or they did not have the right curricular software. What happened instead was the bureaucratic system co-opted the technology by denying access, rather than embracing it. Lefty felt like breaking the locks off all the computer lab doors to allow the kids to have access. *Teacher preference* prevented the transformational change from the traditional Sage on the Stage role, to a student centered Guide on the Side.

Lefty learned from research that for the most part we draw our teachers out of the lower one third of high school SAT scores, and yet graduate them from the Colleges of Education in the upper third of the grades. The academics explanation for this apparent contradiction is because they are professional teachers and superior to other professors in other departments, like math, computer science, and engineering. Those who have enrolled in these colleges of education, would likely dispute this conclusion.

These same teachers also resisted the introduction of computers into the classrooms, due to lack of professional development (training) time, but when presented the opportunity, did not take advantage. This is not unlike the annual day off for the teacher's convention, for them to learn improved methods that few ever attend. These teachers promoted lifelong learning but did not model the behavior for their students. Their professors in the colleges of education did not model the computer use their students either, choosing to use the forty-year-old textbooks they had authored instead.

School board union Grievance committee meetings became stomach-turning discussions of complaints from certain teachers who should have been paid .50 cents per minute for lunch duty rather than the .45 cents per minute they received, and complaints of that nature. Lefty realized that this must be what the public education system looks like while failing. This took the appearance of incompetence, corruption, and adults fighting over the scraps that rightfully belong to the children.