



Photo provided by Steve Sroka

Dr. Steve Sroka Safe schools conference speaker

In Conversation With... features an interview between a leader or figure involved in public education and a staff member of the Kentucky School Advocate.

This month's conversation is with Dr. Steve Sroka, (far left) an award-winning educator who is bringing his message about the importance of putting kindness back into schools to this year's Safe Schools, Successful Students Conference, Oct. 6-7 at the Galt House in Louisville. Sroka will be the keynote speaker Oct. 7, with a follow-up session that afternoon.

Q. Tell me about the program you're going to present at conference.

A. My program is called, "The Power of One, Putting Kindness back in Schools." I have been involved in school safety for 30 years and what has happened traditionally throughout the years after a school shooting is that there is always a call for more police, more cameras, more metal detectors ... And I came up with this idea: Why don't we put more kindness back into our schools? Why don't we start treating our kids with a little bit more respect rather than just punish them every time they do a cry for help?

The message I'm trying to bring to this conference is that with No Child Left Behind, we're leaving most children behind because we are putting such an emphasis on the academic child. I do a lot of work with kids; they are saying they want to be treated as people, not as a grade point average. What has happened in this approach to No Child Left Behind is that we're leaving most children behind because we're addressing the child academically, but not socially, not emotionally, not spiritually. So we're not dealing with the child as a whole.

My basic philosophy is this: If we treat the whole child and make the school a safe and healthy place, the student will learn more. But just to place the emphasis on education is not going to do it.

In education today and making schools safe, it's about relationships, how we treat one another. Rather than having more metal detectors, I'd rather more student detectors.

Caring, communicating, community and culture. The four C's are so important in working with students. Not all kids are the same, which is why No Child Left Behind is such a joke. Basically, I'll ask the audience if all kids learn the same, and they are going to answer, 'No.' Then why do we teach them the same, why do we test them the same?

I think our approach has to be one of caring, to be able to communicate with them, but to know what kind of community they live in, because we don't really have school violence, we have community violence, and we need to work with the culture.

After talking about the four Cs, you have to talk about the fifth C, which is collaboration and why you have to move into the big 'K', which is kick ass!

There has to be a back-up plan. Not all kids are going to respond to everything. I deal with mental health. One out of four people today at any given time is not playing with a full deck, they could use a little support. You have to be able to collaborate, with the police, with the mental health community, because we just can't do it alone in school.

The point is that no message works for everyone, and that's the message that needs to come out. It's not reflected in many of our schools or our safety programs. I've been in schools with metal detectors where guns get into schools. They probably set up a perception of safety, but do they actually make the schools safer? Probably not. I'll tell you who said that recently: The FBI just came out as did the department of education, saying that many of the things that people put in schools create the perception of safety but in reality, they can not prevent violence.

I think those things have a place in the program, but by themselves they are not going to stop things. We often have a four-prong approach, prevention, preparation, respond and recovery. You do need a plan, but so much of it could be avoided early on. I think it's so much easier to talk your way out of a situation than shoot your way out of a situation.

I'm doing another conference in Las Vegas and I'm calling it, "Putting a Human Face on School Safety." The whole idea there is that if we treat people as people and not as a power

play, I think we'll be able to avoid a lot more situations. But we have to be prepared in case something happens, but the approach can make all the difference in the world.

Q. What are the consequences of letting down our guard on school safety?

A. The whole idea of how we treat one another, how we respect one another is incredibly important. That transfer right from school safety into the classroom. We know right now that you can't force kids into learning. You have to get them involved. One of the issues tied up in school safety today is the issue of dropouts and in many urban areas, more than half the kids drop out.

When kids drop out of school, it makes a lot of places unsafe. You have the gang situation, things happening in the community, in the schools. So ironically, when a kid drops out, it makes it less safe for the school. People throw these kids out because they're acting up. Where do they go? They go to the streets. Suspending a kid from school doesn't solve any problem, because it's still a community problem.

We see a lot of kids out there doing bad things: having sex, doing drugs, joining a gang, and our response is, "Let's punish them." I see this as a cry for help. For a kid who's doing drugs, they don't need to go to jail, they need to go to rehab; for a kid who joins a gang and is acting up, he's looking for love, he's looking for a family, he's looking for protection. So we lock them up, too.

If we look at things a little bit differently, then maybe we can help a lot of kids. What's happening in the country right now is that we're into this punishing thing. Around the country we're putting up more jails than schools. We're taking the wrong approach.

Q. So what is the right approach?

A. My approach is a total community approach. I don't think we have school problems. I think we have community problems that take place in school. There's no way we can ever make a difference until we start working with families.

When I come into a community, I love to talk to the kids, then I want to talk to the teacher and then the communities and make the point that this is everyone's issue.

Teaching isn't about facts and figures, it's about making you think. When I go out to talk, it's my real goal, to make people

think differently than they did before.

My big messages I try to deliver are these three: Knowledge is power. The more we learn, the more we earn; the more we learn, the better decisions we make. We've got to take care of one another. None of us is so strong that we can be standing by ourselves all of the time, and if there is a secret to helping yourself it is to help others. And the last one, is you've got to tell the people you love that you love them.

I also try to deliver hope, because without hope, you're not going to make it out alive. I'll tell you right now that most kids today drop out of school because they're bored and they see no reason to keep going.

Q. What can we expect at conference?

A. I'll talk about drugs and sex and violence and how it's impacting kids in making bad decisions. But my big thing is putting kindness back in schools. I'm going to use a whole lot of humor, I'm going to use a whole lot of pictures. The PowerPoint is not one that you read, it's one that you experience and what I'm trying to do is change lives.

You have more power to do things that you think and my real job when I speak is to tell people that you have more power to make a difference with kids than you think.

You ask a kid how he did at school, how did he do on the math test? Well. Where do you have that test in life? Who are the people who are really changing the way that you live, where's the test of how you made a good decision, how you were a good family member, cared about your school, your church? We're not even looking at that. We're looking at a test score that means nothing.

I'm just trying to get people to look a little bit differently at our kids and realize that they're crying for help and realizing that we have a lot more power.

I think it's a good time to put a human face on school safety and on education and put some kindness back in school. From my experiences in life, people who changed, changed because of kindness not because of cruelty or force.

Teachers who have real strong discipline may control of their classroom when they're there, but how does the class act when they walk away? We have to build this discipline in, not just tack it on. School safety has to be like that: build in, not tacked on. ☞

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— Dr. Steve Sroka, Safe Schools, Successful Students Conference speaker