

## DISTRICT 202 COMMUNITY COLUMN

By Dr. John Harper  
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Next week, many District 202 families will exchange gifts to show their affection and appreciation for each other. As I sometimes say to my staff, this is a beautiful thing!

To stretch the metaphor of holiday gift giving just a bit, the public education system is also a great gift that we give each other, as members of this community and of society.

Our schools provide the inspiration, hope and confidence that comes only through education, as we learn new skills, ideas and concepts that shape who we are and help us become who we want to be. For countless people, their education made all the difference in their lives and helped them achieve their dreams, whatever those dreams were.

Many of us can cite a particular classroom experience that opened up a new door of learning and exploration, or a special teacher who encouraged and pushed us to do our best. That little bit of support, that extra time spent beyond the required class period is often the key to a lifetime of learning, growth, self-esteem, positive social contribution and success. Like so many things in life, the smallest gestures often have the biggest impact.

Our schools are built on just this kind of dedication. How often have we heard someone (usually a teacher) say that people don't go into education to get rich? Rather, they do it for the love of helping a child grow by exposing them to the magical world of learning?

What's more, we strive to do this with every child who comes through our doors, no matter where he comes from, what language she speaks, how much money his parents have, the color of her skin, or their level of education or ability to learn.

We accept the inherent and often-frustratingly-difficult challenge of trying to help all students learn, because each and every one of them is a gift to us. They deserve no less than our best, as parents, family, community and educators.

And, to be completely honest, we do this with the somewhat selfish interest of improving our own lives. By creating compassionate, educated thoughtful young people, we help improve our own communities and, maybe even, the world.

Now, none of this is to say that the public education system is perfect. No institutional system ever is, or can be – anymore than every gift we get is perfect. We have all received items that didn't fit, clashed with everything we had, made no sense whatsoever. But we understand that they were (usually) given with the best of intentions.

It's the same with our schools. We may not always get it right. We may try too hard, or not try hard enough, or focus too much on one issue instead of paying more attention to another. The package may not always be wrapped as neatly as we would like. But what is inside is always given with heart and mind and spirit in the right place.

In the end, we do our very best on behalf of all of our students. And, if necessary, we “re-gift” by improving the system to make it the best that it can be, for everyone. May all of our students, staff and families have a wonderful, safe holiday season. And may we all receive, enjoy and appreciate the great gift of learning.

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