

If you have spoken lately with either Mitchell's high school principal, Mr. Joe Childs, or Mitchell's middle school principal, Mr. Justin Zajic, you may have noticed they looked a bit more fatigued, a bit more bleary-eyed, even *more haggard than usual* for a secondary school principal. Well, there is a reason for that: both are now in the home stretch of completing their doctorates from the University of South Dakota.

And by 'home stretch' I mean their doctoral dissertations, those interminably longwinded (or whatever the written form for 'longwinded' is) documentations of a research project that, once done, will be instantly relegated to the deepest, darkest recesses of the stacks in the university library, never to see the light of day or the slightest possibility of an actual reader.

Oh, wait, that was actually the fate of my doctoral dissertation.

Things have changed since that long-ago era and, as I've watched these two gentlemen submerge themselves in the research and the practice of the topics of their magnum opuses, I have to say I'm impressed. After finishing the equivalent of several years of academic coursework, both still had the energy and professional curiosity to select a topic of genuine importance to students and the academic community, in Mitchell and at large.

Mr. Childs capitalized on the successes of his own Mitchell High School in his dissertation entitled (and, yes, all education dissertations seem to have run-on titles like this) *Online dual credits: Measuring the relationship between grades earned in rural high school dual credit courses and grades earned in post high school college credit*. I realize you're probably chewing off 10 fingernails (even perhaps starting on a toenail or two) in anticipation of hearing just what sort of correlation there can be between grades earned in the regular classroom and online, but, alas, a spoiler alert here is simply not enough. You'll have to wait and read it for yourself. But what I do know is that Mr. Childs and his faculty were on the forefront in our state and beyond at making postsecondary credit available to MHS students well before they earned their high school sheepskin. We are graduating scores of students each year with swaths of their college freshman- and even sophomore-year credit already on transcript. It is no longer at all out of the ordinary for our high school graduates to have essentially completed their freshman year of college before even arriving on campus. Such students save tuition dollars, have access to a wider field of studies, minors, and even majors, and enter college with a boldness and confidence that only already-having-proven-yourself can provide. In his dissertation, Mr. Childs has taken the challenging, some might say risky, step of assessing the extent to which the trail he and his faculty have blazed has provided an analogous level of academic rigor and success. Nothing like putting your practices and performance right on the line. And nothing like informing other educators what sort of impact enrolling in college coursework can and will have on students still in high school.

Mr. Zajic, on the other hand, invested his graduate work into a nagging question for educators everywhere. Just why is it that students from families of lower socio-economic status tend to fall behind students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds and tend to fall further and further behind them with the passage of time? His research actually answered the question quite neatly,

tapping into the work of so many educational researchers that went before him. But then, ‘standing on the shoulders of giants,’ he went on to a more important question: what can be done to erase that unfortunate chasm, that academic nightmare infesting and debilitating the American dream? Serendipitously, the Mitchell School District and Longfellow Elementary had been attacking that very obstacle through the Lions Academy, an extended school year program which added many weeks to the academic year of students whose parents voluntarily placed them in it. So did an extended school year really defeat the longstanding impediment of lower socio-economic status? Is an extended school year the irresistible force which finally shifted the immovable object? Once again, I’m not telling. You’ll have to read it for yourself. It will soon become available under the title, *Summer regression & rural students: The effects of the extended school year on math and reading for elementary-age students with a low-SES background*. (See what I mean about that long title thing?) But actually whether he finds that the extended school works or doesn’t work to narrow the achievement gap associated with socioeconomic status is somewhat beside the point. Either way, we’ll soon know a lot more about what at least seems like a promising solution to a long-term problem affecting American children across the nation, our state, and our community.

As I said, as I’ve watched these gentlemen successfully near the end of their pursuit of their doctorate, I am impressed. But not so much by the fact that they will soon have their degree, as by the fact that their academic research in that pursuit will lead to genuinely meaningful progress in the educational profession.

The tired that comes with the completion of such productive work must be, as they say, a good tired.