No Time to Teach

By Bob Evancho

Don't take this article personally if you are a responsible, involved parent. If you take an active role in your child's education, you're to be commended. But America's school-age children seem to be at greater risk than ever, and parents are being blamed for much of the problem.

To be sure, parents are not responsible for all the factors involved in the decline of education in America. But from the perspective of many teachers and education experts, the underlying reason is this: Today's kids don't have enough parental guidance and too many parents expect the schools to fill that void.

In October the National Education Goals Panel released a report that underscored the correlation between the breakdown of the family and academic problems among American children. But the struggle with academics is just the tip of the iceberg, said a panel of seven teachers from Boise's Mountain View Elementary. Although they acknowledged that the reasons and the issues are complex, the panel members said the genesis of the problem is the home life of their students.

Six of the teachers are Boise State graduates and the seventh has taken classes at BSU. They shared their thoughts during a roundtable discussion. Their comments were edited for brevity:

'We can't teach basic skills when a child is hungry. They cannot learn because they're too busy trying to survive.'
It has been said that many parents expect schools to fill their role. Are schools expected to provide more than just an education? Is that fair?

**CONNIE BUNCH:** We do a lot more than educate. In fact, sometimes we don't get to educate because we're doing so many other things. The fairness issue is a moot point. It isn't fair because we don't get to do what we want to do, but this is how it is. This is what we have to deal with and now we have to come up with some ideas to help us do the right things for these kids. We've got to work toward some way to meet the needs of these children or else we are going to lose them. They are at risk.

**JUDY HAHN:** We do more than educate. We have to, because we can't teach those basic skills when a child is hungry or doesn't have a coat to wear in the middle of winter. They cannot learn, they can't pick up those academic skills because they're too busy trying to survive; we have to meet those other needs first.

**CATHY FOSTER:** I have found that a lot of the children that come to my classroom have a lot of social skills missing. I feel we really need to teach them social skills, and I don't think that is part of what you call academic learning. But we're finding out that in a lot of homes they are not taught proper social skills or social values.

**ELAINE MOORE:** We have a lot of parents who expect the school to take over the home role for them. They literally send their children to our classrooms without food, without proper clothing and they expect the school to pick that up. We have a lot of parents who throw that responsibility onto the school and onto the teacher.

**Why is this happening?**

**SUE AMBURN:** The [National Education Goals Panel] report said one of the leading causes of the problems with test scores and problems in our nation with education is the deterioration of the family and family values. I think most educators around the country just said, "So what else is new?" Children are not coming prepared to learn. A tremendous number of them are coming from single-parent homes or where both parents are working and the kids aren't spending much time with an adult. So it's kind of difficult to stand in front of 28 students, half of whom are really in trouble or having big problems, and just say, "Open up to page 12; we're going to start the work," without addressing their problems. You've got all those kids out there screaming for five minutes' worth of attention. And so we are having to walk up and say, "How are you?" and taking the time to figure out what their homes are like. You no longer just become an educator and a facilitator. You have to become an all-purpose person, meeting a tremendous number of needs — and not just academic needs.

**AREN'T THERE OTHER DUTIES TAKING AWAY FROM THE KIDS' LEARNING?**

**SYDIE MCINTYRE:** When you're wearing all the different hats, you can't be just a teacher. You have to have the skills of a counselor and nurse, and you're expected to know all the skills. We have kids who take medication in the classroom and we're supposed to know about the side effects of medication. There are just so many things that are taken for granted. People think, "Well, they must know, they're teachers." But we can't possibly know all of that.

**BUNCH:** One of the words that's becoming trite and overworked is nurturing. But we are getting children who are not being nurtured. They don't have a sense of their environment or knowledge about how things work in nature. Instead of that we are getting kids who are passive receptors. They come here with this lack of awareness and how to interact with their environment and with people because they sit and watch TV and no one talks to them about what they see.

One proposed solution is to offer child care before and after school, the so-called latchkey programs.

**JULIE O'LEARY:** My argument is that at someplace the school has to say, "No, we are not going to continue accepting more responsibilities." I live in fear of institutionalizing children. They're dropped off at 6:30 or 7 o'clock in the morning. They're fed, educated, baby-sat, and we just keep extending these services. I see this more and more becoming a reality. And this is what these kids are used to.

**MCINTYRE:** But how do we stop that cycle from continuing? I know in my program [for seriously emotionally disturbed] if we didn't provide some of those things, even transportation, the students would not be here, period. If we do not provide breakfast they would not eat. So how do we stop the cycle and keep them here? And feed them so they can learn? My program also offers a family counseling component; its like pulling teeth to get those families in, and it's free. But you can't get them in.

