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EDUCATION

“The more that you read,
the more things you will know.
The more that you learn,
the more places you’ll go.”

—Dr. Seuss

DEAR BOYS,

In the shrewd words of philosopher John Dewey, “Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself.” One of the greatest gifts you are granted by living in this country is the right to an education, and perhaps the most invaluable and irrevocable gift you can grant yourself is to be a passionate lifelong learner.

Learning is not simply a receptive process of memorizing facts, comprehending lessons, and blindly accepting the information presented to you as absolute truth. Rather, it’s an interactive process in which you need to be richly and continually engaged. It is incumbent on you as an invested learner to constantly analyze, question, and discuss information. Search for nuances, new meanings, unique applications. Value formal education, embrace informal opportunities to learn, and take the initiative to go outside the bounds of what’s expected and accepted.

We have always viewed ourselves as partners in your education. We were mindful that guiding you to establish sound study practices and take ownership of your work from a young age would be a vital step in becoming independent, active learners in school and throughout life. As parents, our job is to provide you the best learning environment we can and the tools you need to succeed; help you understand the standards and expectations for courses and assignments, as well as the standards and expectations we have established within our own family; and be available

to you as resources for explanation, guidance, encouragement, and enrichment. As students, your job is to be habitually inquisitive, intellectually curious, enthusiastic, open-minded, and well-prepared. Becoming a critical thinker—a reflective thinker—a creative thinker—an independent thinker—will serve you grandly not only in your academic studies but in everything you undertake in life.

Ever since you entered preschool as toddlers, we have purposely given you increasing accountability for your education. We have empowered you to advocate for yourselves respectfully in school, and have intentionally tasked you with managing your own schoolwork—because if you routinely depended upon us to help you complete your work, to keep you organized, to set your priorities, and to raise your questions and concerns, you wouldn't be learning and developing fundamental skills that are essential for all of life's endeavors.

Education goes far beyond the four walls of a classroom. Even when formal academic instruction ends, learning never ceases. Having curiosity for the world is what enables you to grow as a human being throughout your lifetime. We have sought to narrate the world for you since you were born, and we strive to expose you to meaningful experiences that we hope will provoke thought, inspire discussion, broaden your knowledge, and cultivate awareness and appreciation.

Even before you started preschool, you had discovered a magical place of learning that introduced you to memorable characters like Corduroy, Madeline, and a family of ducklings that lived in the Boston Public Garden; sent you on exciting adventures to real and imagined worlds like one found at the top of a beanstalk; transported you to the past and the future; and inspired you to make angels in newly fallen snow and bid goodnight to the moon. That place was the public library, an important backbone of our information structure. By providing affordable

access to a managed collection of resources and archives, libraries democratize knowledge, and you recognized from an early age that a library card is a passport to limitless information and learning within books, magazines, newspapers, professional and scholarly journals, encyclopedias, computers, CDs, and DVDs. You also appreciate the personal assistance a librarian offers in your quest for knowledge—suggesting interesting reading, guiding you to pertinent research resources, and training you to use technology most advantageously.

Exploring the world is another way to experience learning. By traveling, you continually have the opportunity to learn so much about the world in terms of history, geography, and the diversity of cultures and customs. One of the most powerful trips we've taken as a family was to Washington, D.C., where each of you learned about our country's founding. Getting an up-close view of American history was deeply memorable and informative and sparked spirited family discussions about the Constitution, our government, and the political process. The visit prompted you to research key historical figures and events, helping you to further grasp our country's founding, make emotional connections and observations about our nation, and ask questions about the future. While admittedly you can learn about U.S. history by reading a textbook or listening to a lecture, it doesn't truly come alive until you absorb the breathtaking majesty of the Capitol Rotunda, observe the faded ink that adorns the original Declaration of Independence at the National Archives, or experience the solemn poignancy of the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery.

You constantly have your eager eyes open for interesting and exciting learning opportunities around you. You have learned about food, math, and science through our family cooking project, in which we'd choose recipes to create together, and then

record our observations and reactions on our blog. We used your love for baseball as inspiration to start a family fantasy league, and you learned about statistics, the history and rules of the sport, and what a critical role each player on a team serves. Participating in Little League baseball and other sports has reinforced the significance of teamwork and instilled in you the importance of putting forth your best effort.

