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Opinion - Op-Ed
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Teachers must empathize to motivate

By Aaron Hughey

Our schools are in trouble, and we need to wake up before it's too late. The issue is fundamental to our way of life, and the signs are ominous and pervasive.

In a Sept. 20 cover story in Time magazine, investigative journalist Amanda Ripley asks one of the most important questions of our day, "What makes a great school?"

Her answer, which is not all that surprising to anyone who has been keeping up with the seemingly never-ending efforts to reform our public schools over the last 50 years, is that it all begins with the teachers. "We may be on the cusp of running schools," Ripley asserts, "according to what actually works."

Teachers are obviously the key ingredient in any endeavor to make education more meaningful and responsive to the needs of both the student and the larger society.

But perhaps the most accurate interpretation of how to improve our schools comes from Robert Samuelson, a columnist for The Washington Post. In a Sept. 6 column, Samuelson also laments the failure of most school reform initiatives since the mid-1960s.

Scores on the reading and math sections of the National Assessment of Educational Progress have not improved since the early 1970s.

But unlike Ripley and most others trying to provide some much-needed insight into this problem that ultimately affects us all, Samuelson correctly identifies the fundamental reason for this lack of progress as diminished desire.

"The larger cause of failure is almost unmentionable: shrunken student motivation," he writes. "The unstated assumption of much school 'reform' is that if students aren't motivated, it's mainly the fault of schools and teachers."

A lot of well-intentioned legislators — including many in Kentucky — have worked relentlessly to create a school culture that values only what can be measured on standardized tests.

Yet the reality is that students are simply not motivated to learn when their worth is evaluated by such a one-dimensional yardstick.

Education, at its most basic level, has always been about relationships. The extent to which students are motivated depends almost entirely on the quality of the relationships they have with their teachers.

Teachers must be able to relate to their students' individual circumstances. Only by being able to empathize with them as human beings and by appreciating the complexity of their lives can teachers hope to instill within students a genuine desire to learn.

If teachers are truly interested in generating real excitement about the educational process, they must have a deep understanding of, and appreciation for, where the students in their classrooms come from, such as their family configuration, socioeconomic status and racial or ethnic background.

In addition to content mastery and pedagogy, teachers desperately need training in the kind of positive relationship-building that sets the stage for academic and life success.

No teacher should ever be certified without having satisfactorily completed several counseling courses as part of their formal preparation process. The ability to help students deal more effectively with a myriad of problems and issues is essential for success as an educator. Education is not something we do *to* our students; rather, it is something we do *with* them.

Although Ripley is essentially correct in her assertion that teachers constitute the decisive factor in any effective effort to improve schools, Samuelson articulates a more precise and concrete road map for improving our schools.

His interpretation demonstrates that he knows more about education than most educators. **Aaron W. Hughey is a professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University.**

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