

Arrows from the Social Arena Page 1

More than anything, not only is there an erosion of the family, but the family is the pathology that drives the student. I'm seeing the result of sick families, dysfunctional families, producing dysfunctional and sick kids...Kids are regaining their sense of communities lost through families by cliques and gangs. That's where their families are...The gangsters are the youngest kids in schools now. (High school social studies teacher)

I'm tired of hearing from parents that it's the teachers' fault for not being able to control their kids. Teachers also have to frequently deal with the misdeeds of the parents on their children. Kids with deep emotional scars are placed regularly as hostile agents in the classroom. They get no care...no proactive care. It's a pretty bleak picture out there and we get the blame. (Middle school language arts teacher)

Students are not inert units of production slotted into the classroom assembly line. They are participants in dynamic classroom and community social systems, one system affecting the other. There are disturbing forces in the larger society that undermine the academic performance of our students and make teaching much more difficult. Some of these forces include the rapid pace of change in the post-industrial world, eroding values, racism, violence, and the destruction of social services. These forces engender problems in the classroom, teacher bashing, and reduction of teacher decision-making power. Unfortunately, many critics of the teaching profession fail to see the social-contextual problems that undermine educational instruction and performance. They want evidence of results, not reasons for failure. But to ignore these problems is to deny the serious difficulties educators face daily.

Changing World and Values Erosion

We live in an era of fast-paced communications and entertainment. Ease and immediate gratification are what's important. This era is characterized by no-effort values, divisiveness and cultural separatism. A me-first, quick-buck, mean spirited attitude also marks the times (Boutwell, 1997; Coontz, 1995). These values often conflict with those embraced by most teachers. It's difficult to teach students whose values do not begin with one simple premise: the golden rule. Added to these moral problems are the tremendous upheavals throughout the world, evidenced in civil wars, genocide, monetary instability, overpopulation, religious extremism, racism, and environmental problems. But perhaps most insidious for schools are the breakdown of family support for children and the increase in poverty. Hodgkinson (1995) suggests that school [reform](#) attempts that do not address these problems in society are analogous to a leaky roof on our educational house. Some of the more serious problems for educators that are created by today's rapidly changing world include social pathology, poverty, and the erosion of the family and community systems.

Social Pathology

The ills of society are increasingly reflected in classrooms throughout the nation. Twenty five percent of America's children are at moderate risk, 15% at high risk, and 10% at very high risk for experiencing serious negative outcomes (Dryfoos, 1990). Drug and alcohol addiction is on the increase among 8th and 10th grade students (1994 Goals Report). At the same time, the U.S. Congress and Senate currently are proposing a 55% reduction in funds for drug education and peer mediation ([NEA Today](#), 1995). Approximately 400,000 children are born each year to crack-or cocaine-addicted mothers (Waller, 1993). In urban areas, one child in 15 has congenital problems caused by addictions, HIV, low-birth weight, or drug or alcohol damage that impair learning or behavior (Crosby, 1993). Many children, even in primary

grades, are left to fend for themselves with inadequate meals, supervision, health care, or parental support. At least two million school children have no after-school adult supervision, and another two million live with neither parent (Hodgkinson, 1995).

Largely due to all of these [problems](#), between 7.5 million and 9.5 million children in America have serious mental health problems that require special services. Of this group, 70% to 80% do not get the care they need (Edelman, 1991). In the short run, such damaged children face serious disadvantages in the classroom and tax the abilities of already overburdened teachers to the limit. In the long run they too often end up as violent criminals. Some 70% of the men in the U.S. prison system had childhoods marked by abuse, abandonment, or very harsh punishment (Sautter, 1995).

[International comparisons](#) highlight the seriousness of this neglect. The United States lags behind all other industrialized nations in providing substantial, basic support for families including universal health care, paid parental leave, child care, and child payments (Dohrn, 1995).

[Poverty](#)

A steadily increasing percentage of [children](#) in America come from families below the poverty line. The gap between the poor and wealthy has increased, with real income declining in the lowest quintile. Over 80% of the wealth is currently controlled by the top 20% of U.S. households (Bracey, 1995a). Children suffer most from this disparity, making up the poorest age group in America. Nearly 50% of African-American children, 40% of Hispanics, and 15% of white children live in poverty (Edelman, 1991). Moreover, the problem of child poverty continues to grow. In 1969, 14% of American children lived in poverty. In 1993, more than 23% of school children were in this category. In cities, the situation is worse. Some 26.2 % of children in cities larger than 100,000 population live in poverty, and in some cities, up to two-thirds of children of color are poor (Hodgkinson, 1993).

