

Why Kids Can't, Don't and Refuse to Learn

Raising standards has become the “catchword” of late. About 2.2 million of the unemployed are young people who are high school drop outs and almost unemployable without additional training. Annually, the drop out rate ranges upwards of twenty five to thirty percent adding to these numbers yearly, with many inner city school drop out rates even higher. So every year or so, a new “magic bullet” for improving student performance is presented. A few years ago, the “magic bullet” was raising self-esteem in our students. A few years later, several surveys that compared self esteem of U.S. students with other students around the world found that U.S. students had the highest self-esteem and lowest ability. So, were we successful? You be the judge. Now, politicians have been pushing for a lifting of standards, “Raising the Bar,” as the solution. This has pressured the educational establishment to raise standards. There are already signs that raising standards aren't producing the expected results. Richard Mills, NY State Commissioner of Education, testified recently in Manhattan and tried to explain why the regents is allowing students to pass with a 55. Several Studies indicate that raising the bar and putting more pressure on some students has or will increase both the drop-out and suicide rate. In addition, we are seeing teachers being directed to teach to a test, altering grades, giving out test answers and the states lowering passing grades or canceling test results. Is this what we want education to become? Maybe there are other reasons why our children are unable to succeed in school that we are missing.

School violence in the form of weapons in school, gangs and shootings etc., which has shocked the nation over the past several years, has now taken a back seat and given a lower priority while the focus has shifted to raising standards. It is my contention that raising standards will be an automatic consequence of addressing and reducing all forms of school violence. Without dealing with all forms of overt and covert violence our young people are faced with, the bar will never be raised.

When students don't perform well, the first ones blamed are usually educators. Educators are constantly being told how to teach by politicians, parents and others. Do you tell a car mechanic how to fix your car or your brain surgeon how to operate? I can't say that all teachers are doing the best job possible or that more training isn't needed. There is always room for improvement. However, isn't it a little simplistic to put all the blame on educators? Considering that American children spend only nine percent of their time in school between birth and 19 years of age, what about the other ninety one percent of the time. I find it funny when parents suggest schools should offer classes on ethics. Ethics can't be taught in a classroom. What role do parents, politicians, the media, and friends play in developing a moral foundation? I think we will find there is more than enough blame to go around. Moral and ethical behavior should be firmly established by the time a child enrolls in school. It is important to look at the causes and not to let “political correctness” deter us from solving the problem.

Society has removed much of the authority educators had to discipline children. Almost everything is considered corporal punishment. Punishment was not meant to be pleasant. Yet, the parents and courts have watered down the ability of educators to provide meaningful consequences to correct bad behavior and the kids know it. Schools are experiencing a growing number of lawsuits by parents for every disciplinary action possible. There was a case where two students detonated a bomb at school. When the school banned the students from attending graduation, the parents sued. Educators and administrators are spending more and more of their time trying to avoid litigation and this takes away from the effort of educating children. When students are caught cheating, the parent wants to know if that will affect their grade. How can educators teach valuable lessons, when parents don't support them and are challenging them at every step of the way. Many parents today are siding with their children against educators. They are failing to recognize that they are both on the same team.

In many urban/inner city schools and to a lesser degree suburban schools overt violence is rampant. Gangs, weapons in school, fights, stabbings and shootings are almost daily occurrences. Overt violence is more easily identified and addressed. It has been found that many inner city kids suffer from Post Traumatic Stress (PTSD). This is the result of living in a dangerous and stressful environment. However, covert violence is more subtle and is often ignored or denied. Many schools and educators, to some degree, try to hide problems because it gives the impression they are not doing their job. Suburban and rural schools are even more concerned about hiding problems for fear of hurting property values and getting a violent parental backlash.

Bullying and harassment are common and widespread problems in schools. According to some studies, as much as fifteen percent of the student population is involved in bullying. On an almost daily basis, students that are bullied experience rejection and worse. Common sense alone dictates that this would negatively affect academic performance. Can we be surprised that some students are so afraid that they refuse to attend school or even attempt suicide? Can we be surprised when some parents elect to "home school" their children? Today, over one million students are being home schooled. School violence is probably the single most important reason for this choice.

