

What our nation's schools can learn from Lewis and Clark's journey

I recently spent quality time visiting with a local pastor who shared with me, "schools today are finding themselves canoeing in the mountains." Unfamiliar with his reference, he pointed me to a resource that I devoured in just a few sittings. While the book "Canoeing in the Mountains" was written for Christian leadership development, the lessons from this work can and should be contemplated by our nation's schools today.

Bolsinger's book leverages the toils that Lewis and Clark's Corp of Discovery team faced when they found themselves deep in the Rocky Mountains. Recall that the 45-member Corp consisted primarily of well-trained boatmen. Commissioned by President Jefferson, their primary goal was to locate a westward water passage believed to exist. What they soon discovered was that there was no direct river connection, the Rocky Mountains were unlike any terrain they had ever experienced, weather conditions were worse than any could have imagined, and some 40 different grizzly bear attacks, one that nearly took Lewis' life, posed far more risk than they had anticipated. As the author shares, the Corp was on an unprecedented journey, "off the map," equipped with canoes and paddles that would do them little good on their treacherous route across the Bitterroot Mountains. What can schools today glean from this experience you may ask?

I continue to remain confident our nation's schools can overcome almost any obstacle faced. They maintain a well-educated and talented workforce who are deeply passionate about youth, have made great strides in curriculum, technology and serving students with disabilities, and have dedicated school boards who help ensure their local systems reflect community regard. However, as schools begin to move beyond the pandemic and reassess their current realities, I have come to the opinion that many must adapt their approach, like Lewis and Clark, if they are to reach their destination of high achievement and outcomes for all.

Particularly on the heels of COVID, schools nowadays are tasked with far more than Horace Mann could have ever envisioned when he helped spearhead their development in the early 1800's. State and federal laws have placed remarkable and ever-growing obligations on the backs of our nation's public schools. Whether providing critical mental health support and counseling for students, educating youth on the dangers of vaping, fentanyl and human trafficking, or providing critically important instruction on internet safety, screen time and cyberbullying, schools have been asked to assume a bevy of additional responsibility.

Whether a Corp team attempting to cross the Continental Divide equipped with watercraft, a pastor trying to breathe life into a congregation, or a school district attempting to deliver on all that is now asked from it, we must come to recognize that our realities are vastly different than they were just a few decades ago. As Bolsinger points out, "the world before [us] is nothing like the world behind [us]." What we need are not more programs, mandates and high stakes accountability. Rather, what is necessary is for all of our nation's schools to capitalize on the rich resources that likely surround them. As William Clark came to appreciate, their Corp was tapped and needed help. Sacagawea's knowledge of the terrain and skills as a translator served essential to their mission's success. Just as the expedition exposed over 200 years ago, many schools today find themselves stretched and in need of additional resources and expertise. Could their lifelines be discovered by developing new and creative ways to partner with parents, community and business in support of their increasingly complex mission?

Locally, as our Walla Walla school board and I visit with dozens of parents, stakeholders and industry leaders as part of our strategic plan outreach, we are consistently reminded of the incredible community we serve. The support for our system runs deep, with a shared commitment to see our public schools be the best they can be. Parents are eager to engage in their children's futures, retirees are looking for ways to give back by volunteering in classrooms, and local businesses are reaching out to offer internships and invaluable work experience for our students. We are truly blessed and thankful to live, work and raise our children in such a supportive community who prioritizes its youth.

Whether a Walla Walla Public School student plans to enroll, enlist or land gainful employment upon graduation, in partnership with parents and community, I am confident that we will continue to advance our vision together by "Developing Washington's Most Sought-After Graduates."

Dr. Wade Smith
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