[Homelessness](#) is increasing, with an estimated 750,000 homeless school-age children (Nunez & Collignon, 1997). According to Pawlas (1996), many homeless children never even attend school or may enter school for the first time at a later age. Some 30 million Americans now go hungry, a 50% increase in the last 10 years. Child poverty in every kind of American family is greater than in any other industrial nation.

The problem appears to be lack of economic opportunities and low-paying jobs, rather than lack of will to work. Middle-income jobs are rapidly disappearing, being replaced by low-paying, no-benefits jobs that cannot support families (Boutwell, 1997). These trends coincide with current congressional budget cuts that hurt the poor (Sava, 1995). Persistent poverty in early childhood leaves children with IQ deficits of more than nine points (Coontz, 1995). Poverty depresses school performance and exacerbates other problems such as racism and classism for children and teachers in schools (Bracey, 1994; Nieto, 1992).

[Erosion of Family](#)

The traditional two-parent family now comprises less than one-third of all families. Sixty percent of school children will spend part of their lives with a single parent (Kirst, 1993). While this in itself does not mean such children are at risk, most children in single parent homes, particularly the 50% headed by single females, are affected by low income, lack of affordable housing, and excessive stress (Kirst, 1993). These children are considerably more likely to drop out of school (Coontz, 1995). More than a third of America's children "have the deck stacked against them" before they enter school (Hodgkinson, 1995, p. 380-381).

The annual [pregnancy](#) rate for [teenage girls](#) is 110 pregnancies per 1000. Most of these girls are unmarried and of school age (Crosby, 1993). Presently, 30% of all births are to unwed mothers and 80% of these are to teenage mothers (Bracey, 1994). Teen pregnancy is reduced much more by economic opportunity, when young people have hope for the future, than by sex education programs (Coontz, 1995).

Perhaps most insidious is Elkind's (Sherer, 1996) contention that two major shifts in beliefs about family have led to considerably more stress for children. One is the assumption that children are more competent to handle various experiences than they really are. The second is a self-first orientation in which children's needs are weighted less heavily than those of parents. Increased child morbidity has resulted from both too much expectation of children and the lack of attention and care. Elkind claims that as many children are lost to stress-related causes today as were lost to childhood diseases in the past. The effects of these belief shifts have also led to more aggressive and traumatized children in classrooms, resulting in a greater need for teachers to reach out to parents to ensure that children are protected.

Lack of Parent/Community Involvement in Children's Education

According to Epstein (1995) and Newberg (1995), a host of reasons keep parents out of schools, particularly in less affluent communities. The reasons include the prevalence of working mothers and single-parent families, inadequate quality child care, distance, hopelessness, the strain of poverty, and feeling unwelcome in the schools. Parents may be influenced by personal memories of school as a negative experience and may also feel inadequate within the school culture (Balli, 1996). As students get older, the involvement further decreases. Epstein (1995) claims that educators have not sufficiently encouraged parents to become real partners in the education of children. The lack of parental involvement hurts both teachers and students.

Loss of Sense of Community

In much of America, there is little or no communal bond among people. "The family, neighborhood, and community dynamics that once socialized young people into the norms of society are disappearing. Too often, no one is teaching children how to manage conflicts constructively through example or through indirect methods, such as moral codes and patterns of living" (Johnson & Johnson, 1995a, p. 3). Consequently, many children come to school with little or no collective, positive societal values. Their outlook is egocentric and they are disconnected from others. This has profound implications for all school staff. It takes a whole community to raise a child and it works where this is a focus, whether in wealthy or impoverished communities (See [Phi Delta Kappan](#), [76](#), May, 1995 and [78](#), June, 1997 and [Educational Leadership](#), [52](#), May, 1995 and [53](#), April 1996 for elaboration on this issue).

