

Altering Destinies

By Gene I. Maeroff — March 18, 1998  8 min read

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President Clinton has the right idea. Among his budgetary proposals for bolstering elementary and secondary education are several measures that would address some of the most pressing needs of students from economically deprived backgrounds.

Mr. Clinton wants to provide funds for tutors, after-school and extended programs, and stronger partnerships between schools and parents, businesses, and communities. These initiatives come on top of his call for almost \$10 billion over 10 years for school construction and repair and \$7.3 billion over five years to hire 100,000 teachers to lower class size in the first three grades.

Surely students need up-to-date schools. They also stand to gain if their teachers do not have to spread themselves among so many youngsters. But unless more is done to build systems of support for impoverished students, they are not apt to prosper--even in spiffier buildings with one or two fewer classmates.

The fact is that middle-class students, unlike those who are poor, enjoy the benefit of a whole series of out-of-school experiences and supports that tend to assist them no matter how old and inadequate their buildings and no matter how many students--within reason--sit in classes with them. I have seen perfectly modern edifices for learning in which little or no learning occurred and classes with fewer than 20 students that were scarcely more than exercises in baby-sitting, except that a good baby-sitter would have had better control over her charges.

Students whose families are poor urgently require more of the sort of social capital that shapes the networks, values, norms, and relationships that make it possible for lives to have happy endings. In recent visits to schools that enroll primarily needy students in a dozen states, I concluded that what advantaged students have that the others are missing can be summed up in four phrases: a sense of connectedness, a sense of well-being, a sense of academic initiative, and a sense of knowing. Providing support of this kind will be far more difficult than recognizing the need for it.

Critics may dismiss this approach as coddling. Why is it, though, that they do not attach this derogatory label to steps taken in behalf of other children when they are trundled off to allergists and psychiatrists, taken to the library and the circus, aided by math tutors who come to their homes, sent to SAT cram courses at Princeton Review, given computers that allow them to browse the Internet from the comfort of their bedrooms, and put in touch with people who can help them obtain summer jobs and open doors for them?

The fact is that all children need support systems of the sort now in place only for the more advantaged. They need good health care from the time of conception. They need to be read to and need to hear rich language outside school. They need activities during all of their waking hours, not just the traditional school day, that embellish intellectual growth. Such venues as the concert hall, the museum, and the ice rink should not be the haunts of the privileged few. Students of all backgrounds require people who can see them through their homework, teach them about study habits and diligence, and ensure that their summers are fruitfully spent.

If the federal government can position itself to promote and sponsor programs that favorably affect attitudes about learning and inculcate habits of the mind, then it will perform a service as valuable as fixing buildings and lowering class sizes. Washington's imprimatur would powerfully influence states and local school districts. In the absence of such interventions, students who have not bought into the idea of working hard in school may not be affected by better buildings or smaller classes.

Some members of Congress have already dismissed Mr. Clinton's proposals as folderol, but what they seem not to understand is that a sense of connectedness, for example, can be enhanced by the president's proposal for education opportunity zones that would build stronger partnerships with parents, businesses, and communities. Students have to feel that they are a part of the educational enterprise, and they need ties to those who can most help them. Creating connections is a key element in change, as youngsters who are otherwise disenfranchised wend their way through the thicket of obstacles that obstruct their paths.

A place like Intermediate School 218 in Manhattan's drug-ridden Washington Heights makes itself a beckoning oasis for parents so that they will be favorably disposed toward the school and reinforce its aims in the home. A place like Canton Middle School in Baltimore, adjacent to factories where jobs have disappeared, reaches out to businesses throughout the city to engage them in partnerships that benefit students. A place like Ochoa Elementary School in a part of Tucson, Ariz., where impoverished families arrive regularly from Latin America, works for community betterment in alliance with such grassroots organizations as the Pima County Interfaith Council.

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When it comes to a sense of academic initiative, Mr. Clinton's measures give promise by offering to provide role models and mentors for children who do not readily recognize their possibilities in the world. Youngsters must learn by example that positive experiences during childhood can alter their future prospects, no matter how downtrodden they may be. When no one in their immediate family or neighborhood provides inspiration, they need to get it from wherever they can. Mr. Clinton would earmark \$140 million in 1999 to pay college students to provide academic information and mentoring to students as early as the 6th grade. I saw the importance of this kind of input in Newark, N.J., when the Communities in Schools program put students onto a bus and took them on a tour of black colleges in the South, the kind of trip that more-affluent students make with their parents. Students have to learn the lessons of motivation and perseverance, for instance, before they will apply themselves in math or social studies. Acceptance of delayed gratification is not an innate trait.

In San Diego's Advancement Via Individual Determination program, or avid, students of economic need are tutored and taught how to take notes in secondary school by college students who are on the brink of prevailing over the same deprivations that face their younger counterparts. The REACH program that operates during the summer for black males of middle school age in Cleveland provides role models and mentors in the person of teachers, college students, and high school students. And the "I Have a Dream" program, in the dozens of locales in which it operates, holds out the promise of a paid college education for those who acquire habits of persistence. At such sites as the Chelsea-Elliott Houses, a sprawling public-housing complex just south of New York City's Penn Station, college students from AmeriCorps figure prominently in I Have a Dream's attempt to insert more adults into the lives of poor children. President Clinton's proposals include \$89 million to expand AmeriCorps, with an emphasis on tutoring in reading.

When it comes to a sense of knowing, students in need can gain from the before- and after-school, Saturday, and summer programs mentioned by the president in his State of the Union Address. The 21st-Century Community Learning Centers Program would advance the goal of a “safe and enriching place to go after school,” by spending \$800 million over five years to expand the school day in order to make available extra learning and recreation during hours now considered outside the parameters of the school. Middle-class youngsters have so many possible ways of using this time that they and their parents must set priorities, but in economically depressed neighborhoods the streets are unsafe, intellectually stimulating out-of-school programs are few, and opportunities for wholesome recreation are woefully inadequate.

It is essential, though, as recognized in the concept of the Learning Centers Program, that children have opportunities to enlarge their sense of knowing. A knowledge base, like a savings account, builds cumulatively and sometimes requires extra deposits in order to grow to meaningful proportions. The Neighborhood Academic Initiative created in the wake of the Watts disturbances by the University of Southern California, for example, floods the lives of participants with the stuff from which scholastic success is fashioned. High school students spend their mornings in classes on the campus, attend their schools the rest of the day, and return to USC in the late afternoon and on Saturdays for tutoring. Program officials consider no part of a student’s life off limits to them.

Mr. Clinton’s initiatives have less to say about the physical and emotional sense of well-being of students in need. It is vital in this regard therefore to draw on such models as the one that the Children’s Aid Society established in New York with school-based medical and dental clinics to keep students healthy enough to persist in their studies. Well-being can also be addressed through programs that cultivate students’ feelings of caring for others and their civic responsibility, as, indeed, some programs around the country already do.

Yes, what we are discussing here is the idea of schools getting involved in more aspects of the lives of the students of greatest economic need. Perhaps Congress would be more receptive to these initiatives if it did not regard them as marking some kind of new direction for federal school aid. This approach of attending to the needs of the whole child, after all, is not a detour. It is a logical extension in the road that the federal government has traveled for more than a generation. The tenor of Washington’s involvement in the schools was set with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, which had Title I as its centerpiece.

The direction of assistance at that time and ever since--as signified by such legislation as that assisting the disabled and students of non-English-speaking backgrounds--has been to help those least able to help themselves. The inherent goal is to make more Americans capable of attaining places in the middle-class mainstream, hardly a subversive objective.