

OPINION YOUR TURN

CAROL HUDLER, President and Publisher

DWIGHT LEWIS, Editorial Page Editor

MARK SILVERMAN, Editor & V.P./
Content and Audience Development

DEBORAH W. FISHER, Senior Editor

KNIGHT STIVENDER, Senior Editor

MEG DOWNEY, Managing Editor

JOHN SEIGENTHALER, Chairman Emeritus

THE TENNESSEAN ■ 13A • SATURDAY, JUNE 12, 2010

TENNESSEE VOICES

Teachers' obligation is to nurture students

By Amanda Sheaffer

This past fall, as I considered the effectiveness of my teaching, I stumbled across an online article about the Academy for Global Citizenship in Chicago, a charter school with an organic garden.

The home page for the school declared, "The Academy for Global Citizenship's

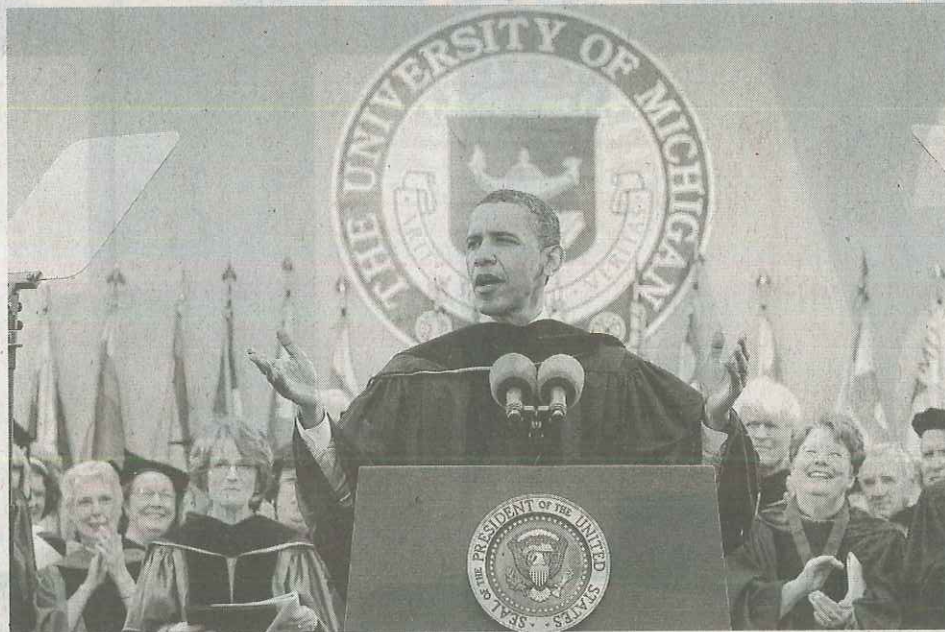
mission is to empower students to positively impact the community and world beyond." I had my doubts, but the language was so romantic ... environmental stewardship, international awareness, inquiry, arts. A welcome contrast to the more commonly used

words of public education today: assessment, achievement, data. I boarded a plane and headed north.

Immersed in a socially conscious curriculum from kindergarten to the eighth grade, these students will form habits, such as eating locally grown foods and recycling, that will benefit all of us. More importantly, though, they will likely form habits of mind.

Leaders, through the curriculum, model and inspire an attitude of selflessness, and students learn through experience the power of the individual as well as the strength in collective action. Students are trained to be, as the name of the school accurately suggests, good citizens. These students will find it difficult to accept injustice and disregard in their future respective communities and will itch to make change.

Sitting at the Chicago Midway airport heading back to Nashville, I listened to



President Barack Obama gives the commencement address May 1 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The president urged students to make their voices and opinions heard. FILE / ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Barack Obama give the commencement address at the University of Michigan. He urged involvement in public life. "When we choose not to make our voices and opinions heard, that's when democracy breaks down," he insisted.

Listening to his speech, I felt ashamed. I graduated believing in the power of my voice but have since lost it to cynicism and apathy. As headlines about the oil spill crossed the bottom of the screen, I knew that I must do better.

In this age of data, the pressure on schools and principals cripples us, and we see this weight inevitably land on the shoulders of students. We instruct amazing, talented children and then measure their success with the narrow view of standardized testing. Over and over again, we treat low achievement in reading and math with widespread panic and speedy implementation of new programs, afraid of public perception or loss of funding. Perhaps it is time to give up the short-sightedness and start over with the big picture, and the whole child, in mind.

Thinking of AGC, I feel confident that all children can grow into contributing members of our society, but I cannot help wonder who will teach them to do this. Simply teaching reading skills is not enough. We must model and cultivate good citizenship so that students will learn to be responsible for others, the community and our planet. With love and ownership will come pride, and the students will know the meaning of their participation. In turn, academic achievement could only improve since the greatest hurdle would be overcome — student buy-in.

Additionally, all students would be given the opportunity for success because all would be citizens.

Envision the potential impact of a generation of empowered students. Imagine young adults committed to progress, unashamed to speak.

Are we brave enough to venture away from the numbers? Do we dare to untie the hands of teachers and nurture the independent spirits of our children?

Amanda Sheaffer is a third-grade teacher who lives in Nashville.

Good citizenship is cultivated, taught

Teachers face many challenges, much criticism and seemingly impossible expectations, but we serve day in and day out. We remain tried and true as the ever-changing policies and procedures close in around us.

We protect our students through faithfulness, continuing in times of great frustration and grief. Still, I wonder if we have been too quiet.