

## OPINION

## Students Must Share Responsibility for Learning

BY ANCIL NANCE

I was hoping that I could agree with Ron Herndon's comments (Parent's Corner, Making Good Teachers, Principals, Portland Observer, Sept. 14), but one thing struck me as I read this statement "Remember, you can't become a licensed electrician unless you have observed successfully wiring a house."

A house cannot refuse to be wired. However, a student can refuse to learn and can refuse (for many different reasons) to follow a teacher's instructions. This happens every day in our schools. Teachers would like nothing more than to have all students reading at grade level, but it is not as simple as wiring the students to do so.

Students bear the responsibility for their lack of reading prowess when they don't carry out assignments, when they pay no attention in class and when they do not do their homework. We know that you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make the horse drink — same with a student. You can

present the steps for learning any particular subject, but you cannot make the student follow those steps. A student has to want to learn more than anything else before learning can take place.

Any student who is below grade level in any subject can take what they have learned and proceed to a higher level, and many do, even to the point of asking a teacher for assistance. But a teacher cannot make a student do anything. Schools that do not have a front office that backs up teachers with a detention room allow disruptive students to remain in the classroom, holding back students who want to learn. There is no way even the best trained teacher can force a student to step into the mainstream if the student has decided not to do so.

So what is the way out? Begin by giving students more choice in their course of study. There is no way a class of 30 students will all want to be on the same page, so individuals who don't want to take part must be given the responsibility to come up with an acceptable

alternative. If they don't, then the front office has to provide a place for that student to be out of class so as not to disrupt students who do want to learn. This is true for reading, math and all classes. It is pointless to blame teachers for the lack of student advancement. That is like blaming a doctor for having an overweight patient who ignores his advice and diet suggestions. The patient is at fault, not the doctor. In the schools, the students are at fault, not the teachers for their own lack of learning.

Another statement made by Mr. Herndon lacks substantiation, and stands only as an assertion. He says, "But the training provided to prospective teachers and principals is a disservice." I don't see the supporting evidence for this. The many teachers who guided student teachers from the local colleges would be surprised to hear they have done a bad job. It is not certain that blaming the teachers for poor student performance is justified. A teacher could get 100 percent success in any class

where the students were attentive and tried to do the assignments. The teacher could then assist those who needed extra instruction. Give a teacher a class where students say, "I want to learn," and the success rate would be overwhelming. No teacher can teach a student who does not want to learn and who also refuses to do the work and the practice.

Students in school today stand on the edge of the mainstream, but are not ready to jump in. What will they need to succeed after high school? Basic math, English, reading and communication skills, for sure. But most of all they will need to know how to learn, how to find out what they do not know. One can't learn everything in school, but if a student knows how to learn on his or her own then that student is ready for anything.

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## Obama Finally Gets His Groove Back

## Sounding more like what got him elected

BY GEORGE E. CURRY

Facing the worst polling numbers of his administration, an increasingly alienated Democratic base and rigidly uncooperative Republicans, President Obama has junked his Compromiser-in-Chief approach and started calling out members of the GOP who oppose adopting programs that will help revive the economy.



Stella isn't the only one who got her groove back. President Obama has recaptured his 2008 presidential campaign mode and it comes not a minute too soon.

Obama assumed office determined to usher in an era of civility and bipartisan cooperation in Washington. He accomplished neither. House Speaker John Boehner, who once signaled that he welcomed a working relationship with the president, quickly became captive of the Tea Party, a small, energized group that pushed Republican leaders to the right of Democratic and Republican voters.

When the President and Boehner were close to reaching a major budget compromise earlier this year, the Republican House leader walked out of the talks. When Obama attempted to reach him by telephone, Boehner twice refused to take his calls. And when President Obama requested to speak to a joint session of Congress on his new job proposals, Boehner broke precedence and rejected the request because it

conflicted with one of 20 scheduled Republican presidential debates.

At every turn, Republicans worked to block Obama's initiatives, even if that meant opposing some programs they had previously supported. Meanwhile, many of the president's defenders were boxed into a corner.

One of them, Al Sharpton, claimed that Obama was executing the political equivalent of Muhammad Ali's rope-a-dope, languishing on the ropes until his opponents tire themselves out before scoring an eventual victory. But Barack Obama is not Muhammad Ali. John Boehner is no George Foreman. And instead of the "Rumble in the Jungle," this was the Rumble in D.C., where the stakes are much higher.

For the first time, President Obama proved that he can trade punches with Boehner.

Obama set up Boehner in his jobs address to Congress on Sept. 8. He said, "...There's a bridge that needs repair between Ohio and Kentucky that's on one of the busiest trucking routes in North America." Senate Minority Leader Mitchell McConnell is a Kentucky Republican and Boehner is from Ohio.

In his speech Sept. 19, President Obama went for the knockout blow.

"Speaker of the House John Boehner gave a speech about the economy," Obama said. "And to his credit, he made the point that we can't afford the kind of politics that says it's 'my way or the highway.' I was encouraged by that. Here's the problem: In that same speech, he also came out against any plan to cut the deficit that includes any additional revenues whatsoever. He said — I'm quoting him — there

is 'only one option.' And that option and only option relies entirely on cuts... So the Speaker says we can't have it 'my way or the highway,' and then basically says, my way — or the highway. That's not smart. It's not right."

Obama smartly reached out to his base, contrasting his approach to that offered by GOP leaders.

"Now, we're already hearing the usual defenders of these kind of loopholes saying this is just 'class warfare.' I reject the idea that asking a hedge fund manager to pay the same tax rate as a plumber or a teacher is class warfare. I think it's just the right thing to do," he said. "I believe the American middle class, who've been pressured relentlessly for decades believe it's time that they were fought for as hard as the lobbyists and some lawmakers have fought to protect special treatment for billionaires and big corporations."

Most politicians give a nod to middle-class workers, usually with an eye on the next election. Obama is no exception. But in his Rose Garden speech Monday, the president mentioned the "poor" four times. That's significant, considering 46.2 million people are now living below the official poverty line, the highest rate in the 52 years the Census Bureau has been collecting such data.

A segment of Obama's political base was deeply disappointed over his decision to direct the Environmental Protection Agency to withdraw a plan to cut smog levels. He reached out to his disappointed base in his speech to Congress.

"But what we can't do — what I will not do — is let this economic crisis be used as an excuse to wipe out the basic protections that Americans have counted on for

decades," he stated. "I reject the idea that we need to ask people to choose between their jobs and their safety. I reject the argument that says for the economy to grow, we have to roll back protections that ban hidden fees by credit card companies, or rules that keep our kids from being exposed to mercury, or laws that prevent the health insurance industry from short-changing patients. I reject the idea that we have to strip away collective bargaining rights to compete in a global economy. We shouldn't be in a race to the bottom, where we try to offer the cheapest labor and the worst pollution standards. America should be in a race to the top. And I believe we can win that race."

In reaching out to Republicans, Obama had hoped to win over important independent voters. But his standing in the polls declined with that bloc as well. Like all voters, independents look to leaders who will fight for their programs.

In his speech last week, Obama adopted a stronger posture than he had assumed in the past.

He said, "I will not support — I will not support — any plan that puts all the burden for closing our deficit on ordinary Americans. And I will veto any bill that changes benefits for those who rely on Medicare but does not raise serious revenues by asking the wealthiest Americans or biggest corporations to pay their fair share. We are not going to have a one-sided deal that hurts the folks who are most vulnerable."

Now President Obama is sounding more and more like candidate Barack Obama. That's how he got his groove back.

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