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Are our schools falling short of the mark?

Ideas to help American schools reach their full potential

Julie Allen

Advisor: Dr. R. Kronick

Modern day schools seem to attempt only one major goal: the 7:30-3:30 education of their students. But is this really all they can do? The school is like a parent. The average child spends as much time in school as he or she does with their parents. Keeping this in mind there are roles that our nation's schools fail to fill, and lifelong benefits that can be gained by the modification of their daily routines. The maximum benefit of schools cannot be seen unless there is collaboration between the school and its community, creating a system of support for every child. Once achieved schools can have a major impact not only on the intellectual level of their students in the present, but the mental and physical characteristics throughout their entire lives.

Systems are formed through collaboration of different parties. A system can be seen as a "web of relationships" which is "composed of regularly interacting groups...which form a new whole. In most cases this whole has properties which cannot be found in the constituent elements" (Wikipedia.com). This is a great way to see the role of systems in a community. Schools should be seamless organizations, with every person playing an active part, not just acting as add-ons, if they are to function at the highest level possible. A great example of this can be seen in after-school programs. If there is no continuity between what a student does during the school day and in his or her after-school care then there is no way the programs are functioning at their highest level. However, if there is communication between the school-day teachers and after-school teachers the lessons taught in classes can be reinforced with activities in the afternoon. Here both parts are having important roles to reach a goal of learning for the student which would not have been possible before.

Only through collaboration can the needed systems be created which form the backbone of support needed to help the students. But collaboration doesn't just spring out of nowhere. Both sides have to be willing to give time and energy for a higher goal. Wikipedia.com defines collaboration as "the process people with different ways of seeing the world use to achieve similar goals." Wordnet defines it as the "act of working jointly." No matter how you look at it, collaboration always involves multiple parties. But these groups don't just happen upon each other serendipitously. One group must seek the other out. Now, logically, one would think that it would be the group that needs help that would seek out the group(s) offering help. However, more often than not this is not the case. For example, the Knox county school system should be seeking out the aid of the university, which has enormous resources and hundreds of students in need of experiences which can be found in the school system. But the schools do not seek help. Instead Dr. R. Kronick, a university professor in education, and others must seek out schools in which their services are wanted and appreciated. Collaboration must exist in a variety of forms, but most important is collaboration between the schools and their communities.

Another form of collaboration would be between the schools and private agencies. These agencies may be health care providers, accounting firms, or other organizations which would be able to provide services through the school that families might not otherwise have access to. For instance an accounting firm might offer help with taxes a few nights one week in late winter; a health care provider may provide free vision tests; or a local organization may offer evening courses to adults through a school. All of these

examples require coordination and collaboration between two very different groups of people.

A further benefit of collaboration is prevention. Actions taken at an early school age can be paramount in preventing teen pregnancy, school drop-outs, juvenile delinquency, poverty, and mental and physical illness. It is much simpler to address a problem early, preventing its progress to something worse, than it is to deal with fully established problem and the issues it may create. Joy Dryfoos has long advocated that short-term interventions that are designed for certain kinds of behavior are not enough. Dr. Kronick says that “correction and mental health consume an undue amount of the state budget because not enough time, money, and effort has been spent on prevention.”

Throughout their lives children learn behaviors and skills that will affect the types of citizens they become later in life. If a behavioral problem appears during the school years the solution is not just to suspend them or put them in detention. This does nothing towards addressing the issues behind the problem and usually has a very minor impact, if any at all, on that student’s future behavior. When students exhibit disruptive behavior they should have some sort of counseling to determine the reasons. Perhaps the student gets bullied by older siblings at home and so takes out his or her frustration on other students at school who are more his or her size. Or, perhaps their parents do not know how to control them and so his or her behavior has been allowed to spiral out of control. Both of these instances have underlying problems that must be addressed before any changes can be made. If left un-fixed there is an extremely high chance that the student will never finish high school.

At Austin East high school the graduation rate in 2005 was a mere 62.6 percent. Granted, not all of this was due to drop-out, but a large portion of it probably was. So why do students drop out of school? The number one reason is the “school was not for me” mind set. Every child is different and if they fail to become engaged with what they do in school they will “mentally” drop out. Once this has occurred it is only a matter of time before the student drops out completely. Steps must be taken early on to ensure that students remain actively involved and excited about school activities to prevent slipping into this frame of mind.

