

Freep.com

July 21, 2008

Get bolder in effort to lift all children's education

By Susan B. Neuman

Six years after the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind law, there is frustratingly little evidence that it will close the achievement gap between low-income, minority children and their middle-class peers. Despite the heroic attempts of many dedicated educators, NCLB-inspired school reforms, like so many others before, have failed and will continue to fail to change the trajectory of our disadvantaged children.

As President George W. Bush's assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education during NCLB's passage and initial implementation, I began my journey believing that raising standards would be enough to help low-income children succeed. I have learned that closing the achievement gap requires much more. The failure is not a result of the president's espoused "soft bigotry of low expectations," but because many children grow up in circumstances that make them highly vulnerable.

Schools educate middle-class children well but struggle to function as remedial, clinical institutions. Once a child starts falling behind in school, catching up is mostly a pipe dream.

In their 1995 book "Meaningful Differences," Betty Hart and Todd Risley calculated it would take approximately 41 hours of extra intervention per week to raise language scores of poor children to those of their well-off counterparts by age four -- and that's before starting preschool!

The impetus for change built into NCLB was to effectively "shame" schools into improvement. We now see that the shame game is flawed.

Schools fail not because they lack resources, or quality teachers. School influences are overwhelmed because so many children are molded by highly vulnerable and dysfunctional environments. The rhetoric of leaving no child behind has trumped reality.

A child born poor will likely stay poor, likely live in an unsafe neighborhood, landscaped with little hope, with more security bars than quality day care or after school programs. This highly vulnerable community will have higher proportions of very young children, higher rates of single parenting, and fewer educated adults. The child will likely find dilapidated schools, abandoned playgrounds, and teachers, though earnest, ready to throw in the towel. The child will drop further behind, with increasingly narrow options.

Shaming schools has become the cure to everything but the common cold, distracting attention from the devastating effects of poverty. We need to move beyond touting school reform as the magical elixir. It is important, but we need to mobilize other institutions to help solve this problem.

I've now joined with a group of national experts, from diverse backgrounds, areas of expertise and political beliefs, calling for a "broader, bolder approach" to education. Our proposals (at www.boldapproach.com) certainly include improving schools, but tie changes in classrooms to changes in the world outside.

For example, as a researcher and government official, I've seen highly successful early childhood programs where teachers focus relentlessly on prevention, effectively changing the odds for poor children. But such programs are too rare.

A broader, bolder approach must also ensure routine pediatric, dental, hearing and vision care for all infants, toddlers and schoolchildren. Many of the most intractable problems faced by young children and their parents can be traced to maternal health-related behaviors. Programs such as the nurse-family partnership project have shown stunning effects on young mothers' ability to care for their infant's nutritional, health and social needs.

I've also seen hospital and health center services that show low-income parents and children the pleasures of looking at books together. They demonstrate that pediatricians' literacy-promoting interventions can dramatically improve the language of young children.

A broader, bolder approach also needs high-quality out-of-school support. Disadvantaged students often lose ground after school and during summers.

All this suggests that perhaps schools don't have exclusive rights to education.

If we are to take seriously the prospect of really leaving no child behind, we need to support education whether delivered in K-12 schools, in clinics, child-care centers, community-based organizations, libraries, church basements or storefronts. By using the science of what we know works, we can help millions of children growing up in highly vulnerable circumstances to achieve a more promising future.

SUSAN B. NEUMAN is a professor in educational studies specializing in early literacy development at the University of Michigan. Write to her in care of the Free Press Editorial Page, 615 W. Lafayette, Detroit, MI 48226 or at oped@freepress.com.

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080731/OPINION01/807310343>