



Neil D. Steinberg: R.I. should hang tough on education; casinos, not so much

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Thank you, Miss Witkowski. Thank you, Coach Marnell.

She was my fifth-grade teacher and he was my high-school track coach. That decades later I easily remember their names and many of the good things they taught me is proof of their positive impact. So, thank you to all of those who are now or have ever been teachers. You have been a positive influence on countless children — myself and my own included.

I recall with appreciation that fifth-grade teacher who encouraged me to do extra work as well as my seventh-grade biology teacher, who introduced me to hands-on science, and the high-school English teacher who taught me to read for comprehension while still diagramming sentences. And of course, I remember the math teacher who identified an aptitude for higher math that carried on into college and the track coach who challenged me to achieve and taught me life lessons that I have carried into my career.

And all of these people who played such a huge role in who I have become today were teachers in a middle-class, suburban public-school system.

Do we need better teachers today? Yes. We also need better principals, superintendents and school committees. Not to mention corporate chief executives, politicians, entrepreneurs and skilled workers across many fields. Why? Not because they perform badly but because the world has changed. It's more competitive than ever.

When I was growing up, in the 1960s and '70s, we had the best education system in the world. Well, the world has caught up and in some cases surpassed us, and we must rise to the challenge. We no longer are at the top of the list for K-12 education. We did not decide to become second tier, but other countries began to place a higher value on education and on educators.

Education reform, I have found, is a rallying cry for improvement for some and a sign of disrespect for others. In Rhode Island we seem to be concerned about competing with Massachusetts over casino revenue. This is not my area of expertise or interest so I will let others decide the merits. However, if we really want to compete with Massachusetts, let's compete in education. Massachusetts has arguably some of the best results nationally in K-12 education. Massachusetts has the "knowledge economy" that Rhode Island dreams of, and a tax structure that challenges us to keep up. But remember, while Massachusetts scored highest in the Race to the Top competition for federal education-reform dollars, Rhode Island was number five — not far from the top!

We can improve education to prepare students for meaningful jobs and a continued path to higher education. We can do this in a mutually respectful way if all of us — students, parents, educators, politicians, unions, school boards, community and business leaders — raise our game. It won't be easy, but it must be done. We must overcome decades of rancor and mistrust and a lack of overt public support for teachers working hard every day, often in challenging circumstances quite different from when I was in school.

We must hold unions accountable for at times giving the impression that their mission is to protect underperforming teachers and not to advocate for the best in their profession. We must create an environment of responsibility and accountability across the board: students, parents, teachers, administrators and elected officials. How will we turn the tide?

All of these factors can be made to look like excuses, but we need leaders among all parties to take a “no-fault” approach. It is not a student's “fault” that he or she comes from poverty, a broken home, a challenging rural area, or a city or town that is financially stressed. Likewise, it is not a teacher's “fault” that his or her students come from poverty, broken homes, challenging rural areas or localities that are financially stressed. But it is our fault if we do not set aside the excuses, assume responsibility and accountability, and work together.

Having the best teachers in the classroom is the way to improve the education we provide to our children — all of our children. Miss Witkowski, Coach Marnell, and all the teachers who have profoundly influenced our lives have repeatedly proven that.

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