Violence in Schools– FEAR

Schools are becoming increasingly dangerous to both students and teachers as the result of factors such as values erosion; broken social bonds; racism; stress and conflict; media violence; unhealthy brains as byproducts of alcohol, drugs, or disease; and the ease of obtaining weapons (Coontz, 1995). [Violence](#) is so commonplace in some communities and schools that it is considered the norm rather than the exception (Johnson & Johnson, 1995a). Youth [homicide](#) has never been higher. Every 48 hours, 25 youngsters are killed by gunfire (Barr & Parrett, 1995). According to Gest (1996), fully a fifth of the nation's crimes, including drug and weapons-related offenses and murders are committed by youths under age 18.

Eleven percent of all crimes occur in public schools, with a [school crime](#) occurring every six seconds. In 1993, the most prevalent reported violent incidents by students in schools were

assaults against other students, bringing weapons to the classroom, attacks on teachers, racial and ethnic attacks, and gang problems (Sautter, 1995). Even though fewer than 5% of students account for more than one-third of violent acts (Johnson & Johnson, 1995b), schools have [difficulty removing troublesome](#) students as a result of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) of 1975. When schools have zero-tolerance policies for serious offenses and expel students for bringing weapons to school, this does little more than shift the responsibility to parents, the community, and the police. There is no "elsewhere" for these students to go (Brendtro & Long, 1995).

Too often, school discipline policies are inadequate, inappropriate, or ineffective (Chellgren, 1995). Violence in schools is frightening to students, teachers and administrators alike. Eleven percent of all teachers have been victims of violent acts (Harris, 1993). Every hour, some 900 teachers are threatened, and approximately 40 attacked. Annually, some 400,000 violent crimes occur in and around schools (Lantieri, 1995). Teachers around the country finally are beginning to sue students who have harassed or threatened them (Chellgren, 1995). It has become frightening to be a teacher, especially in middle and senior high urban schools. Of course, it is also frightening to be a student in too many schools.

Destruction of Social Service Agencies

Although the need for social services has increased rapidly, particularly among families with children, the resources to support these families have been severely pruned. Dohrn (1995) points out that these cuts may be the result of an anti-youth backlash, manifested in legislative measures that attack the [welfare](#) system, a primary source of support for poor children. This has resulted in a triage approach to providing social services. Under this approach the only cases that are addressed are the most severe which take the most money and resources, but actually show the least likelihood of positive change. Meanwhile, those in the second and third stages of triage do not get needed services and they become more dysfunctional. For example, when a middle school child reports to a teacher that his mother is too "spaced out" on crack to keep food in the house, and that drug dealers are crawling all over the place, the student is crying out for help to escape from this trap. Sadly, there is probably no agency support for him unless he has committed a crime. Block grants, recently enacted by Congress, will likely lead the very agencies trying to help such desperate children and families to fight over the limited funds available. Yet, the 1995 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll (Elam & Rose, 1995) found that the public overwhelmingly wants the public schools to provide health and social services to meet physical and emotional needs of students. The 1990 [UNICEF](#) World Summit on Children likewise advocated that children should have a first call on the resources of the adult world to protect their growing minds and bodies (Dohrn, 1995).

School and Teacher Bashing

In the last fifteen years, countless editorials, journal and news articles, and television programs have portrayed teachers as inadequate or culpable because some students can't read or because American test scores are lower compared to other nations, particularly the Japanese (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Bracey (1994, p. 125) calls most of these reports "gratuitous media violence," and notes the media's indifference to good news about schools. He (Bracey, 1995a) laments that this school bashing had not diminished in the intervening year, with this form of "leisure-time fun" being dealt out in such media as [Family Circle](#) and [Business Week](#), among others. The teaching profession has become a scapegoat for the frustrations of society, in the USA and elsewhere (Prince-Cohen, 1994).

In part, because of these media assaults, a pervasive attitude held by the public is that anyone can teach. Teachers are viewed as glorified baby-sitters who are paid too much for putting in easy time from 9 to 3. This unrealistic, simplistic view of teaching denies the complex, unpredictable, and multidimensional nature of the classroom as reported by Doyle (1986) and the countless hours before and after school in preparation and assessment.

Berliner & Biddle (1995) point out that many criticisms towards the teaching profession spring largely from a manufactured crisis that began with "[A Nation At Risk](#)" a much-quoted 1983 report that provided little or no research support for its claims. Moreover, these attacks were fueled by government leaders who spouted inaccuracies. Berliner and Biddle also claim that a subsequent government document (the Sandia Report) countered the prevailing belief that educators are failing. It dispelled the myth that U.S. corporations must provide expensive remedial training in basic skills for their workers. Elam, Rose, and Gallup (1996) conclude that United States citizens are not well-informed about public schools due to dependence on media gatekeepers who do not provide accurate information to the public.

