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Guest Viewpoint: It takes a child to raze a village: Before we address proficiency testing...

By Stephen R. Sroka

1/9/01 – The often-quoted African proverb states, "It takes a village to raise a child." Unfortunately, the village is dysfunctional and the children are razing the village with destructive behavior, while too many school systems, planning proficiency education, live in denial.

After the school shooting in Paducah, Ky., President Bill Clinton called it an "angry wake-up call" and said, "children cannot learn and live up to their full potential when violence and drugs threaten their safety in schools." And then there was Jonesboro, Edinboro, Springfield, Littleton, and other "wake-up calls."

In Chautauqua, N.Y., a man allegedly deliberately infected 11 young women with HIV. In Plano, Texas, 11 teenagers have died from heroin overdoses. And in Pierre, S.D., eight teens have committed suicide.

In almost all such incidences, people in the affected school system, said, "I can't believe it could happen here."

In this age of educational measurement, assessment, and accountability, school systems plan for proficiency tests, while adolescents plan behaviors that put their and others' academic futures and very lives at risk.

According to the latest *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance* report, 49.9 percent of students in grades 9-12 have had sexual intercourse, 15.7 percent had carried a weapon, and 31.5 percent had five or more alcoholic drinks on at least one occasion during the previous 30-day period. During the 12 months preceding the survey, 35.7 percent of students polled had been in a physical fight and 19.3 percent had seriously considered suicide.

The results of risky behavior among teens are frightening. The leading cause of death for America's youth are: (1) automobile crashes and other accidents involving alcohol or other drugs, (2) homicide, and (3) suicide. AIDS is the ninth leading cause of death for teens.

Each year, approximately one in 10 teenage girls gets pregnant, and approximately one of six teenagers will get a sexually transmitted disease.

Before we address the *proficiency test* issues, we need to address the *reality test* issues. What good is a high SAT score if you graduate with HIV? What good is a high GPA if you are high on THC? What good are courses that develop your head, if you are going to be

dead? If our youths fail the reality test, there is no proficiency test.

Simply said, healthy kids make better students and learn more.

Why don't we teach accurate, honest, and relevant life-saving reality education? There are certainly many reasons, but the major problem is denial. Most parents and educators think other adolescents, not their own, are violent, doing drugs, or having sex.

The first step in dealing with denial is awareness. Most adolescents today are at risk regardless of where they live. Awareness programs need to break down the walls of denial, fear, ignorance, and complacency that put adolescents at risk.

School systems can use research findings and statistics on youth behavior to plan appropriate programs. Frank and timely community dialogues involving youths can provide insights.

The second step is education. A K-12 comprehensive health education framework with age-appropriate prevention messages and positive life skills is critical.

Programs need to be accurate, up-to-date, relevant, and brutally honest. Schools need to educate about drugs; sex, including condoms; hate crimes; suicide; guns; and other controversial subjects. Or would you rather have students learn about these things on the streets or on the Internet?

But facts are not enough. Students need to learn life skills, such as decision making, assertiveness, stress reduction, conflict resolution, and other ways to build their resiliency.

Programs need to reflect the needs and values of the community, but the messages need to be geared to adolescents in a culturally sensitive and specific language they understand.

Programs need to integrate cutting-edge research, humor, and inspiring real-life stories to facilitate learning and strengthen their life skills to deal with sex, drugs, and violence prevention and raise academic achievement.

The third step is intervention. Although early warning signs might not be a predictor of behavior, they can serve as a basis for appropriate referrals to school psychologists and other professionals to evaluate and, if necessary, to intervene.

The U.S. Department of Education's *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Plan* details a comprehensive, three-level approach to prevention: (1) build a schoolwide foundation including a caring school community and safe physical environment, (2) respond to children exhibiting early warning signs, and (3) provide intensive intervention to troubled students.

Schools, parents, and communities need crisis response policies and procedures in place and they need to practice how they would respond before an emergency occurs.

The fourth step is advocacy. School systems cannot do what needs to be done by themselves. The total village needs to be involved. Parents and guardians must be models and advocates for all students. Leaders in the faith community must leave their sacred halls and go out to save at-risk youths.

Youth leaders must reach out to talk to their peers in a language they can understand. Business leaders must support such efforts, since youths involved with sex, drugs, and violence carry a heavy cost in terms of theft, poor job performance, absenteeism, and other problems.

Politicians must support efforts to protect our youths. And finally, the media, music, and movie companies must realize the role they can play—not only in reflecting society, but reconstructing the village.

There are no magic bullets and no quick fixes, but there are intelligent alternatives. Research on what works is paving the way. *Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy* found that intense communitywide programs that include churches, schools, clinics, and the media can significantly reduce teen pregnancy.

A National Institute on Drug Abuse study has identified "protective factors," such as parental supervision, commitment to school, and positive relationships with peers who have conventional values.

The "asset-building" concept, which stresses positive approaches involving family and friends, rather than concentrating on negative behaviors, has become the new paradigm to regain the village.

It takes a strong unified village to raise a child. Proficiency tests are essential, but they are not enough. We need programs to encourage youths to pass the proficiency tests of achievement and to pass the reality tests of staying alive and healthy.

Sex, drugs, and violence are threatening our children's education and lives and razing our villages. Denial promotes paralysis.

Now is the time for school leaders to become aware, to educate, to intervene, and to advocate for our youth—and our future. For some, tomorrow might be too late. As one teacher told me, "I guess someone will have to die in our community before we talk about such sensitive subjects."

I wonder where our next wake-up call will come from. Where you live, does a village raise a child or does a child raze a village?

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