

# Schools Alone Can't Close the Gap



One of the strongest convictions of American social philosophy is that education is the doorway through which individuals can pass from hardship to opportunity. That may happen for some children, but it won't for many unless we temper that expectation with a substantial dose of reality. Schools and those who work in them need additional support. I'm not talking about financial support, although that is important too.

Back in 1961, John W. Gardner wrote in *Excellence: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?* that in our society a large number of young people never fulfill their potential. Unlike many political leaders today, Gardner, who later became Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under President Lyndon Johnson, did not blame schools and those who work in them for this failure. Instead, he pointed to the unaddressed societal problem that kept, and continues to keep, far too many young people from fulfilling their potential, despite the efforts of the schools they attend.

Gardner wrote: "The neighborhood in which delinquency and social disintegration are universal conditions cannot create an atmosphere in which educational values hold a commanding place. In such surroundings, the process by which talents are blighted begins long before kindergarten, and survives long afterward."

If we are to stop squandering the

potential of so many of our young people, educators must face the fact that schools alone will never be able to adequately address the disadvantages that children from poor families and blighted neighborhoods bring with them to school. Schools have a significant role in helping students overcome these handicaps, to be sure, but that role cannot be all-encompassing. We have tried that, and it has failed. It hasn't succeeded because it takes a village to overcome the challenges of poverty and social disintegration.

## A Change of Approach

Faced with this reality, those who work in schools must change their approach to helping disadvantaged students reach their potential. Instead of continuing to act as if they and their schools alone can overcome the challenges that children trapped in poverty bring to school, instead of accepting sole responsibility for disadvantaged

children's academic failure and becoming despondent or defensive, instead of going blandly along with political policies that pit one school district against another for limited federal funds, it's time to adopt a different approach—a more assertive one.

Economic problems and their accompanying social pathology must be addressed by the whole village, not just the village schoolhouse. Those who work in schools know this, but for too long have been timid about highlighting this reality, thus allowing national leaders and other members of the village to shirk their responsibility. That must change if children in disadvantaged situations are to be given a genuine opportunity to fulfill their potential.

Here are a few action educators must take outside the schoolhouse even as they continue to help children in their schools:

- Actively advocate for affordable housing in communities where it doesn't exist. There are advocacy groups in every city that one can join to promote this initiative (e.g., the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America).
- Push for an equitable wage structure for American workers. There are advocacy groups that educators can join to support this cause.
- Persuade the media that outlets must inform the public about what is really keeping too many of our nation's children from higher academic achievement. Write and pub-

## HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT


The author argues that our whole society—not just schools—must be held accountable for improving the academic opportunities for disadvantaged children. Do you agree that educators must play a more active public policy and advocacy role to further the cause? Share your ideas on Twitter @NAESP.

lish articles on the subject yourself if you have to.

- Refuse to support public policies that promote unwise competition between schools, school districts, and states for limited federal school funding. Instead, advocate for policies that encourage cooperation and the sharing of resources and expertise among schools, districts, and states.

### We Can Do Better

David Berliner reveals in his 2006 *Teachers College Record* article, “Our Impoverished View of Educational Reform,” that students in American public schools that don’t have a high percentage of poor children are already doing well in international academic competitions, but the scores of children from poverty are shockingly low and drag down our national standing in these competitions. He also cites research that demonstrates that when families in poverty rise even slightly above the poverty level, the academic achievement and social behavior of their children improves significantly. Therein lies an opportunity for schools: With adequate help from their respective villages, to ensure that many more children have the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

In *The Children Left Behind*, UNICEF notes that “the true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends to its children—their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization.” As a nation, we must do a better job of ensuring the well-being of all our children. Our failure in this area has shown itself in, among other things, the academic underachievement of disadvantaged children. That can change. But if it is to change, the country needs leadership that encourages all of us to love children—in the concrete, not the abstract. Will educators provide that leadership? 

**Michael Connolly**, a former principal, is author of *Teaching Kids to Love Learning: Not Just Endure It and What They Never Told Me in Principals’ School*.

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