

Students stifled by lack of creativity in schools

By Gail Konop Baker

GUEST COLUMN

Since moving to Madison three years ago, I have been confused by two diametrically opposing forces gaining momentum simultaneously.

On one hand, I am extraordinarily impressed with Madison's arts community. American Players Theater, CTM Madison Family Theater Co. and Madison Symphony Orchestra, to name a few, produce exceptional performances on par with those in major cities. With Jerome Frautschi's \$100 million gift, Madison is certain to achieve even greater prominence in the arts. This serves artists and nonartists, rich and poor, since art enriches all our lives.

In contrast, I am appalled with the test-crazy lack of creativity and rigidity in the Madison Public middle schools. I have always supported public education and I'm not blaming one person, classroom or school. The test craze is a nationwide phenomenon, equally influenced by parents, who want the best for their children, and politicians, who want their school, district, city labeled the best. I just find it surprising that progressive Madison tolerates militaristic institutionalization of children.

From the moment sixth-graders set foot in middle school they are given tests and more tests. Perhaps teachers have to administer tests for placement and later to justify their jobs. If so, how misguided. Children who spend more time taking multiple-choice, true-false, fill-in-the-blank tests than writing and questioning will become great test-taking non-thinkers. I have worked with some of these top students who are unable to express their own ideas on paper. It isn't lack of intelligence, it's lack of opportunity. I understand the need to acquire knowledge, but if knowledge isn't applied in meaningful context, it's like learning single notes of music but never playing a song.

An equally strong message is, follow the rules. I understand the need for order. But what is it? Fear of anarchy? Or simply a hyperkinetic point system that influences assignments that penalize for lettering that isn't uniform, for not erasing enough pencil lines, for coloring outside the lines and for showing their work in math? What is the point of the only poetry assignment all year being graded down for "lack of bold colors" on the mounting board when the

poem is about a silent winter day? Why would children dare take a creative or intellectual risk in this environment?

If it's competitiveness we're encouraging, this is also the wrong way. An overly controlled learning environment encourages a petty kind of competitiveness — classrooms where distrust pervades, where teachers "police" students because cheating is commonplace. If students focused less on test-taking and perfect writing, they might focus more on feeding their instinctual hunger for knowledge. Teachers, administrators and parents might be pleasantly surprised at the far superior results.

Are we, as a community, so disconnected that we fail to see the irony in supporting a world-class arts district while at the same time supporting schools that crush the creative spirit of our children? Have we parents stopped to consider into what our children are being molded? Not the great minds of the next generation. More like corporate soldiers, always dependent on lots of rules to get through life. As for the future artists, I'm afraid Madison will have to settle for a dazzling arts district starring mostly non-Madisonians.

We're not all born to be artists, but we're all born to be creative thinkers and problem solvers; mothers and people who must triumph over adversity; doctors and lawyers. I implore all teachers, for the sake of our collective future, for the sake of your soul, trust the children, their natural curiosity, their inherent ability to absorb and apply knowledge. Tell them to put down No. 2 pencils and take the time to find joy in their quest for knowledge. Not only will you find greater personal satisfaction in your work but only then will you give our children the opportunity to reach "their maximum potential."

I implore all members of this community — parents, administrators, scientists, business leaders and community activists — to think through the long-term consequences of educating our children in this standardized way. They may be the best at this time, in this system. But the best what? The best parents? The best community members? The best leaders, willing and able to move our civilization forward in thoughtful ways?

This country and this city were made great by those who weren't afraid to ask questions, to color outside the lines, to show their work.

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