

## Common sense education reform

By Jill E. Siegal

THIS spring, millions of school-age children will complete tests that will determine their present and future. As we head into fall, “high-stakes” testing will again be examined and debated along with other proposed solutions including accountability, vouchers and school choice. We have spent countless hours and billions of dollars trying to repair our system. But how many children will suffer before we take immediate action?

Our youngest citizens face extraordinary challenges as they prepare to become workers, parents and productive members of their community. More than 8,500 children are abused or neglected each day; one in five lives in poverty. One in five high school students surveyed said they had seriously considered suicide and nearly one in 10 said they had attempted it. Use of heroin and other dangerous substances is skyrocketing. Young adults with limited education are unable to secure jobs that pay well enough to support a family. Half of our young people leave school without the knowledge or foundation required to find and hold a job. One million students in grades 6-12 take a gun to school each year. Tragic school shootings are brutal reminders that some children are sick and desperate.

At our nation’s founding, Thomas Jefferson drafted a Declaration of Independence to rally fellow colonists to rebellion. He asserted every citizen’s right “to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The word “pursuit” had a different meaning then. In 18th century America, the word didn’t imply a “quest.” It meant attainment. The founders fought and died for the right to realize their dreams. In the 21st century, too many young people see the “American dream” as impossible to achieve.

Now imagine a nation where all children learn the skills they need to achieve dreams. In the school day, they would learn how to make good decisions, how to be good listeners and good speakers and how to communicate effectively with everyone from parents, to employers, to teachers and

friends. They would learn how to ask for help — and how to respect themselves and others. They would learn how to apply to college, write a resume, fill out a job application and advance within a chosen career.

Then our country would have less crime, a motivated and skilled work force, a stronger economy and many more responsible citizens and healthy children. A lack of proficiency in communication, decision-making and goal-setting leads to the violence, crime, poverty and other problems we

battle against. The common sense nature of teaching skills relevant to success cannot be ignored.

Relevant skills instruction is a viable and timely approach to reform. There are affordable and effective curriculum materials and professional development opportunities available to every school in the nation. Evaluations tell us that when students have formal instruction in communication, decision-making and goal-setting, they become more committed to academics, more engaged in family life, more involved in community and less susceptible to negative peer

pressure. Teachers of relevant skills help students recognize the connection between education, behavior in school and future plans. These results are not limited to a certain geographic area, culture, socioeconomic group, gender or level of academic achievement.

America’s fate is in our hands. Community members must demand this instruction. School superintendents and principals must allocate professional development days to train teachers and designate classroom time for communication, decision-making and goal-setting instruction — infusing it into courses like health, education and career planning and social studies, and offering it as a stand-alone course during homeroom, advisory periods or as “Skills for Success.”

Relevant skills instruction is the bridge to a nation where each of us has the tools we need to achieve the “American dream.” If we want to improve our country, the time to take action is now.

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