



LYNX team members coming to Dayton's Bluff Rec

Two LYNX team members will be at the Dayton's Bluff Recreation Center, 800 Conway, on Thursday, May 13, at 4:00 pm. They're coming to shoot some hoops with local kids and spend an hour or so talking about basketball, school and getting ahead in life.

As Minnesota's professional women's basketball team, the team has shown that women's basketball is as exciting as men's, so they are coming to show their stuff and offer some pointers.

There are three Olympians and five all-stars on the LYNX, and the Team is currently the favorite to win the WBA Western Conference this year.

Team members wanted to visit with Dayton's Bluff girls to carry the message that basketball is a sport that girls play well, and that active engagement in sports opens doors to help young people develop into strong and confident adults.

The recreation center is extending an invitation to all Dayton's Bluff girls and others who want to meet some of the LYNX players, and spend some time shooting hoops and just plain talking. All are welcome. See you on the court!

Only in the on-line edition

We encourage our neighbors and readers to send articles to the *Forum*. Unfortunately, we don't have room for all the excellent submissions we receive. Please visit www.daytonsbuff.org for our special online-only supplement.

Race to the top?

by Mary Ann Cogelow

Oh, come on, Mr. President! What a singularly inapt metaphor you have chosen for the process of state grant writing to improve education. I have been pleased to learn that you and Education Secretary Arne Duncan believe that the focus of education in the United States needs to be broader and to include such aspects as physical education, music and the arts. I am encouraged to learn that you understand that standardized tests are not the only means of assessing student achievement.

As a teacher who was initially licensed by an alternative process, I embrace alternate paths to teaching if they are carefully thought out and consider both subject matter and pedagogy, the art and science of teaching. I am sure that all who are concerned with education need to closely scrutinize what good teaching is and how

every teacher can become more adept or be helped to find a different career. This said, however, one of the few positive aspects of your predecessor's education plan was its title, "No Child Left Behind" (purloined from the Children's Defense Fund though it was), which implied all of us working for all children and posited all children achieving. "Race To the Top" to the contrary implies a desperate competition with one or a few winners and many, many more losers—not a way I want to imagine education for any society, much less our own.

So what's wrong with the uncritical acceptance of competition, with promoting winning? Much more than I can easily describe within the limits of this article, but two basic themes occur to me. The first of these is that competition embraced uncritically damages the development of children in too many ways and with devastating effects. The second is that competition is the wrong focus. On this "big blue marble" we need to educate our kids to have the knowledge and skills to be world class cooperators and collaborators.

The evidence is that competition hinders rather than promotes the kind of education we need to give to all children. It comes at a high price. Winning implies to kids that some of them are better than others. Adults do a poor job of helping kids understand what winning really means: at one moment in time you had more skill, luck, information, a better breakfast, a happier home life—or whatever—than the person you surpassed. It has nothing whatever to do with your inherent human value.

The belief that their value lies in winning hurts children. It raises their stress levels which over time damages their brains and their ability to use their neocortexes to learn. If you have witnessed the sadness of a preschooler or elementary age child over losing a "game," you know that the pain is real. If you have witnessed a grandmother using a marked card to avoid losing a game of Old Maid (yes, I know it's a yucky name) to her three-year-old grandchild, you understand that the passage of years doesn't in itself heal earlier wounds from losing.

The stress young children feel over games may seem insignificant to many adults, but the stress and anxiety of striving to be "the best" academically has many educators worrying about childhood "burnout" not only in junior and senior high school, but as early as fourth grade. Alfie Kohn, author of *No Contest: The Case against Competition*, who more than any popular author I know has read the educational research on multiple topics, argues that competition does not lead to the solid learning we want for children. He reminds us that intrinsic interest in a subject motivates learners more than any artificial reward including being "Number One." He also asserts that "task involvement" predicts higher achievement than "ego involvement" does.

Children who believe their human value rests on being better at something than other children are often reluctant to try something they may "fail at" or they may become trapped in self-defeating perfectionism. Children who compete against others instead of reaching for the most they



Dave Murphy, Jane Prince, Rob Marino, Barbara Rapacz (with Parker, the dog) and Jennifer Newton at the Friends of Mounds Park bonfire on March 21

can achieve are not reaching their own potential. Children who see themselves as unsuccessful competitors give up and drop out. And those who define their worth in being "the best" are in danger of losing themselves when they meet competitors who can "beat" them at their own games.

Not only does competition impede cognitive learning. It damages children morally and socially. The poet T.S. Eliot once wrote "the game enforces cheats." Children certainly seem to think this is true. In a 2006 study of 36,122 high school students by the Josephson Institute of Ethics in Los Angeles, 59% of them agreed that successful people do what they have to do to win even if others consider it cheating. The effect of pushing kids to be better than their peers and to see others as potential obstacles to their own success can lead to envy and contempt, alienation, aggression and poor relationships. Educational competition may contribute to defining one's self-worth by surpassing others, but the problem doesn't stay at school. It contributes to defining oneself by having more or newer or better stuff or being the most friended on Facebook.

For children who see themselves as losers the consequence can be horrific. Personalities can become so dam-

aged that kids can't stand up for what they know is right, and lose the ability to make friends based on good shared values. Some of them self-medicate with risky behavior, smoking, drinking or drug use or pursue self-destructive ways of trying to fit into their peer groups.

The confusion about the meaning and value of competition isn't limited to children in our society (one of the reasons we all need to think seriously about this issue). At the season finale of American Idol in May 2008, Simon Cowell advised contestants, "You have got to hate your opponent." Reacting to his statement, Susan Newman, author of *The Book of No*, says, "Kids shouldn't be taught to hate their competitors. They need to learn how to cooperate and support one another because team players are the people who succeed in the real world."

In June, look for more here on the need to help children become skilled collaborators.

This article was abridged for space reasons, but can be read in its entirety in the online supplement at www.daytonsbuff.org

Mary Ann Cogelow was a parent educator in the St. Paul Public Schools Early Childhood Family Education Program at Dayton's Bluff from 1975 to 2008. She continues to write on parenting issues.

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