

Tuesday, February 27, 2007

Musing on schools, performance, and "The Sum Of All Fears"

This entry is going to be a bit different than my usual political stuff..... its going to focus on schools. I've picked on this day to write about this for two reasons - Florida Schools are currently administering their version of *academic assessment*, the FCAT , and I have been asked to help current students of my Alma Mater in addressing a free speech concern.

First, some history. When I was in my teen years I forced my parents to send me to a private, boarding high school. "Forced" is not an understatement - there was literal force used. The reasons were many and complex, but to this day I believe it was the right decision to make, and believe I was fully justified in doing so.

Anyway, the school I attended, The Leelanau School in Glen Arbor MI was where I graduated. And let me be clear - there was no measure by which that school was "perfect." I cannot, however, complain about the quality of *academic* instruction I received there.

But many of the basic problems that many educational institutions have - *fairness, transparency, even honesty and clean dealing* - were present there.

Over the last 25 years in the *public school system* some elements of accountability have improved. More information is being made available to parents. We are seeing more and more standardized testing, which of course *the schools and teachers are complaining about*, especially when that is then tied to pay. **Gee, what's wrong with pay for performance?** We do it everywhere *else* in our economy!

I actually *like* the FCAT here in Florida. As a parent, it continues to show me something important - that the school *underperforms* my child! That is, she continues to show FCAT performance that exceeds the "grade" performance that the school records for her actual routine work. Year after year this pattern has replayed, and it'll be interesting to see if we find the same thing this year as well. I bet we do, and it says to me that there are disparities in the *evaluation* of performance, or worse, there's a serious problem with *how testing and grading are done in relationship to the actual curriculum and state grade-level standards*. In any event, by the standards, my daughter is doing very well. A year ago just prior to the FCAT I had a drag-down debate with the school principal during which she claimed that I should "expect" a certain level of FCAT performance given the evaluations she was bringing home. It was quite funny how her mouth snapped shut after the FCAT results came back.... that won't be a mistake Marti Gardner will make again, I suspect.

Anyway, on to the **real** purpose of this particular blog entry.

Over the last weekend I was contacted by a group of current students at *The Leelanau School*. They had run across my ["Open Letter"](#) to the school's Board of Trustees, published in August of last year, and were curious if I would help them with a free speech project.

See, *The Leelanau School* is a private school. As such they can, and have a history of, totally ignoring student's free speech rights. Now certainly there's an argument to be made that certain forms of speech are disruptive to an educational environment - thus the (totally reasonable) bans on wearing clothing that has, for example, the phrase "f* the principal", or a bare-chested woman displayed on it.

But mere words, printed on a page, are a different matter.

Anyway, these students have figured out how to get around internet filters and, at the same time, get themselves a high degree of protection from identification. They enclosed their first "issue" of their proposed

underground newspaper, which contained enough information for me to be quite certain they really *were* students there. And they asked for help.

I have to admit, politically, these guys (and perhaps gals) seem to be a bit to the left of *Atilla* The Hun, and that's about as diametrically opposed to me, politically, as one can find. Yet I admire the intestinal fortitude to put in the effort (and it took quite a bit!) to not only find my letter, but also to find a way to protect themselves against almost-certain retributive action were they to publish "in the open."

So of course I said yes, and set them up a domain, a web server, and a copy of my forum (bulletin board) code.

What will this all mean for the school? I don't know. I do hope that *The Leelanau* School sees this forum not as a threat, but as an opportunity. Sure, politically, these folks are likely to be quite "politically incorrect." So what? Isn't one of our strengths our diversity? Perhaps the Administration will have the intestinal fortitude to weigh in and join the debate - in a format where they cannot wield a stick, but instead have to treat people as *people*, since they will have a hell of a time identifying "who's who" in an attempt to stick a boot on someone's neck.

With luck the web site and forum will sponsor an open and honest debate. Its obvious from reading the material that these *really are school students*. Its also obvious that there are a group of students that are willing to go to quite a bit of trouble to put their viewpoint out in public.

You have to admire that.

You can find the site at <http://www.leelanauunderground.org> - if you're curious about having a look "inside" a private school and its student body, from an unvarnished, uncensored point of view, have a gander. The site - and forum - are open to all.

Just like it should be.

Labels: [free speech](#), [school](#), [student rights](#), [The Leelanau School](#)

Posted by Karl Denninger at 09:36