

Bernie Schein: Putting The Kids First

Written by Wendy Nilsen Pollitzer

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Lifelong Educator is running for Beaufort County School Board, District 3



Recently I sat down with Bernie Schein to discuss the state of Beaufort County schools. He spoke about his desire to minimize bricks and mortar, top-down leadership and bloated bureaucracy as described in a personal letter regarding his bid for Beaufort County School Board, District 3. He talked about what makes our kids truly smart-smart teachers, smart counselors and social workers, perceptive learning specialists, inspired curricula and instructional programs, and strong, healthy peer and parent-child relationships. He also candidly described his repugnance toward standardized tests and bad teachers.

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“Hey folks, it’s simple. We all know who the bad teachers are. If we get rid of them and pay attention to the good ones, we’re on a good start,” explains Schein.

That’s what I love about Bernie, as I will refer to him throughout the rest of this article. Bernie is a friend, and he tells it like it is. I’m not sure he knows the term “politically correct.” Because, quite frankly, he doesn’t care as much about pleasing the recipient of a comment as he does about his message to help professionals and parents view the world through the eyes of a child.

Think about it. Children tend to speak freely and openly about their opinions, their concerns, their questions. They aren’t disrespectful. They’re curious for the right answer. And they rely on us to give it to them. When we don’t or when we belittle their interest, they naturally become frustrated. If unsuccessful bids for attention continue throughout their adolescence, frustration turns into anger, whether it be overt or concealed.

Bernie Schein is asking for the right answer. He’s not a child asking his parents or teachers. He’s asking his peers and our elected officials, locally, regionally and nationally. He’s not getting an answer. And he’s frustrated.

To Bernie, it’s black and white. Put the kids first.

He should know. Bernie Schein earned a master's degree in education from Harvard University with an emphasis in educational psychology and taught for 40 years in public and private schools. He was a principal at three schools, including Yemassee Elementary and Junior High School and Port Royal Elementary School. He was named District Teacher of the Year in Metropolitan Atlanta in 1978 and has visited over 1000 classrooms in his lifetime.

Bernie believes that Education does not have to be impersonal, formal and objective.

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“Putting students in school for 13 years and giving them four options on multiple choice tests does not teach them to ask questions,” Schein said.

“No Child Left Behind and that whole standardized industry asks the questions for the kids,” he said.

Without the freedom to ask questions students want to ask, Schein said, “Students become passive receptive learners and fodder for any charlatan’s imagination.”

Bernie believes students need to be emotionally open and aware before true learning can take place. He remembers introducing J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* to students and their reaction to the book’s main character, Holden Caulfield.

“Reading literature with cynical and negative characters like Holden acts like a mirror for the students,” said Schein.

“It is so glaring and so accurate that they shy away from it. To face the glare and confront their own truths, students need teachers to help them. Like Holden, students don’t walk up to you and say: I need you. I love you. Can you help me?” Schein explains.

Bernie Schein’s book, *If Holden Caulfield Were in my Classroom: Inspiring Love, Creativity and Intelligence in Middle School Kids*, published in 2008, illustrates humanity, humor, and compassion in the classroom. Through stories from his students, Bernie describes how true emotion, rather than pure reason, is the key to discovering real relationships and creativity and academic success. His account is psychologically sensitive and socially accurate.

Bernie asked me recently about my memories of teachers from school. He said, “Wendy, what are those stand out moments you recall?”

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I remembered a few. But one stood out more than most. And I was in middle school, 7th grade in fact.

Mrs. Bayliss, our guidance counselor asked me to her office. She wanted me to participate in a new group she was forming. It was a peer-counseling group of sorts. There was another girl in the group who was being bullied for her appearance. I assumed I was invited into the group to befriend her and help defend her from the attacks. When we met for the first time, this amazing girl had more confidence than anyone I'd ever met. She scoffed at all the remarks and understood that the kids who were bullying her must have had "issues" at home. She taught me. The pairing of us was intentional, and I learned from that experience. Peg Bayliss was a genius.

After listening to the story, Bernie opened my eyes to his persuasive logic with regards to his definition of good teachers.

He explained to me that when we as adults recall school memories, almost all accounts involve emotional components. They are those "teaching moments." They are the memories that created stepping stones in our learning processes.

Do we actually recall those times when we aced the quiz on Capitals of the U.S.? Probably not. But I sure do remember the time when I asked Mrs. Morton in front of our third grade class why learning these Capitals was important. Her response was priceless.

"I'm not testing you on remembering the names Wendy. I'm preparing you for your travels," she stated.

Wow. Talk about giving kids hope. Talk about creating imagination. Talk about wanting to learn more.

That's exactly what Bernie is talking about. Good teachers want to educate students, not test prep them for job security. Teachers should be preparing our children to be productive learners

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and members of society. Instead, we live in an era where teacher job status is based upon standardized test scores. Good teachers, through no fault of their own, are worrying more about evaluations based upon their students' test scores than about their healthy relationships with each of their students.

Bernie and I agree. This needs to change. Kids learn when they have a desire to learn. No standardized test can evaluate a true measure of progress. But a good teacher certainly can. And they're all over Beaufort County. To all of you, from Bernie and me, thank you for making a difference in each of your students' lives. They will remember you, I promise.

Email Bernie at bernie1@hargray.com , call me at 379-2772, or better yet, go to www.facebook.com/BernieScheinForSchoolBoard.

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