

Keep the Best Alive

“I set the education of character and virtue at least as high among our obligations as the preparation of intellect for a lifetime of self-education.” ---Josiah Bunting III

This “sabbatical,” gives me the gift of reflection, the luxury of staying current on national and world events, spiritual growth, and time to learn the subtlety of context.

I’ve been paying more attention to military schools. Military education and training fascinate me...from a childhood admiration of West Point (my father was a career Army officer), watching the Coast Guard train in Yorktown as a high school student, serving as a service academy superintendent, to ultimately leading a private military boarding school.

These schools blend the best of Athens and Sparta. They focus on intellectual growth, physical fitness, and character development...interconnecting those three like strands of triple braided line; each strand adding strength to the whole. Anyone who properly develops and balances mind, body, and spirit will be a success story.

Military service changed my life. After graduating from college, the Coast Guard took a chance on an impetuous, curious, and rebellious young man who sought to “change the world.”

In short order, the Coast Guard taught me to “influence the world around me” by first learning the system’s rules, working within those limits, and then (and only then) challenging regulations that needed to be changed along the way...and rewarded that thoughtful initiative.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could teach those same lessons to high school students?

I believe this transformation is only possible when the rules are clear, consistent, and intentional. In our current culture, where a recent Wall Street Journal article suggested that young men who might otherwise be working are instead being drawn into immersive virtual worlds, I’m thinking more parents should give military high schools a chance.

Private and charter military high schools are places young men and women go to learn timeless values, and live a disciplined lifestyle without the inherent risk or obligated service of active duty. America’s accredited military high schools are the envy of other countries, which visit to learn how America takes a diverse cross-section of young people and organizes them around a common set of values in a hierarchical system.

Few today want to admit that young people struggle in the absence of structure, limits, and clear guidance. Clear lanes stimulate growth, and the absence of those lanes creates chaos and confusion.

In the crucible and sanctuary of military schools, strong relationships are forged, and become enduring bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood. At the military high school I led, we discouraged the use of smartphones and video games. I told my sister that to us “social media”

referred to the park benches lining our main campus circle. At every class break, and after each meal, students filled these benches for real eye-to-eye human interaction, with no electronic distractions.

Most boarding schools require their students to be independent, but few offer the rigor of a military school...building grit, resilience, persistence, and tenacity. With dedicated daily plans, morning and evening formations, students quickly learn how to be where they are supposed to be, when they are supposed to be there. They learn to be accounted for and to be accountable.

Military schools make good people even better, and those who might otherwise wander afar are offered incentives to stay on the right path. As Superintendent of the United States Coast Guard Academy, I saw the same transformation of mind, body, and spirit I witnessed at a military high school.

Our world is filled with disruption and chaos, yet these schools are places where stability and order exist side-by-side with creativity, leadership, and enthusiasm. Today's private and charter military schools are safe places to learn the best aspects of military service, yet many of these schools seem to be struggling with decreasing enrollment and aging infrastructure.

While recent news about closures and governance issues at these schools is disconcerting, throughout the history of military high schools and colleges, many schools have closed while others have grown. One encouraging sign is that "charter schools" using the military model seem to be increasing. As a country, we need to take a good look at why the boarding schools are struggling, so that we can turn the tide.

America needs these schools as options for students who are at their best with certainty and clarity, and as preparation for our nation's service academies and military colleges. If we aren't careful, military schools will no longer be around when we find we need them the most, which would be sad indeed. Students tell this story best:

"The opportunities I've had here are unreal. I learned how to follow, I learned how to lead, and those leadership skills will translate anywhere." —Culver Academies cadet

"It was here that I learned to carry myself like a man should carry himself, and to accept responsibility for all my actions, and appreciate everything and everyone around me as valuable and unique." —Fork Union Military Academy cadet

So, let's work together to keep the best of these schools in business.

Rear Admiral Burhoe is on sabbatical, having recently served as President of the Association of Military Colleges and Schools (AMCSUS). He was the 10th President of Fork Union Military Academy in Fork Union, VA, and the 39th Superintendent of the United States Coast Guard Academy and may be reached at j.scott.burhoe@gmail.com .