



Daily Press – Friday, August 31, 2007

Education in crisis, Piercy says

Charter school founder outlines improvement steps

By MATTHEW C. DURKEE Staff Writer

APPLE VALLEY — “Public education works just as it was designed — 100 years ago,” said Rick Piercy, founder and CEO of the Lewis Center for Educational Research and the Academy for Academic Excellence in Apple Valley.

Speaking Thursday to the Apple Valley Rotary Club, Piercy held forth on the state of education in America today and contrasted it to the methods in use at his charter school.

Piercy described public education as an assembly-line system that worked well in its time, when large populations of manual laborers were needed, but times have changed and America is now competing in a global economy.

“We take kids by chronological age, we put them in a group and move them down the line year by year,” he said.

Like an auto-assembly line that produces essentially the same car with minor differences — some with air conditioning, some with automatic transmission — America’s schools have little of the versatility needed in the 21st century.

“Everybody who liked the comfort of not changing keeps things mired,” he said, urging a willingness to radically rethink the way America’s children are educated.

Piercy said most of his ideas came from economist Thomas L. Friedman’s book, “The World is Flat,” which argues that the advanced nations of the world are now competing on an entirely level playing field.

In just a few years, a high concentration of the world’s engineers and scientists will live in Asia, he said.

“We are in a slowly unfolding crisis,” Piercy said, where nations like Japan, India and China are teaching their students the skills necessary to dominate the world’s high-paying industries while the U.S. languishes with an outmoded and underproductive system.

Piercy was the Daily Press Person of the Year in 2006. He spoke at the Rotary Club Thursday as the guest of Daily Press editor Don Holland.

HOW TO IMPROVE OUR SCHOOLS

Rick Piercy outlined a few steps America needs to take to head off the education crisis he sees:

- Create smaller, more nurturing learning environments. At the Lewis Center, Piercy said, students go from kindergarten to high school with the same set of teachers, fostering an

environment where each student benefits from increased attention and understanding.

- Instill a work ethic in our youth. “It’s time for parents to stop being soft to our kids,” Piercy said. “In China, Bill Gates is like Britney Spears. Here, Britney Spears is like Britney Spears.”
- Make the school day and the school year longer. Chinese students have 250-day school years compared to America’s 180-day years, and their school days are longer, Piercy said. As a result, they graduate with the equivalent of 5 1/2 years more schooling than their American counterparts.
- Teach responsibility for actions. Piercy said that America’s education system is not merit-based because it has few incentives for academic excellence. He compared it to school sports, where a student who does not perform can be cut from the team or disciplined — as a result, athletes tend to try much harder at sports than students do at academic learning.
- Create systems of mastery. Don’t divide students by age, he said, but by merit. Some kids are great at reading but not at math, or vice versa, and their best skills shouldn’t be held down by their worst skills.
- Recognize the crisis and put away selfish ambitions. Piercy said this is how America has triumphed in the past.

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