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The importance of education awareness



Fenger High School students visit the US Capitol. Photo from The Education Project Photo Exhibition by Sandra Steinbrecher being featured at the Illini Union Art Gallery in September. (Courtesy of Sandra Steinbrecher)

Alex Swanson
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For the month of September, the Illini Union Art Gallery is showcasing a photo exhibition by Sandra Steinbrecher titled "The Education Project."

The exhibit portrays visceral scenes from Marshall, Fenger and Harper High Schools in Chicago and shows students and educators striving to achieve a quality education.

Violence is a compelling, prevalent theme in the exhibition. Indeed, one of Steinbrecher's pieces captures a moment as an administrator goes on a home visit for a student killed by gun violence.

The photos that detail out-of-school peace rallies, protests against violence and scenes of poverty remind the audience that the inequality of schooling unfortunately results from more than just the actual quality of a school.

Certainly, there are more factors than the schools alone that produce college-readiness ratings. These circumstances may include home life, community expectations, financial flexibility etc., but it would be foolish to assume that the education system itself assumes none of the responsibility.

We need to start caring, much more potently than we now do, about the American education system.

Because also apparent in Steinbrecher's collection is the talent and vivacity present in so many of the students, as shown in the photos of the gospel choir or graduation.

Steinbrecher has curated an exhibit that makes it tremendously difficult for its audience to deny the importance of education. She seems to believe in education as a social justice apparatus.

"Public education is one of the main foundations of our democratic society," Steinbrecher said. "It's one of the great equalizers. If you don't have good public schools for everyone, you don't have equal opportunities. It's very hard to ignore the importance of public education."

My perception of a democratic society is a structure in which all citizens have a weighted voice. But without quality education, citizens cannot be expected to know where to direct their voices or with what to take issue.

For our nation to continue on with a consciousness suggesting that all citizens are equal, we simply must alter our education system.

Complaints regarding the unequal state of education are rather old-hat. Indeed, calls for a more equitable system are woven into many 18th-century writings, including Mary Wollstonecraft's.

It is thus perplexing that we continue to enforce a drastically unequal education system as much as three centuries later.

Many participants in Steinbrecher's exhibit echo that concern; her project also involved the interviewing and photographing of influential personalities in education.

Current Secretary of Education Arne Duncan claimed, "I'm convinced the fight for quality education is the civil rights issue of our generation," when interviewed for Steinbrecher's project.

It indisputably is an issue with immense micro-effects on students as well as macro-effects for our country. A good education can be pivotal in an individual's life, and an exceptional national education system will almost definitely produce a more balanced and knowledgeable society.

We know that social and economic mobility is intimately tied to educational attainment. National median annual earnings for full-time workers is approximately \$50,000 for those with bachelor degrees and \$30,000 for those who only complete high school. For those without a GED, the median earnings is only about \$25,000.

And yet, the education system is quite disparate in that regard. It is estimated that just two percent of Harper High School students are ready for the rigor of a collegiate curriculum. Compare that with Deerfield High School, also in Illinois but in a more affluent suburb, that has 91 percent of students who are estimated to be prepared for college.

There's simply something misguided about a system that produces such skewed performance statistics based on where one attends high school.

Equal education would make for a better informed general public, a likely less prejudiced society, a more equitable distribution of wealth, etc.

We must therefore earnestly meet the challenge to improve our education system.

We have to fix the education funding formula. For even if external issues affect school performance, at the least, we can still control and attempt to equalize education within the walls of a classroom. We must also alter the societal mindset regarding what a teacher really is; a student who aims to become a concert violinist cannot secure a degree in music education as a back-up, guaranteed form of employment.

This is why projects like Steinbrecher's are so critical; they encourage their audiences to prioritize education as one of the most crucial issues of today.

If our education system were to be truly made equitable, there is no doubt that we should also see an increase in social and economic equality in the nation.

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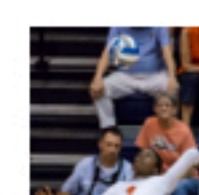

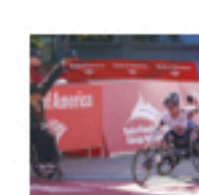

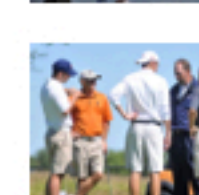
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