

DISTRICT 202 COMMUNITY COLUMN

By Dr. Lane Abrell  
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Dear District 202 Community,

I once had a professor in an educational foundations course at Western Illinois University ask our class, “What’s the most ‘American’ of all American institutions?”

The answer was (as it still is now), Public Education – because we take all comers. No matter who it is, what language they speak, where they come from, or how much money their family has. Kind of like Ellis Island...

That is the American ideal, in a nutshell.

As I near the end of my 36-year public education career, I am so proud and humbled to have been a very small part of such a giant vision.

I share this information now because February 21-25, 2022, is recognized this year as Public Education Week.

Unfortunately, public education has been the focus on of considerable pandemic-spurred criticism since March 2020.

Many of those arrows – in fact, I’d say, most – have been shot by people who are either unfamiliar with or forget the essential service that public education provides against unbelievable odds and challenges, even under the best of circumstances. I think we would all agree, the last two years have presented anything but the “best of circumstances” for everyone.

To be fair, some of those arrows have been well placed. Every institution needs and benefits from regular inspection, reflection, and improvement. Public education is no different. Whether at the federal governmental, state, or local level, schools can be bureaucratic systems that often step on their own toes and suffer from the crushing weight of their own best wishes.

Still, no other institution does what we strive to do as well as we do it, which is nothing less than helping to build and shape the future of our communities and the world, one child’s mind at a time.

The American public education system is especially unique as we go to incredible lengths to serve and support and ensure learning and growth opportunities to every student who comes through our doors.

I have some good friends in the private school system, and I admire them for what they provide to their students as well.

But the simple truth is, the private school system is not held to the same legal bonds as public schools in terms of accepting every student. They can set boundaries that we can't – religious, financial, academic, etc.

Rather, we take every child wherever they stand.

We feed, clothe, and shelter and nurse them if needed to make sure each one has a fair chance at success.

We provide all manner of “extracurricular” opportunities, knowing that some children only come to school to participate in the band, or the chess club, or the fall play, or the myriad athletic teams.

We know that for some, these opportunities – no matter their cost - are the doors that will lead these students not only to academic achievement, but to success in life beyond our doors.

Still, the most important things we do, happen in our classrooms and schools every day.

That's where professional, experienced, dedicated, compassionate adults give their time and talent to care for and guide students through whatever life throws their way.

Is this system perfect? Of course not.

The world asks, demands, and expects more from public education every day, then sometimes gets upset when we provide it, burdened by a list of laws, rules, politics, and regulations longer than my arm.

Still, we stand ready to enthusiastically teach and guide our 25,000 students in our thirty-one schools.

Their families' finances range from very wealthy to barely putting food on the table. They speak or represent seventy-two different languages. Their learning abilities run the gamut from gifted to severely challenged.

They could not be more different. Yet in one crucial way, they are all the same: individually and together, they are our future.

And we in District 202 are committed to doing whatever we can to prepare our learners for the future.

Dr. Lane Abrell  
Superintendent