

A Sample Paper Illustrating the Single-Source Argumentative Essay

WHY THE "F---DOG" WON'T HUNT!

Scores by American students on national standardized tests in 2000 placed United States public schools fifteenth in a ranking of students among other first-world countries, and researchers in the United States Department of Education see the possibility of the overall quality of American public education slipping even lower. There certainly seems cause for ringing of hands, and educators are placing blame across a wide spectrum of ills. Just as many are ready to offer solutions, ranging from increased funding to returning corporal punishment in the hallways. In "What Our Educational System Needs is More F's," Carl Singleton, a public school educator, has proposed a "massive dispensing of F's" at all levels as the first step to turning the corner on improving public school education. His essay on the subject is, no doubt, very appealing to many interested in a quick and easy solution, but the issue is far more complex than he would have his readers believe.

No matter other suggested remedies, until teachers begin giving more F's, the general quality of American education isn't going to improve significantly. Carl Singleton dismisses such proposals as "merit raises, getting back to basics, [and] marrying the university to industry" in deference to a "massive dispensing of failing grades." Illiterate high school graduates, poor teaching, weakly prepared college students--all are the results of twenty years of grade inflation in our schools. While some might be quick to dismiss his call for the "big fat F, written decisively in red ink millions of times in schools and colleges across the country," Singleton projects some positive effects. Parents would become more attentive to student progress and begin taking an active part in their children's learning. While public taxpayers and voters would begin to realize the costs of improving our educational system, teachers would begin demanding more of themselves. Most importantly, however, giving more F=s would result in fewer illiterate graduates.

While some may find his proposal for massive failures rather severe, Carl Singleton's essay merely reflects, in part, the growing concern shared by many observers who lament the sad decline in the quality of American education. Most significantly, perhaps, is his faith that something positive can still be done to improve the situation. His proposal implies that a broad shift in policy, applied universally in only one element of the educational process--notably, in grading practices--will promote such improvement. Just as important, however, is his recognition of and emphasis on the collective role of parents and the public in effecting change through the classroom. Finally, he clearly suggests that awarding millions of F's--with their universally accepted negative stigma-- will foment only positive results.

At one level, Singleton's proposal sounds gratefully "do-able": just make teachers start giving millions of F's! But F's to whom? F's to the thousands of marginally intelligent whose diminishing self-esteem keeps them on the brink of dropping out hour by hour? F's to the thousands of students gifted in a single area who will be eliminated from participation and success by failure in another? F's to the thousands of students who can learn and can pass in other circumstances under other supervision and in a classroom with more attentive, better prepared, and more experienced teaching? And F's to the virtual millions of students already

placed through social promotion who--without sufficient remediation--must begin immediately to meet grade-level standards?

Singleton's sweeping, general fix of F's suggests a kind of universal student population with a single profile characterized by a common identity, a common context, a common ability for growth and achievement, a common demeanor, readiness, and discipline, and a common support system in place in each community. To anyone who has ever entered an American classroom recently, such an impression is clearly erroneous.

Nevertheless, awarding unearned credits is just as clearly wrong; only those with social and psychological blinders might attempt to argue otherwise. Ironically, however, the alternative to unearned credits might be something more than just earned credits mantled traditionally in their snobby vestments of grades. In his simplicity, Singleton fails to consider such various factors as different student learning styles. He fails to recognize the varying thresholds of student readiness for learning. He ignores proven mechanics of learning such as carefully monitored revision and repetition; reinforcement through varieties of demonstrations and multiple applications--all of which can enhance student understanding and performance but none of which necessarily have to be tied to traditional grading scales. And he never considers such alternatives to traditional hierarchical grading as learning contracts that remove much of the stigma of comparative grading. In other words, a focus on learning styles and complementary methodologies might have proven more relevant to his own rather obvious frustration over the whole affair of American education, but you probably won't get taxpayers and parents very feisty over such abstractions as "alternative learning strategies." The methodology dog won't hunt and certainly won't bark as loudly as the one wearing the "big fat F" tags.

Simply stated, Singleton's proposal itself fails to recognize the complexities of students' varying needs, contexts, and abilities which factor in to the completion of every learning activity and the complex effects that the stigma of failure can have on the range of student personalities that fill our classrooms. If every student wore the same uniform, always sat up straight, always raised his/her hand in response to questions, always came prepared to class, always laughed on cue, and always worshipped A's, then a fiery blanket of F's might be effective.