Another common reason for dropouts is that they are forced to repeat a grade. While this is commonly seen as doing good for the child, its true effects could not be more opposite. Repeating a grade will quickly wear down a student’s confidence and, if it happens again, may reduce the child’s chance of graduating to an alarming 10 percent. In cases where a teacher feels the student is unprepared for the next grade personal curriculum and private tutoring are two examples of methods which could be used in place of repetition of the grade. These methods are much less damaging to self esteem and allow the student to remain with his or her class and friends. Yes, this method requires more resources such as time and money from the school system, but will save them even more time, effort, and wherewithal in the future by preventing problems which would undoubtedly arise with these kinds of students.

As previously stated prevention of juvenile delinquency is a process that must begin long before any sort of criminal behavior takes place. Simple steps taken even as early as preschool can have a major impact on the behaviors of students. Teaching children to get along and treat everyone as equals can have lasting behavioral effects. At

Sam E. Hill School children are being taught to settle disputes using words instead of violence. Every child should be taught to respect not only their teachers but also their classmates. At this same school children are being taught this respect by playing together or sharing stories. This forces the children to interact with others that they might not have chosen to mingle with on their own.

In 2005, 17 percent of children were living in poverty. Following is an excerpt from an article from the child trends Data bank website:

Being raised in poverty places children at higher risk for a wide range of problems. Research indicates that poor children are disproportionately exposed to risk factors that may impair brain development and affect social and emotional development. A few of these risks include exposure to environmental toxins, inadequate nutrition, maternal depression, parental substance abuse, trauma and abuse, violent crime, divorce, low quality child care, and decreased cognitive stimulation.”

Few people realize the extent of the damage a life of poverty does besides lack of health care and proper nutrition. Poor children are also more likely to drop out of school as well as having increased aggression and chances of becoming juvenile delinquents. It seems to be an ever circulating spiral with no way out. Poverty leads to poorer performance in school which leads to drop-outs which leads in turn to more poverty. Why isn't more being done to prevent this? Schools in areas with low-income families should be given extra funding to provide more opportunities for these children to advance. This is rarely the case, however. In his book “Shame of the Nation” Jonathan Kozol talks about school spending discrepancies between schools in the Bronx and schools in the New York

suburbs. A school in the Bronx averaged \$8,000 per student the same year schools in the suburbs averaged \$12,000-18,000. Only when these problems are identified and corrected will schools have the resources they need to make significant differences in the lives of children living in poverty.

A further facet of prevention is in healthcare. Few children are taught how to properly care for themselves because it is assumed that is the role of the parent, not the school. Preventable issues such as obesity and sexually transmitted diseases continue to run rampant in our nation, consuming huge amounts of medical resources. Educating the nation's children is the first step into prevention of these on-the-rise issues.

According to the Center for Disease control in 1995 all 50 states had obesity rates of less than twenty percent. By 2000 it had dropped to only 28 of the 50 states. And by 2005 only four states continued to have obesity rates below twenty percent. The vast majority of the states with rates above thirty percent are in the Deep South and southeast, where fried and fatty foods are culturally prominent. Between 1988 and 2004 obesity rates in children increased as much as an alarming nineteen percent in 6-11 year olds. With the invention of technological advances in computers, televisions, and video games fewer children are spending their days outside playing, as in the past. The average American youth now spends 1500 hours a year watching television. When compared to the mere 900 spent in school it begins to fall into perspective. This averages out to over four hours a day, every day of the year. What if, instead, that time was spent outdoors or learning?

This is where the school can help. By teaching children about the importance of diet and exercise at such a young age, perhaps these statistics could be turned around in a few generations. The Center for Disease Control says that

Healthy eating patterns in childhood and adolescence promote optimal childhood health, growth, and intellectual development; prevent immediate health problems, such as iron deficiency anemia, obesity, eating disorders, and dental caries; and may prevent long-term health problems, such as coronary heart disease, cancer, and stroke.

The top four killers in America today are cardiovascular disease, cancer, infections, and adult-onset diabetes. All of these can be directly prevented by promoting healthy lifestyles in children. Cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes can be lessened through diet and exercise. Chances of infection can be lowered by building a healthy immune system by having a balanced diet. Poor diet and inadequate physical activity together account for at least 300,000 deaths in the United States annually, second only to tobacco use as an identifiable cause of premature death.