**AMBURN:** Last year Connie was talking about our staff getting together to discuss some of the problems we were experiencing.

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**BSU PREPARES TO MEET NEW NEEDS**

Let's face it: As more of America's students become "at risk," teachers are required to do more than just teach.

"There is a whole other dimension of student out there," says Virgil Young, chairman of Boise State's department of teacher education. "We need to get our prospective teachers out there facing those situations. These [new teachers] need to see at-risk children so they are a little better prepared to walk into a classroom knowing they're going to have to do more than just teach arithmetic."

With single-parent families and double-income households becoming the norm, adequate parental guidance often suffers. And whether it's fair or not, the onus to provide that missing influence quite often falls on the teacher.

Although parental guidance is suggested, and preferred, Young acknowledges that teacher preparation programs will have to pick up the slack left by the decline of the American family. People entering the teaching field now, he says, will need to develop skills in counseling, nursing and other areas to deal with the additional self-imposed duties — especially at the elementary level.

Unfortunately, Young says, BSU has not done "an adequate job," thus far in preparing its student-teachers for such added responsibilities.

That will change, however. "We have had a task force dissertation our program for the last 21 months," Young says, "and we're about to give birth to a proposal for some alterations; one of those things definitely focuses on at-risk kids in what will be our new elementary program."

Which should help both teacher and student.

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We talked about having a pilot group of parents that would come talk to us.

**BUNCH:** And our problem was how we were going to get them here. We talked about giving them dinner. Dinner was going to be part of it because we knew they wouldn't come if there wasn't something in it for them. We thought that maybe while they were chewing some of the food, we could work on ways to help them make a connection with school. We wanted to have parents say, "We want to be here. Thanks for having this program, and we will be there because we care about our kids." But we don't believe that would happen. That's why it's come down so hard upon us and that's why we're losing hope. And that's frightening to me. We're wearing down. Educators in general, the system is wearing down.

**AMBURN:** Are parents really that uninterested? They simply don't show up to meet their kids' teachers?

**AMBURN:** When they do [there usually is], a certain degree of animosity there.

**Why animosity?**

**AMBURN:** There's a competition there [between teacher and parent]. There's a lack of communication [between child and parent] and we're spending six solid hours a day with them. So parents aren't listening when they come together with us. They're antagonistic toward the school. They don't address it, but there's a lot of guilt from parents who feel they're not having quality time with their kids. They don't know what their kids are all about and they see teachers as those people who do.

**OL'EARLY:** It's funny because you get a real mixed bag from parents. I sent a letter to my [students'] parents the first week of school asking them to give me a little information about their kids. What are your child's interests? What skills or classes do they like best? What are their outside interests? What is the parents' attitude about homework? Well, I have 27 kids. I think I got back 15 letters, which I thought was a pretty good return. The responses ranged from pages for each question to "yay," "I don't know," "you figure it out," and "it's your job." The response on homework was so varied that I was sorry I asked the question. They ranged from "if you're doing your job, there wouldn't be a need for homework," to "I expect an hour's worth of homework every night."

**OL'EARLY:** I've toned down to where I'm spending about $500 a year, and I've really been holding the line on my budget. ... We know it's not fair and we came with the premise in mind. We chose to teach — we didn't expect to make a fortune and get stock options.

**OL'EARLY:** I've been told repeatedly that kids have a home life separate from school life. Which I find fascinating because we can't separate the two. We have to know what's happening at home.

**OL'EARLY:** I think it's the emotional expense that takes its toll. When a child isn't learning, you stew over it when you go home. But you don't know what's happening to them at home.

**BUNCH:** We are constantly being confronted with multiple social problems. We could all regale you with horror stories — incest within families, fathers in prison, and others. And this is in a somewhat middle-class neighborhood.

**McINTYRE:** By the end of the day you're completely wiped out. But then you think tomorrow's going to be such a milestone for your kids and you just keep coming back.

**HAHN:** If you like kids, if you think you can make a difference in kids' lives, I can't think of another occupation that's more rewarding. That's why.

**McINTYRE:** This is really a safe harbor for a lot of them. It's like they're wandering ships and we're there for them.

**FOSTER:** I had one little girl today who hugged me and said, "Gee, I can't wait until tomorrow." I just wanted to cry. It's really true. That's why we do it.

**AMBURN:** [One day at school] recently one of the kids' mothers asked me, "How can you do this? I don't understand how you can possibly do this." At that split second one of the little kids I taught last year burst through the door, ran across the room, jumped into my lap and said, "I love you. I miss you so much." That's why. It's the greatest job in the world.