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20° – Master of the Symbolic Lodge
Topic 2

“Do What You Ought to be Doing - The Rest Will Work Itself Out”

In the 20° of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, we are advanced to the degree of *Master of the Symbolic Lodge*. In this degree, we are taught to model our Masonic virtues at all times, both in and out of the lodge. The degree forces us to wrestle with the ethical dilemmas arising from the complexities of daily life. As Masons, we are charged to yield to just authority and to support our country patriotically. However, what if the government of that country passes a law that is imprudent? What are we to do?

When you mention the letters “NCLB” to a group of professional educators, you are bound to hear a few groans. There probably has not been an educational reform bill passed by the federal government as magnanimous as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Obviously, this act has created quite a stir in education. The act has questioned how local school districts and buildings administer their educational programs and how they measure the results of their efforts. To say the least, NCLB has been the main topic of concern for educators over the past eight years.

To begin, let’s discern some of the merits of this act. First, the title of the act evokes a common belief to every true educator: to leave no child behind. In order for an

educator to be effective, he must sincerely believe that all children can learn, and he must do all he can to ensure that the child is provided opportunities to learn and grow both academically and socially. I don't know a single educator who thinks we should leave some of our kids behind and help others get ahead. Hence, the title of the act seems to equate quite nicely with educational ideals and core beliefs.

Second, the act has forced states and local school districts to analyze their programs and methods of instruction. In many ways, the act has prompted more questions than answers. What is the goal of education? How do we know if we have met those goals? What are teachers teaching in their classrooms? What are kids learning in those environments? What should be taught in our nation's schools? How should this information be presented? What are the needs of 21st century children? These are necessary questions that need to be answered. If institutions are not consistently analyzing their effectiveness, they are bound to become idle and irrelevant.

Because of all these questions and concerns, educators have looked toward scientifically researched programs and studies to evaluate current practice and implement more effective pedagogy. Quite possibly now more than ever before, the educational profession has become a research-focused institution constantly striving to meet the needs of various individuals and communities. In many ways, NCLB has done much to make education a more respected profession. Like the "real" world of business where bottom lines are constantly monitored, public educational institutions

now have to show that they produce a measurable “profit” from their time and investment into our nation’s youth.

That being said, the act is not all good. NCLB established mandates for 100% of our students to demonstrate proficiency in the areas of math and reading by the year 2014. Over time, subject areas such as social studies and science are added to the mix. Each year, schools are required to have a certain number of their students scoring “proficient” or above on state adopted standardized math and reading assessments. Year after year, a greater percentage of students have to pass the proficiency tests until 100% of our students meet proficiency...well, unless 2014 comes first, but more on that later. If schools meet these targets, they have met their AYP goal (Adequate Yearly Progress). Schools that meet exceptional criteria are credited as achieving the “Standard of Excellence” in math, reading, or both. Schools that do not meet that year’s goal are placed “on improvement.” If a school is “on improvement” for three years in a row, the State has the right to re-organize the school and make program changes, which includes but is not limited to firing and replacing current staff members. Plus, failure to make adequate yearly progress leads to schools losing their accreditation. In Kansas, if you don’t teach at an accredited institution, you do not earn your retirement benefits under that state’s public employee retirement system, which is a problem our state has yet to fix. I wonder who would be willing to give up their retirement income to teach in an unaccredited school that has not met its adequate yearly progress goals for over

three years in a row? In a time when we are experiencing a shortage of teachers to begin with, the scope of the issue deepens greatly.

NCLB's requirements have made for all sorts of interesting arguments and dilemmas. First, although NCLB mandates that schools pass a proficiency test, it did not create a national test that had to be administered in each state. Rather, each individual state was in charge of making its own test to ensure proficiency. Now, talk about ethical decisions. What is a state to do? In order to obtain federal funds for education, which includes numerous Title funds, a state has to fulfill NCLB's guidelines. However, in order to ensure the integrity of your state's educational system, the proficiency test has to be rigorous, doesn't it? But what if the students can't pass a rigorous assessment? Should the test be made easier to ensure that everyone can pass it? State departments of education and boards of education along with local school districts and the individual school buildings have grappled with these questions since the implementation of the act.