Visiting museums and zoos has enlightened you about innumerable fascinating subjects including art, science, history, civilizations, nature, habitats, transportation, fashion, culture, and media. By attending live theatrical performances, you have developed a genuine appreciation for acting, dance, and music, as well as the technical aspects of performance art like direction, sound, lighting, scenic design, costumes and props. Experiencing a variety of musical genres has been illuminating for you, and you were as captivated by the brilliance of master classical violinist Itzhak Perlman at the New York Philharmonic as you were by the exuberant talent of the tribe of hippies howling at the moon in *Hair* on Broadway.

Attending religious school has enabled you to understand your faith and ancestry in the context of history, as well as other religions and spiritual concepts. Your Jewish summer camp experience has not only enriched your religious learning, but has fostered your independence and self-confidence. Performing in ensemble acting groups has taught you about public speaking, which is a critical skill you will continually need to engage and refine throughout your lives.

Although you may not know it, you have even learned during the most mundane activities. Going to Dad's office or Papa's shipyard or the supermarket teaches you about commerce and industry. A fun day at the beach offers you the opportunity to learn about waterways, tides, the sun, sea life, wind, and weather.

E d u c a t i o n

Simply looking up at a starlit night sky has spurred you to study and learn about celestial objects in the vast universe. And for our family, rides in the car—whether five minutes to school or hours on a long journey—always provide treasured learning time together. Since the days when you were tiny infants strapped into car seats, we’ve taken advantage of the captive, uninterrupted environment to do everything from sing Black Eyed Peas songs, to imitate *Family Guy*’s Stewie Griffin, to explain how location affects real estate pricing, to lecture on the consequences of underage drinking.

Technology and media have given you the ability to access information and satisfy your curiosity almost instantaneously. Yet you need to realize that instant access also presents the challenge and responsibility of continually filtering overwhelming amounts of information to distinguish fact from opinion, and evaluating the credibility of sources in terms of bias, accuracy, reputability, and currentness. Use these powerful tools wisely, and rely on the information you gather to enrich independent thought, not replace it.

Knowledge is fluid, and you never know where it can lead. It builds on itself, impelling you to imagine possibilities and solutions with innovation and ingenuity, and it keeps us on an evolutionary path. No one in our life embodies this message more passionately than the acclaimed and esteemed principal of your high school, John Dodig. He speaks out in the following profile about the educational reform necessary to keep our country competitive, and he’s a bell ringer for a concerted national effort to emphasize the paramount importance of education for all Americans. We know you appreciate how fortunate you are that Mr. Dodig inspires your academic lives every day.

With love,
Mama and Dad

GLIMPSE QUESTIONNAIRE



JOHN DODIG

What's the best advice you've ever gotten?

Don't underestimate what a principal can do.

If you were to receive an award, what would you want it to be for?

Helping to change someone's life.

Who or what inspires you?

The realization that the position I hold is very powerful, in that it can affect in a positive way the individual lives of people in a school.

What do you see as the greatest challenge for the next generation of Americans?

The economic survival of this country.

What three (famous) people, living or dead, would you invite to your fantasy dinner party?

Oprah Winfrey

Bono

Jesus Christ

MAVERICK EDUCATOR

John Dodig is on a crusade to make education cool. And, he says, it's got to be a collective initiative between parents, educators, political leaders, sports figures, musicians, actors, and other celebrities, to effectively influence the media message. "The problem is not an educational issue as much as it is a social issue," he asserts, "but few of our national leaders are willing to say that publicly."

Principal of Staples High School in Westport, Connecticut, the top public high school in the state, John proposes, "Imagine if someone in this country was able to motivate the movie, television, music, and advertising industries to make education the aspiration of every young person." He continues, "Imagine what our country would be like if those millions of kids who have always been poorly educated became obsessed with the notion that being educated, going to college, and mastering the skills of life-long learning were the best ways to fame, wealth, and the good life, whereas pursuing a path that leads to being a basketball, football, rap, television, or movie star may not always lead to the happiest or healthiest life."