Simple programs can be installed into American schools to teach children about the benefits of a proper diet. Though most young children do not understand what heart disease or cancer are they should be taught they are not indestructible, as many seem to think. Simple ideas such as the food pyramid should be enforced and brought into prominence. Children need to be taught the difference between the groups, and it can be used to show where the majority of their diets should come from. For example emphasis should be put on the variety of healthy choices available, the concept of moderation, and how humans should take in more of the lower groups and less of the higher. Moderation

is important. Many parents force children to “clean their plates.” This probably isn’t the best way to teach kids that they don’t have to eat until they feel full. As with any human, their eyes are often larger than their stomachs.

On top of teaching students about proper eating habits, parents should also be informed. Many parents do not know about the dietary needs of children which can differ from those of adults. By educating parents there can be a second tier of enforcement for healthy living that is essential for ensuring these ideas take hold in each child’s lifestyle. Parents can be reached not only with information about healthy living but also by providing meal or lunch suggestions for their child. More than one third of all parents are informed about good nutrition and health but do not know how to put it into practice, and many have difficulty telling which foods are healthy or not.

Many schools have implemented changes in school lunches in order to facilitate this education. More than half of all school age children have one of their three major meals at school, and ten percent have two daily. Schools can further assist in forming healthy habit by removing snack and soda machines from cafeterias as well as doing away with snack lunch lines that serve pizza, hamburgers, and fries.

Exercise can also be taught in schools. Alarmingly only eight percent of elementary schools and 6.4 percent of middle schools provide physical education courses. And even more are being taken off the schedules to make room for more class time or for funding reasons. Sadly it is left mostly to individual teachers to make sure their students understand the crucial importance of daily exercise. At one school in Nashville a second grade teacher has implemented a daily exercise element to her lessons. Students are required to either run or walk a half mile (or two laps around the track) at the beginning

of recess before they are allowed to play or participate in other activities. The choice of whether to run or walk is left up to the students, and most of the time the boys run while the girls walk and talk to each other. This solution may not work for every school time wise, but is an example of just one teacher's way of emphasizing how important physical activity is.

Although teaching about exercise during school hours would reach more children, it doesn't have to be. After school programs can be used to keep kids active. These programs can teach sports which allow them to have fun and develop team interaction skills while keeping them active. By providing a place for students to go after school fewer will end up on the streets or at home in front of a television. A great example of the success of this type of program is the Boys and Girls club of America, which provides students with educational as well as physical after-school activities.

A second component of healthcare that can be taught in schools is sexual awareness. Both boys and girls are becoming sexually active at younger ages and sex education programs need to respond accordingly. Late elementary and middle school are difficult times for young teens and preteens. Puberty and a rising sexual awareness that is exacerbated by television and media have led to more and more middle school age students engaging in sexual activity. Recent statistics show that by the age of fifteen one quarter of all children have had sexual intercourse. But how should schools teach their students and at what age? Should they teach abstinence or safe sex practices? This is up to the ideals of each individual school, but which ever method is chosen, some knowledge must be given about the risks of pre-marital sex, and it must be done early enough to influence their choices about sex.

Sexually transmitted diseases are more prominent than ever in America. The CDC estimates that there are 19 million new cases each year racking up a medical bill of over fourteen billion dollars, and that over half of these occur in teenagers and college students. It is more important now than it has ever been that children are educated about the potentially life-long consequences of these actions. They should be taught what STDs are, how they are transmitted, and that the only way to remain free of them is by abstinence. It is also important to tell them exactly what an STD can do to a person's body, lifestyle, and in the case of the incurable ones like herpes and HIV, future.

A child in today's world has a lot of influences on the person that he or she will one day become. Television, media, friends, parents, and teachers are just some of the forces vying to mold students' minds. A school can have a major influence on each child's future. Because of this every school should strive to function at its maximum potential to create a productive, healthy, and fully functioning citizen for America's intellectual and physical workforce. By implementing simple programs into students' daily routines schools can attempt to not only lower drop-out rates, but also start health trends that can help our citizens live longer, healthier lives.