

Unlocking the Potential that Lies Within Every Child

BY GEOFFREY CANADA

I have spent the past 40 years working with poor children, and spent the prior 20 being one. So when I say that all children can learn, it is not just an academic theory for me. It is a belief based on decades of personal and professional experience.

In the 1960s I saw my own brother—a bright and thoughtful kid—labeled as “slow” and placed on the low-expectations track at our local public school in the Bronx. I watched as he battled against those expectations and eventually became a nuclear engineer. This past June I watched 17-year-old Morgan, outfitted in cap and gown, march with my charter school’s first graduating class of high school seniors having entered as a sixth grader labeled as a “bad boy” by five different elementary schools.

My belief that every child can learn inspires me every day and gives me an urgent sense of responsibility—to unlock the potential that I know lies within every child. It’s a belief that is all the more passionate because I have seen the harm done by adults who don’t believe all children can learn. What makes my belief controversial—and even dangerous to some—is the corollary that schools can be the key to the extent that they give primacy to children’s needs rather than the needs of adults.

Though a school can turn around a poor child’s odds of success, our country’s definition of “education” needs to broaden. Education—as a national policy—must start prior to kindergarten and extend beyond the walls of the classroom. These are areas where government has been reluctant to go, but where it must go if public education is to succeed for the

massive number of underprivileged children on the scale that is necessary. The return on these investments is simply too great to ignore.

While there are many programs and teachers who have accomplished what I call the “superhero” work of turning around teenagers lagging behind, we need to start much earlier to get at-risk children on track. Research shows that something as simple as talking more to an infant can enrich the neural architecture of the child’s brain, strengthening it for later learning. This is the kind of science that we need to share with parents to help produce big gains in our poorest, most disenfranchised communities.

Any teacher in America can tell you about a student whose life outside the classroom creates problems inside the classroom. There are “the squinters”—children with poor vision whose parents can’t afford glasses. Maybe it’s hunger pains interfering with a child’s ability to concentrate. Or sometimes it’s the fear of violence on the way home—or even at home—that’s distracting a child.

That said, it’s no secret that what’s going on inside many of our schools is horribly inadequate, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. Likewise, the solution, too, is no secret for anyone willing to really look. The solution resides in plain sight amid the many successful schools in middle-class neighborhoods. For these children, going to college is simply in the air around them. In these schools, if a child needs glasses, she gets them. If a student is struggling in math, he gets a tutor. These children have

safe, enriching afterschool activities, and for the most part don’t have to worry about whether they will get dinner after school or get shot on their way home. What we see among these schools is that there are a set of givens that allow educators, by and large, to succeed at the long, hard process of educating large numbers of children. Also implicit is that there is no time during a child’s development when we can simply drop our vigilance and assume he or she will be fine; our support system must run from birth through college.



In the debate about improving public education, some simply blame the parents. It is absolutely true that negative parenting can cripple a child's ability to learn, but I believe it is my responsibility as an educator to educate every child—even if the parent is uncooperative. I can't and won't give up on a child because she or he has a toxic parent—and neither can we as a society.

Others blame teachers—another easy target. Anyone who has stood in front of a classroom of students knows it is a herculean job. Unfortunately, the profession never gets the respect it deserves, which is just stunning when you consider the unparalleled role teachers play in building our future. Teachers should be treated and paid as the skilled professionals they are, and the great ones should be rewarded as such.

I believe, however, that the other side of that coin must be holding school staff accountable. We need to train and pay teachers more, but those who are demonstrated failures should not be routinely allowed to ruin the chances of children year after year. Certainly, failing teachers need support and training, but if they still cannot do the job, they cannot be allowed to continue on the job.

I wish I could say reforming our education system can be done without spending more money, but we cannot do this on the cheap. What I will say, and confidently so, is that smart investments in education, particularly done early in a child's life, will be more than offset by the reduction of societal costs. A high-quality prekindergarten program is a more humane and markedly less-expensive option than a high-security prison.

Children who are readied for the high-skills job market simply don't have the time or inclination to drift into antisocial behavior. Even if we don't want to look at the moral imperative, spending on education is a smart investment in our country's future. College graduates earn much more over their lifetime than high school dropouts. And, of course, those higher earnings bring in commensurate taxes for the country.

If we are going to stay competitive in the global marketplace, we cannot ignore the potential of all of our children—the future stewards of America. How can we not do everything humanly possible to make sure our children will continue to write the story of this country's incredible legacy? ■