

We must support the Youth PROMISE Act

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Thursday, 13 August 2009 15:32

Over the last three decades, politicians from Capitol Hill to local city councils have generated law enforcement policies and practices based on the mantra that we have to "get tough on crime." The impact of that approach to law enforcement has made our nation the biggest jailer on the planet. With 2.3 million people behind bars, many for non-violent drug offenses, America incarcerates more of its people than any other country in the world. African Americans constitute one-third and Latinos one-fifth of our imprisoned population. This is madness!

But I'm gratified to report that rational Congressional legislators—229 in the House of Representatives alone—are supporting the bipartisan Youth PROMISE Act (H.R. 1064) that calls for a fundamental shift in child policy and practice away from the too frequent first choice of punishment and incarceration and toward prevention and early intervention and sustained child investment. There is also a companion bill in the Senate (S. 435).

On July 15, I testified before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security in support of the Youth PROMISE Act, because I'm confident that it will be a powerful tool for dismantling the pipeline to prison. Hundreds of thousands of children and youths are being funneled into the pipeline each year at younger and younger ages. It's a national disgrace that at-risk children are more likely to enter the pipeline to prison than they are of receiving the help they need to finish high school.

The lack of health and mental health care is a crucial factor in putting children at risk. Because many pregnant women do not receive prenatal care, one in 12 babies in the U.S. is born at low birthweight. These babies are at greater risk of having problems than normal birthweight babies. Black babies in the U.S. are more likely to be born at low birthweight than babies in 100 other nations including Botswana. Children are in great jeopardy if they don't receive routine health care including the standard vaccinations against communicable childhood diseases. These and other unmet health needs such as early hearing or vision loss turn into deficits and developmental delays that often go undiagnosed and untreated causing children to start school with deficits that affect learning. Many fall behind before or in kindergarten and first grade and never recover. As their frustrations and failures pile up, they act out and get suspended and expelled—the suspension rate among Black public school students is three times that of White students. We have been pushing our children out of school and into the pipeline to prison for far too long.

By introducing the Youth PROMISE Act, US Reps. Bobby Scott (D-VA) and Mike Castle (R-DE) have devised a better way. This bill builds on what we know works and encourages states and communities to put in place alternatives to incarceration for youths. The legislation recognizes that the key to gang prevention is not increased federal prosecution of more young people by federalizing certain gang crimes—thus higher penalties and more incarceration. Instead, the bill promotes investment in quality evidence-based early childhood, voluntary home visitation and comprehensive after-school and summer school programs; mentoring; health and mental health care; job training; and alternative intervention. These approaches build success by decreasing youth arrests and delinquency and lowering the recidivism rate.

Under the Youth PROMISE Act, special help will be available for designated Comprehensive Gang Prevention and Relief Areas with high incidence of gang crime activity and violent crime.

We must support the Youth PROMISE Act

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Thursday, 13 August 2009 15:32

These areas will be eligible for priority attention under a number of federal early childhood, at-risk youth, literacy, training, employment and crime control programs.

The legislation calls for the formation of local PROMISE councils that include parents as well as representatives from law enforcement, the courts, schools, social service agencies, health and mental health providers, community-based groups and faith-based organizations. These councils will focus on developing and implementing a comprehensive local plan to support young people and their families and make our communities safer. The Act also provides additional funding for state and local law enforcement agencies to hire and train youth-oriented police officers and help them better understand their role in prevention and early intervention.

The Youth PROMISE Act would establish a National Research Center for Proven Juvenile Justice Practices to collect and disseminate to local councils and the public evidence-based and promising practices to prevent and reduce juvenile delinquency and criminal street gang activity.

It is unacceptable that the only thing our rich nation will guarantee every child is a jail or detention cell after she or he gets into trouble. America must act now with urgency to ensure all our children a healthy and fair start in life and to stop criminalizing children at younger and younger ages, and instead institute policies that place all children on a path to productive adulthood. The Youth PROMISE Act would take an important step toward that goal. Please join the Children's Defense Fund and more than 240 national, state and local organizations in supporting this legislation. And please thank Representatives Bobby Scott and Mike Castle for their leadership.

Marian Wright Edelman, whose new book is *The Sea Is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation*, is president of the Children's Defense Fund. For more information about the Children's Defense Fund, go to <http://www.childrensdefense.org/>