When prominent government leaders (including former education secretaries!) toss about factual inaccuracies in blaming teachers for the ills of schools, where can teachers turn for help? When sentiment in Congress could lead to the abolishment of the Department of Education and could severely cut funding for programs that have proven effective (Lewis, 1995a), how do educators feel? Instead of advocacy, the very sources that should be supportive portray educators as failures and condemn public schools as worthless.

Stifling of Creativity

Teaching is both a science and an art but a technological mindset in the system often overrides the artistic aspects of teaching (Gibboney, 1991). Too often, "tightly linked instructional packages stunt performance, growth, imagination, and community" (Clark & Astuto, 1994, p. 517). Such a predisposition in the system pressures teachers to use models and methods that are contrary to their beliefs and understandings of how children learn. Under these conditions teachers are simply deliverers of mindless exercises from "dumbed down" and required textbooks (Renzulli & Reis, 1991). After a few years of such stifling, their creative spark is often extinguished.

Countering the Assaults from the Social Arena

Although educators take a beating in the national media, they fare much better at the local level. Parents are generally pleased with their local schools (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1996). Nevertheless, there is much that can be done to enhance the image of the profession and to bolster the status of education at the local level. The following recommendations represent a starting point for these efforts.

Focus on Learners

Stay focused on why you wanted to become a teacher in the first place: to help kids learn. Make a personal decision about why you are there, touching kids' lives. Reach out and touch the soul of just one child. People usually don't leave education because of the kids, but because of the bureaucracy and politics. Enjoy the little rewards: the smile when a child "gets it"; the twinkle when you helped one student recognize something about him/herself; the young person's excitement about being able to do something that was difficult, like successfully acting in a play, or solving a quadratic equation. Hold very high expectations and accept no excuses for less than success. Remind yourself that a teacher was responsible for helping create the business person, the scientist, the artist, or the computer programmer--shaping skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Remember that teachers are the encouragers of

dreams. Step out of the negatives. Do positive things, like inviting parents and community to hear students' creative writing. Because of society's ills, children need teachers' caring more than ever!

Find Ways to Provide "One-stop Shopping" in or near the School

[Children](#) and [families](#) need a variety of services and schools have become lifelines for many (Fiske, 1991). Form a care committee to work on securing medical and dental, welfare, and job-training services, as well as other needed essentials--clothing, coats, boots, hats, school supplies. Ensure that breakfasts and lunches are available for children who need them. Under the new welfare policies, food may become a luxury that too many families cannot provide. Put yourself in the child's shoes--the one who comes to school tired, hungry, and unwashed--and think about whether that child can effectively be a learner. Involve the kids and the community in caring for each other, for example, fifth graders working with first graders on writing and reading. Work with universities, senior centers, or churches to get tutoring, "big brothers" or "big sisters", and other support and attention for children in your school or district. Interestingly, costs are reduced when such full-service programs are provided (Dryfoos, 1994).

Make Schools Safe Havens

When children have to attend to so many problems in their homes and [communities](#), schools need to be safe havens. Dividing a large school into small units to establish learning and caring communities with a personalized atmosphere has been found to reduce truancy, discipline problems, and anonymity, as well as improve student outcomes (McPartland, Jordan, Legters, & Balfanz, 1997). [Teaching skills](#) of cooperation, conflict resolution, and civic values, especially when peers are involved in the process, likewise has been effective (Johnson, Johnson, Stevahn, & Hodne, 1997; Tanaka & Reid, 1997). Using class meetings to deal with conflicts, such as fighting or bullying on the playground, are helpful, especially when the problems are depersonalized (Nelson, Lott, & Glenn, 1993). Curbing cruel teasing by recognizing it, putting a stop to the harassing behavior, defining appropriate behavior, and continuing to monitor it is beneficial (Shakeshaft, Mandel, Johnson, Sawyer, Hergenrother, & Barber, 1997). Use of theater, songs, and dialogue about relational problems such as date violence or ostracism helps students develop acceptance and empathy for others (Levine, 1997; McNulty, Heller, & Binet, 1997). Creating school-wide positive discipline approaches where students are engaged in rule development, such as those espoused by McEwan (1994) and Nelson et al. (1993) helps students to become responsible about choices they make. For example, Elmira Elementary School in Oregon has a discipline policy marked by caring and student responsibility. Use of anger management training, peer conflict resolution, and training of teachers and staff make this Chapter I school coherent and safe. Finally, teaching students to expand their repertoire of coping strategies (Cohen & Frydenberg, 1996), to develop resilience (Bancroft, 1997), and to increase their hopefulness (Snyder, 1995) may be some of the most valuable tools we give students that make not only schools but selves safe havens.

