

SOM June 2009

Something wonderful unfolded on television in late May. Kavya Shivashankar, an eighth grader from Kansas, bested 293 other competitors to win the 2009 National Spelling Bee. It was surprising to hear how many people had watched this contest. They have expressed how much more meaningful and fun it was than any of the reality shows and most sporting events.

With the determination of a competitive athlete Kavya tackled each word in a strategic and knowledgeable manner, spelling her challenge out invisibly on her hand. She was the last one standing, but her fellow finalists each brought unique personalities and approaches to the quest. Sixty-nine of them, including Kavya, had been in the national level of competition previously. In her case, this was her fourth try. Thirty others had family members who had gone before them. And for all, there were nervous and proud parents sitting, watching, waiting and cheering. In 292 cases, parents lovingly consoled their third- through eighth-grade children who had spent hours learning definitions, roots and derivations and somehow finding a way to beat the odds and spell some pretty obscure—make that impossible—words. Their efforts were at once compelling, anxiety producing, sad and exhilarating.

Most importantly, the spelling bee showcased an intellectual pursuit. It reflected discipline and, dare say, courage as these youngsters stood in the national spotlight searching for clues and making spectators squirm in nervous anticipation. It was clear that this was important to them—and not in some surface manner. Otherwise, why would many of them have put themselves through this torturous exercise several times? They all were chasing a dream, their reward for endless hours of study: the quest for excellence.

These children reflect what should be seen as the hope of the United States and give a strong sign of what is really needed to bring this country back to prominence on the world stage. According to organizer E.W. Scripps Company, the contestants reflected the diversity of the population of our special country as evidenced in the final five. English is not the first language of 33 spellers; one hundred seventeen of the contestants speak languages other than English. They come from public, private, parochial, charter and home schools. Regardless of the type of education, 259 of them reported that parents and family members had played a major or vital role in the coaching process. Of the 69 returnees, 93% said that members of the family unit provided the most significant assistance.

The theme that comes up continually is FAMILY INVOLVEMENT, evidencing fervor equal to that of parents encouraging athletic pursuits. The special lessons learned from participation in the spelling bee form the foundation for taking on future challenges. Brainpower is something to relish. It is not fleeting; it can be cultivated. With the right encouragement all children have the chance to make a mark.

As we struggle to improve our schools, it seems best that we focus on how to engage parents in a productive way. Even the best teachers can do only so much, unless there is support at home. Mothers and fathers must be committed to creating the environment that fosters and rewards excellence in academics, as well as other pursuits that build on a

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child's strengths and aptitudes. In this era of instant gratification, there must be an effort to teach discipline and a long-range view toward achieving goals that are not immediately or excitingly rewarding. The world today is no place for the weak or untrained, who face a daunting challenge: the world seems to be attempting to offer easy and quick fixes to complex problems ... maybe even offering false promises. Perhaps the current plan for economic recovery that is supposed to bring the United States back to world prominence is an example of such.

As parents, we cannot abdicate responsibility and assume that our schools will do the total job of educating our children. (Must it go so far as to include even morals training?) The real value of education and the pursuit of knowledge must be instilled in the home, not as a burden, but as a way of expanding the possibilities a child will have in taking on the challenges facing them in this complex world. We must be honest with our children, yet show them that with commitment to quality, adherence to ideals, a willingness to work hard and an internalized belief that we can make a difference, a productive and exciting future is a true possibility.

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As many companies are exiting West Virginia, we should listen to the rationalizations (i.e., excuses) made for their decisions to leave. My favorites are that the state is not interested in preserving jobs that pay well and that we do not have the quality of life that is attractive. What hogwash! Maybe we have some big problems, but has anyone been looking at California, Ohio, Georgia, Florida and most of the New England states? Buildings are sitting empty. Houses are not selling. Infrastructures are crumbling, and the states are facing bankruptcy. Traffic is horrible, commutes are long and crime is up.

So I will leave my house. Drive 10 minutes to work. Park for free. Upon arrival to the office, I will read about the balanced state budget, which was attained by finding just 2% to cutback. Yes, we need to make changes to enhance our educational system and encourage new venues for business, but come on, who really has the best chance for a quality life? Some of those caught up in the exodus should check the grass on the other side.