

Children drop out and into lives of poverty and imprisonment

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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A homeless man talking about how he ended up on the streets said he had wanted to get in with the "cool" crowd in 8th or 9th grade—a crowd that smoked marijuana, got into fights, and skipped school. No adult reached out to help him turn his life around so he continued his decline into a life of chronic joblessness and poverty, and long stretches of incarceration after he dropped out of school.

Youths who drop out of school represent a colossal loss to our communities and nation.

And many dropouts are condemned to the social and economic fringes of our society and lives less fulfilled than their peers who graduate from high school. Today, more than half of all young adult dropouts are jobless. And dropouts are at greater risk of being incarcerated and having poorer physical and mental health than those who graduate.

The impact of the enormous dropout problem is not evenly shared among children in America. Poor and minority youths are far less likely to graduate from high school than White children. An October 2009 report released by the National Center for Education Statistics says 59.8 percent of Blacks, 62.2 percent of Hispanics, and 61.2 percent of American Indians graduated from public high school in four years with a regular diploma in the 2006–07 school year compared to 79.8 percent for Whites and 91.2 percent for Asian and Pacific Islanders. Black and Hispanic dropout rates were more than twice those of White youths.

Children don't just wake up one morning and decide to take a path to a dead end life. So how is it possible that more than half a million of them drop out every year? I believe the main reason is that adults have often let our children down and abandoned our responsibilities to prepare them for healthy and productive lives in our homes and communities. We'd rather punish children after they get into trouble than prevent child problems. The only universally guaranteed child right is a jail or detention cell after they come in conflict with the law. We don't even assure all children prenatal care to be born as healthy as possible.

We have deprived our children of fathers by locking up young men and putting them in a pipeline to prison, and we've allowed our community supports to fray, depriving children of safe havens and positive mentors. For most of the week, congregational doors are locked and we've cut back on the hours when community centers and libraries are open. Some have decided that after-school and summer enrichment programs are too expensive. Some states spend more to incarcerate a child for a year than it would cost to send him to Harvard University! Some New York state youth prisons cost \$210,000 to house one child for a year. Gangs and drug dealers are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, offering apprenticeships in drug dealing and car stealing and other illegal behaviors.

So many of our nation's schools have let our children down and are unwitting accomplices to the pipeline to prison's destructive work. Academic tracking, social promotion, and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions contribute mightily to the discouragement, low self-esteem, and disengagement of so many poor and minority children.

One-size-fits-all school zero tolerance disciplinary policies are responsible for the growth in the number of school-based arrests of poor and minority children, funneling them into the juvenile and criminal justice systems at younger and younger ages. So many are suspended, expelled,

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even arrested, for nonviolent infractions such as being "disruptive" or "disrespectful." In the past, many of these problems would have been resolved in the principal's office or referred to a pastor or social worker or by calling the parent (who may no longer be in the house). Too many children today end up with an arrest record and are labeled a troublemaker, increasing the likelihood of dropping out of school.

There are a lot of things we know about preventing children from dropping out. New research has led to a better understanding of how to turn this enormous crisis around and has identified schools where graduation is not the norm. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University have identified 2,000 high schools in the country (12 percent) responsible for nearly half of the nation's dropouts. The children attending these "dropout factories" are overwhelmingly minority.

We can spot students in elementary school who, if adults do intervene, will be less likely to drop out. Potential dropouts can be identified as early as the fourth and sixth grades by looking at attendance, behavior and, of course, failure in math and English. We can focus our resources on these schools and their students with the goal of turning them around and rescuing hundreds of thousands of children from the cradle to prison pipeline. But the community has to care and raise a ruckus for our children's and nation's sakes.

This is a national problem requiring all of our focused attention. The dropout crisis is too costly to our children, communities, and nation to let it persist. We know how to keep children in school. We simply must decide to mix our knowledge and experience with the will to educate every child.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.