Without a good education, John doesn't see a particularly bright future for America's middle class. "One hundred years ago, if you lived in a major urban area there was poverty and there were gangs just as there are now," he notes. "Huge numbers of young people dropped out of school or graduated high school with barely a basic knowledge of reading, writing, and mathematics. Unfortunately, some of these young people eventually wound up dead. Some wound up in jail." He goes on, "But many others saw the light at some point in their lives and decided to get a job in a factory. They learned a skill, joined a union, made decent money, raised a family,

moved to a place like Levittown, and slowly became middle class. They stayed with the company until retirement and during that time sent their children to college to become professionals.”

According to John, however, that strategy just doesn’t cut it anymore: “We don’t need people trained to bolt four tires onto a car for 35 years. Robots do that. We don’t build washing machines. They are built in other countries.”

And much as the media might have young people believe otherwise, the solution doesn’t lie in pursuing fleeting fame. The answer, John believes, lies in becoming well-educated.

“Every student now needs to be able to think critically, work in small groups to solve problems, use mathematics at a level of at least precalculus, demonstrate an understanding of both the physical and biological sciences, and master the art of learning,” insists John, “because it is something they will have to continue to do for the rest of their lives.”

John firmly believes that education is the key to success and prosperity, affording flexibility and adaptability—two skills John sees as crucial for the next generation. To validate his impassioned perspective, he frequently references an October, 2009 *New York Times* op-ed column by Thomas Friedman titled “The New Untouchables.” In the piece, Friedman insightfully explains that today’s students need to learn a new level of thinking out of the box in order to be globally competitive, and that it’s up to our nation’s public schools to provide the right education to produce these innovators and creative thinkers.

“These kids need the ability to think on their feet, solve problems, and learn something new at the drop of a hat,” John contends. “So my corporation goes out of business? I don’t care, I’ll get another job. Or ‘You’re not going to make widgets anymore, you’re going to make that? Fine. Give me the manual. I’ll read it; I’ll teach myself how to do it.’”

One of the first steps, in John's opinion, is to adopt corporate hiring practices in the public education field to attract dynamic leaders to be principals at elementary, middle, and high schools, and make the pay competitive with the corporate scale.

"It has to be the right fit for the school, and you need to look for the absolute best people—just like you would in looking for a CEO of a corporation or the president of the United States," he reasons. "And then you have to pay them a lot, because many of the people who have those traits will choose business because they can make \$300,000, \$400,000, \$500,000 a year and all the stipends that go with it . . . you become a principal somewhere, you might make \$65,000 a year."

Without strong leadership in the schools, John sees the health of the country at stake. "We believe that dynamic leaders can affect change. We see that all the time in the newspapers—'Principal changes this school' and 'Teacher changes that classroom'—so we know it can happen," he maintains. "Then let's go out and find these people. Let's buy these people, pay them double or triple what they're getting—and then let them go change a school."

John, who has devoted his entire 40+-year career to education, points to one of his own childhood teachers as his inspiration to affect kids' lives. A product of what he calls a dysfunctional household, John didn't meet his father until he was four because of the war, and says he was afraid of the man from the moment he walked in the door. He describes bitter tension in his home life as a child, and remembers his parents being engaged in constant battles. His father's repeated business failures caused the family to uproot numerous times, moving throughout New York and Connecticut, and eventually his parents divorced.

"The only person who had a profound effect on me as a child was Mr. Wilner, my fourth- and fifth-grade teacher at PS 186 in

Queens,” recalls John. “He was the male role model in my life since I couldn’t stand my father. He made learning exciting for us.” He continues, “There was something about the guy that I needed in my life, so he was my mentor and my surrogate father, just for the six hours every day at school. And I think that’s why I became a teacher—because I knew that I wanted to do something like what Mr. Wilner did for me.”

That’s precisely what he has done as a teacher and administrator at schools in inner cities and affluent suburbs alike. He credits his professional mentor, Dr. Raymond Lemley, with inspiring his much-admired style. The mentorship began when Lemley, then the principal at Daniel Hand High School in Madison, Connecticut, hired John as an assistant principal, after observing the special relationship John had cultivated with the low-income minority students he was teaching at a middle school in New Haven.

