

Have you seen a drift in our education system? As Dr. Tim Elmore spoke to an English teacher of high school seniors, he shared that he had one job: to teach language arts to teenagers. Dr. Elmore then reflected on the history of education in America and recognized that we've drifted.

There are two dictionary definitions for the word 'education'. Merriam-Webster's modern definition is, "The action or process of educating or of being educated; the knowledge and development resulting from the process of being educated." Rephrased by Dr. Elmore, simply a matter of knowledge and development, in what constitutes either is uncertain.

Noah Webster's 1928 dictionary definition of 'education' is, "The bringing up of a child through instruction; the formation of manners. Education comprehends all series of instruction and discipline which is intended to enlighten the understanding, correct the temper and form the manners and habits of youth and to fit them to usefulness in their future stations." Noah Webster continued by saying that to give children a good education means developing them in manners, the arts and the sciences.

In this definition, education is broadened from accumulating knowledge to enabling students to gain understanding so that it changes the way they manage their lives. Education includes: correcting their tempers, practicing habits and manners and developing reason. Elmore rephrases this in stating that educators and parents are to equip their students to exercise their will in a moral and reasonable manner so they can become generative adults.

Teachers know that student development is about more than academic progress, grade point averages and SAT or ACT scores. For this reason, many schools now include social and emotional learning in weekly coursework because it's simply not happening in many homes. Teachers must now not only focus on the curriculum intended for them to teach, but also on soft skills of helping students manage their emotions, building disciplined habits and empathizing with others.

Reframing a statement from James Baldwin's "A Talk to Teachers" in 1963, he states that a teacher's job is to create active problem-solvers. A research article suggests that problem-solving skills help buffer against distress when people are experiencing stressful events in life.

According to Dr. Elmore, America is experiencing a perfect storm of elements. We have been telling our kids to go to college to get great jobs. Most educators will agree that not every K-12 student is cut out for a four-year university. Trade schools, such as learning to be an electrician, builder, plumber, mechanic or even a truck driver would be more suited to most.

We suffered the consequences of our advice when we got ambushed by the pandemic. People stayed home during quarantine, ordered products and services online and many people did not want to go back to work. We have a labor shortage because there are not enough workers for the available jobs and Elmore states that 'most high school students where I live don't want to work jobs that feel "below them".'

Before the pandemic, college graduates were conditioned by society to wait for the perfect job. Because these college graduates feel they are overqualified for these jobs, prices are up and efficiency is down. Elmore states that possibly we told too many kids they should have white-collar jobs. In all reality, many of the plumbing, electrical or truck driving jobs pay very well and would be perfect for millions of students who were forced into a narrow window of what success looks like.

Elmore states, "If millennials and Generation Z are underemployed, is it possible many of them are because they got a college degree they didn't need? And is it because we neglected to teach basic job skills or soft skills to them?"

It's time we return to practicality. Embrace the earlier definition of education and form great problem-solvers who practice disciplines and address challenges in society. This will not only entail social and emotional learning, but also character and leadership. Elmore states, "Academics are clearly important, but not at the expense of practical skill sets that improve the way we live our lives."

This article is adapted from Dr. Tim Elmore, CEO and founder of Growing Leaders, an international non-profit organization created to develop leadership and life skills in the emerging generations.

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