

## Keeping the Education Promise

*By Scott Poland, NASP 2000-2001 President*

President Bush's focus on education has galvanized the country around reform of our public schools. The pledge to "Leave No Child Behind" resonates across all sectors of society, cultural divides, and party lines, elevating this traditionally "local" issue to the top of the national agenda. The promise evokes our collective commitment to safeguard our children today and prepare them to meet the challenges of tomorrow. The key is to keep the promise for *all* children, particularly those most at risk that present the greatest challenge.

For more than a century public schools have served at the heart of this mission. The fact that the challenge is more complex or that some schools have failed does not negate the critical role they play in shaping the lives of more than 90% of America's youngsters. Reform efforts must empower public schools, not undermine their ability both to raise the bar and close the gap in achievement between disadvantaged and general populations. Quality teaching, adequate infrastructure, school readiness, and regular assessment are essential to this process. But raising standards is not enough. Schools that make significant strides toward the goal of success for all children also provide support services necessary to promote students' academic, social, and behavioral development.

This is not a new role for public schools. An early purpose of public education was to help integrate immigrant children into American society around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Educators and social scientists recognized the need for a universal mechanism to help these children overcome barriers to a productive life in this country. Many barriers are the same as we see today such as language, prejudice, and poverty. Psychologists were among the early educators to help identify the kinds of services schools needed to provide. Even then, the link between mental health and learning and behavior was clear.

Current research, including two reports by the U.S. Surgeon General, affirms that mental health continues to impact virtually every issue related to children and youth. The learning experience is affected because youngsters do not shed their problems at the schoolhouse door. Chronic underachievement, dropout rates, youth violence, suicide, and substance abuse all can be linked to mental health, whether a disability or mental illness, pressures of family or peer problems, or the stresses of poverty and intolerance.

Schools must accommodate these needs if they are going to achieve the high stakes objectives proposed by the President and Congress. Reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) must include adequate student support services. School psychologists, counselors, and social workers provide prevention and intervention services to help teachers and parents address problems that can impede achievement. They link students' academic or behavioral needs with the appropriate classroom, family, and community resources. They also target school-wide issues such as school safety, bullying, and teen pregnancy, objectives that President Bush terms "teaching right from wrong."

The support services side of education will become even more important as we raise the ante on performance. Even the most gifted math teacher cannot assess and recommend appropriate interventions for a learning disability. And the best history teacher in the world may not have the capacity to recognize depression or neglect as the reason for poor motivation. Most educators are caring and observant but, like many parents, they need support on issues that fall outside their experience.

As recently reported by *The Washington Post* (Saturday, March 3, 2001), there are far-reaching hazards in failing to provide adequate support services, particularly to disadvantaged students. The trend toward mislabeling minority children as mentally disabled not only limits their potential but also strains the special education system. Trained professionals can differentiate between a disability that requires special education and difficulties that can be addressed with interventions in the regular classroom.

Similarly, standardized testing could further disenfranchise at-risk students. Employed in isolation, such high stakes criteria can limit schools' ability to accommodate diverse learning styles, misrepresent actual student achievement, and increase dropout rates among disadvantaged youth who finally give up instead of being held back or "failing again." We do not have to look beyond the 50% higher unemployment rate of dropouts or their increased likelihood of doing jail time to recognize the true cost of this failure.

Head Start, a lynchpin in the President's plan, demonstrates what we can achieve when education serves the whole child. This publicly funded program is successful because the prevention-focused curriculum integrates social and developmental services with academic instruction to reach at-risk children early.

Reforming public schools along these same principles will require clearly articulated and fully funded services as well as consistency across related policies in special education, juvenile justice, healthcare, and social services. Resource allocation does matter. The average ratio of school psychologists to students is more than twice the recommended rate of 1:1000. Similar disparities exist with school counselors and social workers. Directing substantial resources across all reform objectives to disadvantaged communities is appropriate. But increased risky behaviors among suburban youths, Columbine—and tragically again, Santana High—remind us that mental health concerns recognize no geographic, cultural, or economic boundaries.

Quality education is the foundation of our promise to help children achieve excellence in all aspects of life. We need our public schools to keep this promise and should make the most of this opportunity to create a system that truly will leave no child behind.

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