Get the Public Back in Public Schools

One of the most important steps in fighting the siege in all three arenas, social, economic, and political, is connecting schools with communities. In order to regain the trust and support needed to overcome the attacks on educators, "public building" is required (Mathews, 1997). Control of public schools is the issue, and too many people do not believe that these schools are responsive to their concerns. Diverse citizens need to be brought together "to find the larger public purpose in the basic work of schools--teaching young people" (Mathews, 1997, p. 742). He calls for local "deliberative forums" that focus on finding a common purpose and direction, wherein real choices are offered, real listening and dialogue is held, and no single

group has "THE answers" (see Phi Delta Kappan, June, 1997 on engaging the public in schools).

Reach out to parents

[Parents as partners](#) is not a new concept. But too often, the focus has been on getting parents to assist with class trips, candy money collections, or paper cutting, a one-way view of parents as helpers in schools. Parents also have needs. Recent developments such as Comer's efforts to involve parents as essential in the education of their children have been positive (Comer, 1996). Fun activities for the family, such as family math or science nights where pizza or hot dogs are provided at cost; pride night, where students share their learning products with families; and homework hotlines all show that educators support families as part of the school's learning community (Fowler & Corley, 1996). A parents' room in the school that offers learning opportunities, especially where parents get training for paid jobs within the school creates strong support. The Barbeton Project near Akron, Ohio is an example of such a program. And when parents build constructivist curriculum together with teachers, the benefits to children and community are exciting (Daniels, 1996).

Recruit volunteers from the community

Across the nation, volunteers can be found reading to small groups in classrooms or school libraries, helping with special projects, sharing their specialized background knowledge, and constructing learning materials. Although most parents today work full time, there still are many parents and other adults who are eager to devote at least some free time to support teaching and learning in public schools. Some local businesses provide paid release time for employees to work in schools. Colleges of education are good sources for volunteers, especially when university students can enhance skills related to coursework, such as tutoring reading or math.

Visionary teachers and administrators capitalize on this willingness to help, soliciting assistance for a wide variety of tasks

Of course there is the danger that outsiders may occasionally interfere with school procedures, and the presence of more adult "evaluators" in the building can be threatening to some teachers. But in general, helping hands from the community bring significant advantages to schools. The obvious advantages include the work these people do, providing extra human resources in times of fiscal erosion, especially providing individual attention to children who desperately need it. Many volunteers leave school wondering "How do they do it?," filled with new-found respect for teachers whom they previously stereotyped as relatively low-status technicians.

Connect with senior citizens

Seniors on fixed incomes who no longer have children in the schools represent a powerful voting bloc, susceptible to critics of public schools who push tax-cutting political platforms. Yet powerful connections can be made between senior citizens and young children. Many elementary teachers have seen strong bonds develop when seniors attend concerts or other school events in which young children demonstrate their growing skills and abilities. Educators can capitalize on this phenomenon by ensuring that personalized invitations for school events reach senior citizens, or by taking school events out into seniors' clubs in the community. One district even pays seniors minimum wages, provides medical check-ups, and offers training because their efforts in schools have been so valued (Conyers, 1996). The growing population of retirees could be the largest potential source for committed, talented classroom volunteers. If invited and encouraged to observe and participate in education, seniors could add the magic that comes from the wisdom of age to the learning process, while spreading the good word about the magic in the work of effective educators. Positive

experiences with children and teachers could make them think twice about voting against the next school budget.

Bring volunteers to the community

Get kids involved in helping in the community as part of their learning experiences. Community-based service, service learning, and social action are all terms used today, sometimes with controversy. But when child power is harnessed for good, everyone benefits and the community sees young people as valuable (Cohen, 1987). Learning is contextualized, real, and valued to both the student and others (see Phi Delta Kappan, May