

Don't shut divorced fathers out of debates over school curriculum

It is essential that fathers be part of their children's academic life, and not only to give input on curriculum.

By Jeffery M. Leving | Jul 25, 2022, 8:00pm CDT

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Divorced fathers, like all parents, deserve a say in school matters affecting their children, attorney Jeffery Leving writes. | Ashlee Rezin

While battles between parents and educators over school curricula continue in much of the United States, divorced fathers — one important group that should have input — are often shut out.

Whatever one's opinion is regarding how much input parents should have into a school's curriculum, one thing seems certain: If parents are allowed a seat at the table, both parents should be involved.

Some may view this — parents being involved in shaping curriculum — as a new phenomenon, but the truth is that parents have been involved for years. From the founding of the PTA to calls for desegregation, parental participation has shaped U.S. education.

The designers of public schooling in America viewed the goal of education as creating informed citizens. The question now, to a large degree, is how does parental input match up with that goal? And what lessons does history offer us about how much parents can and should shape education in a democracy?

That is a debate that likely will continue to rage, as parents attempt to influence teaching on race, LGBTQ issues, evolution and more. I am not taking a stand on what should or should not be taught in school, or at what grade level and so forth. Instead, I'm writing to stand up for the one group that often is shut out of having any say: divorced fathers.

In America, children of divorce most often end up living with their mother. That is how it's been for a long time in most, but not all, cases. However, that should not mean that fathers do not have a say in things concerning their children.

School boards and PTA groups should seek the input of both parents of all children when it comes to any matters that are up for discussion. And of course, fathers need to make the effort to be heard. Fathers need to be part of the discussion.

When parents lack communication, it only hurts their children. A failure to be flexible at times is harmful as well.

It is essential that fathers be part of their children's academic life, and not only to give input on curriculum. Many studies have shown that children whose fathers are absent consistently score lower than average on reading and math tests. Additionally, fatherless children are twice as likely to drop out of school as their classmates who live with two parents.

It is also high time that school administrators and school boards recognize that most children have two parents, even if they only live with one. Both parents should generally be consulted by school administrators and be given the opportunity to have input about matters affecting their child.

A well-rounded curriculum is developed with the goals of the community — i.e., parents — in mind. However, parents also need to realize that school administrators are the professionals and often have very sound reasons for the curriculum they produce. Only in extreme cases should parents turn curriculum into a large, public issue.

For instance, in fights about prayer in school — something that has been consistently banned in public school because of the constitutional separation of church and state — some parents need to remember that there is nothing stopping them from having their child pray silently at lunchtime or at home.

Other examples abound, but my point is the same. All sides — parents, administrators and school boards — need to listen to each other, while making sure that divorced fathers have a seat at the table.

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