Another question that must be asked is whether or not there is such a thing as a test that everyone can pass. NCLB's policies assume that kids are like raw materials. For example, let's take steel in the automobile industry. If you develop a process that works steel into an automobile frame, then time and time again you are going to get the same car frame, one right after the other, just like clockwork. However, kids are not inanimate materials, they are humans, and humans are far from the same. Some kids

learn quickly, others don't. Some kids read well but can't compute, others are the exact opposite. Some kids come from nurturing homes where education is valued and supported, others come from environments where mere survival is the top priority and education rarely makes the immediate to-do list. We all have different gifts and abilities. To say that when it comes to reading, math, and other academic areas we can all attain the same level of proficiency is simply imprudent.

The bill also falsely assumes that if educators find a magic elixir resulting in 100% of their students passing these state standardized tests, then the next batch of students will automatically become proficient as well by utilizing the same methods. However, as stated before, each individual student is different. Further, each generation of students have different needs and capabilities. Just because a farmer has a bumper crop one year doesn't mean he won't face damaging weather conditions or infestations limiting his yield the following year. Again, many of NCLB's mandates simply defy logic.

Thus, we have a quandary. While the NCLB act suggests the noblest virtues in education, the practicality of realizing those virtues remains elusive, especially when you put a 13-year deadline on the project. Having 100% proficiency in any human endeavor is utterly ridiculous, much less when you are dealing with education. The supporters of NCLB failed to realize the complexities of education. Educators can't just download information into the minds of our children and then expect them to upload it

when asked. The human mind is a complex machine, and it differs from one person to the next.

Despite questions and concerns with No Child Left Behind, most educators, including myself, have taken the approach to implement the mandates of the act into their respective educational institutions. Truly, educators can see great value in assessing their institution and practices in order to better serve youth. In many ways, education has made significant gains these past eight years under NCLB. We have more data than ever before to guide and direct key educational decisions. This data will inevitably drive positive future programs and methodology.

However, educators have balked at the idea that schools should be subjected to punitive consequences if a certain number of students in a school do not pass a mandated exam. Rather than measure a school's success based on the number of students who score "proficient" on a reading or math test, most educators believe we should be measuring each student's individual growth. In this manner, we can account for individual differences and growth for all students. If a student is ahead of the learning curve, schools need to focus on ways to make him even more proficient. If a student is at grade level, schools need to ensure that he is on track to advance to the next grade level. If a student comes into a school below grade level, schools need to work on filling the gaps in that student's academic skill set so he can learn and grow.

By using a growth-model indicator to score a school's performance rather than setting a stationary bar for "x" percentage of students to hurdle each year, educators can better meet the goal of educating every child. Although I am sure it was not intended, an unfortunate consequence of NCLB is that schools focus so much on getting students who are just below the proficient line to pass the yearly tests that more advanced students are not nurtured properly. So many resources go to programs aimed at underperforming students that there is not enough money to fund enrichment courses and programs for advanced students. NCLB's intent was to not to allow our nation's children to fall behind the rest of world in terms of educational skills and opportunities, but it has resulted in abandoning our nation's brightest students.

The motto of the 20^o is especially fitting to modern education – "Do that which thou oughtest: let the result be what it will." As an educator, I will continue to support the educational needs for all students. It is my goal for every student to learn and grow. All students can learn more than they knew before; all students can improve themselves from one day to the next. In this case, the right thing for educators to do is to focus on the quality of educational services rendered to our students. We do this not because of a law but because it is right, it is what we ought to be doing. We may not be able to get every student in our nation to pass a standardized reading test by 2014, but we can certainly ensure that every one of our nation's children has an opportunity to be served by an educational system dedicated to their individual learning and growth. If

educators do what we ought to be doing to begin with, the rest will work itself out and the result will be positive growth for all students.

To display truthfulness, demonstrate justice, and practice tolerance - such are the lessons of the Master of the Symbolic Lodge. Though the degree's title refers directly to governing a lodge of Masons, its applications are practical in any honorable human endeavor. From the field of business to the realm of education, professional leaders must be able to demonstrate the ability to use virtue as a guide for action. In so doing, we become models for others to follow; we ensure society's survival while at the same time growing personally and expressing our utmost gratitude to the Supreme Architect. By applying the lessons of the 20°, we become masters of ourselves, masters of our fellows, and dutiful servants of God. May each one of us strive to earn the title of *Master of the Symbolic Lodge!*

Works Reviewed

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