John talks about Ray Lemley with great respect and fondness. “He used to stand in front of the building every morning and say hello to everybody, and he got to know as many kids as he possibly could. He wasn’t afraid to get in their face, and he always had something nice to say to somebody. His belief was, ‘Anything is possible, if you believe strongly in it, and you model it.’”

This philosophy made an indelible impression on John, who greets as many of the 1,800 Staples students as possible as they come into school every morning. He believes it’s critical for him and his administrative staff to really get to know the students for a number of reasons. First, he wants to model for teachers and students a caring, supportive environment, which makes the school a safe place to learn, think, challenge, and question. “I think a lot of that is going to hit the kids years after they leave us,” he suggests. “I don’t know if they can articulate

it now, but caring for one another and accepting one another is modeled in this school. I think that kids will eventually understand that it was something special that benefited them, and when they get into a professional position some day, then they will hopefully try to recreate that same kind of environment for their team.”

John feels it’s most meaningful not only to show his love for his teachers and students, but to tell them as well. “I tell my faculty when I meet with them,” he shares. “I told the senior class last year, ‘I love being here. I love each of you.’ They all applauded and that brought tears to my eyes.”

John also makes sure that each day he takes the opportunity to say something kind and complimentary to students as he sees them around the school. “I do it intentionally, because I’m the principal and it’s a big deal to them,” he says. “The principal of the high school can be a position that the kids admire, but not all principals are admired—you have to earn it.”

He also goes to great lengths to foster kindness because, as he confides, “If somebody likes you, they are more likely to do what you ask them to do.” John strives to hire teachers who want their students to like them, and in turn, he wants his teachers to genuinely like him. “That doesn’t mean that I’m going to play golf with them, or poker every Thursday night—I don’t socialize with my teachers,” he explains. “But of course I want them to like me, because then when I say, ‘Can we work on this new goal?’ they’ll buy into it—and in the end it helps 1,800 kids.”

Further, he believes that by deterring student anonymity, administrators can pick up on subtle and not-so-subtle changes in a student who may benefit from intervention by someone at the school. “If the community is willing to provide enough adults in the building so kids are not anonymous—so that you know every kid—someone will know when a kid is behaving or dressing different

than she or he was before. But that's a people-intensive enterprise," he acknowledges.

John knows, however, that like his old teacher Mr. Wilner, a teacher or principal's supportive influence often lasts only as long as the student is at school. In areas where education is generally not valued, particularly in inner cities and rural America, John laments that many kids go home to environments where their affective needs are not met. "It's hard when there's nobody there. Or there may be somebody there who wants to be able to help, but just can't. So these kids go back into misery, squalor, drug-addled environments," he presumes. "I guess somebody will rise out of that, but the preponderance of them will be just like their parents."

According to John, if we want to change the life path for these kids, we need to barrage them during their time away from school with the constant, consistent message that education is essential to this country, and to the well-being of every citizen in the United States.

"If every politician, every time they spoke—everywhere—about anything, wove that into what they were saying, things would change," he alleges. "The message has to be every day to those kids—everything they watch on TV, every comment made by basketball players, football players—has to be education. I think it's their responsibility. Every day. Every day. And it would change the lives of those kids," he proclaims.

John cites mass media support for the anti-smoking movement during the 1980s as an example of successful social and cultural change. "How did we get the movie industry to sell tickets and make money when you never saw a star in a movie smoking a cigarette? And in that time, coincidentally, everybody gave up smoking," he reflects. "We did that in 20 or 25 years. Talk about profound social change! It worked. It changed culture in America

profoundly. Why can't we do the same thing to send the message that education is important? We are good at sending messages to young people. Why not this one?" he asks.

If the message about the importance of education reached young Americans, John reasons that kids would show up at school eager and determined to learn, and the very schools that are now being maligned would be able to accomplish what they all want to and can provide for their students. "This is something that we can do as a nation," he insists. "Why not give it a varsity try on a national scale?"

