

“Schools can improve without help of parents, but it is more difficult”

I am a middle class African-American parent of a second grade and kindergarten student. I am also a child advocate who works nationally as an educator. I write to respond to Secretary Rod Paige’s piece in “USA Today,” Monday, April 8, 2002, “Schools can’t improve without help of parents.”

Secretary Paige’s article gave me hope for thousands of students who soon will be supported through the No Child Left Behind Act signed into law on January 8, 2002. I take few issues with what the Secretary states and implies in his “USA Today” piece. Yet I felt compelled to write because I feel the Secretary missed a crucial point in his declaration that “schools can’t improve without the help of parents.”

Obviously when we talk about school reform in this country we are not necessarily speaking about creating reforms in Scarsdale, New York, Beverly Hills, California, Short Hills, New Jersey or Shaker Heights, Ohio, to name a few. When the outcry for school reform is heard in this country, it is directed at the nation’s impoverished communities. I speaking about schools located, among others, in sections of Indianapolis, New York City, Bridgeport, Connecticut, Newark, Detroit, Chicago, Atlanta and San Francisco. These communities are inhabited by adults and children who struggle to survive. Whose homes are often run by one parent – typically a woman of color. And this parent struggles mightily to meet the needs of not only her children, but the needs of cousins, grandparents, sisters and brothers who may all inhabit a small apartment in an impoverished section of a city. She often holds not one, but three part-time jobs and returns to the home, late at evening exhausted by the day’s work.

How can this parent find the time to read to her children? How does she hold her children’s school accountable, to use solid research for instruction, and knows that her school has flexibility with federal funds -- just a few suggestions Secretary Paige had for the readers of his article.

As a very busy middle class parent, who is married to a very busy university professor, we somehow find the time to read to our children ever day, hire a tutor for additional practice, work to engage our children in outside learning experiences, and support home work every night. I am finding first-hand how important the role of a parent is in the education of our children. In fact, if it were not for our engagement with our children, they would probably rapidly fall behind in their school achievement. This is not the fault of the school, just the nature of a teacher attempting to meet the learning requirements of not only our children, but 22 others.

So if it is difficult for a middle-class family to meet the goal of an educational partnership between the home and school, how realistic is it for the nation’s Secretary of Education to expect the same for those living in impoverished communities? The answer is not very realistic at all.

The good news is that schools in poor communities are succeeding in spite of a lack of sustained parental support. There are daily reminders in the media that achievement for some urban schools and systems are improving. Examples are found at School #69 and #27 in Indianapolis, the Abington Avenue school in Newark, Lincoln Elementary in Mt. Vernon, NY, all of the elementary schools in Beacon, New York, Kimball and Gatewood elementary schools in Seattle, schools in District 2, San Diego, Houston, Brazoport, TX, Los Angeles and San Francisco. They do this without mysterious methods, programs or equipment. They do it mainly by exposing the poor and ethnic minorities to the same standards, expectations and quality of instruction usually reserved for the more affluent and/or dominant groups in the society.

They do it by marshalling resources toward improving teaching and learning – not on some frivolous new program. They do it by finding the best teachers they can at the school, and providing sustained professional development for all to improve on the delivery of instruction.

Professional development is the engine of the advance being made by effective schools. And systemic reform is the vehicle. If we are to advance the capacity of educational systems, we will need to increase funding beyond those levels provided by the new No Child Left Behind act. Partnerships will need to be created that build alliances among parents, teacher, principals and the community. But to provide the support for those parents who struggle just to survive, support mechanisms need to be put into place that help to free the parent to live up to Secretary Paige exhortations. Communities will need to identify mentors, hire additional social workers, create effective after-school programs and increase enriching summer school experiences, to support families whose circumstances place them at-risk, and whose circumstances force some students to be more dependent on schools for learning than others.

Until these social mechanisms are put into play on a sustained basis, those students who are dependent entirely on the schools for learning will continue to fight an uphill battle. To address the achievement gap between poor children of color and wealthier students requires policymakers who back their rhetoric with real resources and their policies with thoughtful accountability. Leave No Child Behind is a step in the right direction, but it remains only one small step. All in our nation must ward off complacency and root out convictions that shackle efforts leading to systemic change.

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