Dysfunctional families come in all size and shapes. There are cases where substance abuse, by one or both parents, occurs. Alcohol and substance abuse by parents can either be the cause of domestic violence or, at the very least, a contributing factor to the violence. As an educator, I have heard of cases where parents actively supplied their adolescent children with marijuana. Child abuse and neglect are probably far more prevalent than most statistics indicate. While physical or sexual abuse is easier to identify, it is suggested that the effects of neglect are even more damaging. Domestic Violence, an associated issue to child abuse, is now recognized as a common and serious

threat. Over three million cases are reported each year. Kids are affected either directly or indirectly. While children are often direct victims of the violence, watching and listening to the violence over time can have a devastating effect. Many grow up to

become perpetrators or future victims themselves thus creating a vicious cycle. This is a major societal issue that has not really been successfully addressed. Quite possibly, because of its scope, it might never be adequately addressed. Over one million students have one parent incarcerated, usually it's the father. With the divorce rate skyrocketing, many young people find themselves involved in a bitter struggle between parents and they eventually find themselves living in a single parent home. Often days are spent in court resolving this issue. Another significant problem is single or teenage mothers. Fifty percent of all U.S. children born to women ages 20-24 were born out of wedlock. This includes all races and ethnicities. A vicious cycle begins when children are repeating the problems of their parents i.e. substance abuse, teen pregnancy or abuse. Because of a failure to exercise parental authority, outside forces and other factors, some parents have lost control of their children. Children as young as eleven or twelve engage in promiscuous sex, substance abuse and even run away. Often parents have to resort to the legal system to exercise any control at all. Anyone of these factors can have a deleterious affect. In some cases, many of these issues are present. How can anyone function on school work, either in school or at home, when this abuse occurs on an almost daily basis? Going to school and getting an education is not a priority with these children.

Lack of adult supervision is far too common. Many kids return home from school in the afternoon to an empty house. It could be because a single parent is working or, as often the case, both parents work, supervision is lacking for a number of hours. Statistically, this is the time most kids get into trouble. Between substance abuse, promiscuous sex or unfettered access to the internet, trouble can be the only outcome.

Every child needs a role model and almost all find one. However is it a caring, functioning parent, or a movie, rock or rap star, a sports figure, or the local pimp or drug dealer? How many girls look to Britney Spears or Madonna as their role model? For the boys, is it Mike Tyson, Bill Clinton, rappers or Stone Cold Steve Austin? Many of the role models for girls are scantily clad and at least suggestive of being sexually permissive. These influences begin at the pre-adolescent stage. For the boys, also starting early, their heroes are typically vile and violent and answer every personal problem with anger and retaliation. Equally disturbing is the messages sent by the media or role models concerning smoking, drinking, substance abuse and sexuality.

Recent media revelations about hazing in Illinois and L.I. schools have pointed a finger at this widespread problem. An Alfred University Study completed in 2001 "Initiation Rites in American High Schools: A National Survey" indicated hazing to be a widespread problem in high schools and colleges. Why hasn't this been on the "radar screen" of school officials? It has been projected that as many as 1.5 million students are

involved. In the survey, twenty five percent of survey responders said they were encouraged to engage in substance abuse. Twenty one percent of those responding said they did poorly in school as a result of the experience and it gets worse. Twenty percent said they engaged in dangerous and illegal behavior which included stealing or pain. Suicide is the number three leading cause of death among the young. In the study, fifteen

percent considered suicide. Hazing was found to be very widespread and was probably worst for students participating in fraternities and sororities. Because of the greater number of students participating in sports, sports provided the bulk number of cases. Even cheerleading squads and Church groups had their offenders.

Many young people are "bored of education." Many curriculums are content driven. Drilling for a test isn't going to create more interest in school. Instead of putting so much effort into "raising the bar," more effort should be put into making education more exciting. This could be done and it doesn't really have to cost much more. Once children are excited about learning, just get out of their way.

A study by Columbia University's Carmel Hill Center for the Early Diagnosis and Treatment of Mental Illness suggests that more than 800,000 teenagers suffer from depression each year and more than 500,000 make an attempt at suicide that requires medical intervention. With some of the issues young people are facing today, is this totally unexpected. It is not surprising to find that suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-19 year olds.

While I have touched on a number of key areas, there are others. Kids require love, supervision, order and discipline in their lives. Many are not getting it. As a result, we have a very large number of frightened, abused, traumatized and angry students in our schools. Some are victims and some are victimizers. Many learn in spite of this. Too many don't. Many have lost hope. All need our help and many can be saved. After examining why some young people were successful in spite of coming from the worst possible environment, it was found that one caring adult made the difference. Maybe putting more emphasis on a mentoring program might be useful. However, unless we address these issues, instead of ignoring or denying they exist we will do little to "raise the bar."