The Trouble with Schools is the Trouble with Us

By Robert D. Barr

There is a bumper sticker that can be seen around the state proclaiming that "The Future of Idaho is in School Today."

While that provocative message does indeed ring true, it places an unfair responsibility on our teachers and our schools. Schools do have a significant responsibility in the development of the state's next generation of citizens, but research has helped us understand that schools alone can no longer do the job.

Regardless of the quality of schooling, more and more children are having difficulty learning, more and more children are growing up in poverty and in dysfunctional families and in homes where all adults work; more and more children are growing up in homes where English is not spoken.

Increasingly, children are arriving at school with social, emotional and learning handicaps; many who were drug babies at birth. It is this diverse and demanding student body that is proving so terribly difficult to teach. It is this development that has led many to conclude that public schools are failing and has contributed to such negative media attention.

But one thing is sure: Without strong support from families and communities, our schools cannot be successful.

In a true and troubling sense, it may not be schools that are failing, but that the problems of schools are only a reflection of the failure of an ever growing number of families and the failure of many communities to adequately support their schools. At a time when education has been identified as a national priority, state after state has slashed education budgets.

Almost everyone who is involved in public schools — everyone from the US West Teacher of the Year to the current Idaho Teacher of the Year to the classroom teacher down the street — has expressed a startling concern regarding the growing number of children who are arriving at school from tragic circumstances and dysfunctional families, arriving disinterested in school and unprepared to learn.

Some fear that the attention that these children need and must have threatens to overwhelm classroom teachers and render effective education nearly impossible for all the rest.

Combine the growing number in need with low teachers’ salaries, inadequate facilities and crowded classrooms and the effective schools that Idaho has prided itself on may well be in jeopardy.

Unlike so much of America, Idaho's schools have a long tradition of excellence, a tradition that continues to be enjoyed today. Idaho students continue to excel and our schools are far below the national averages in everything from school dropouts, to juvenile delinquency, to functional illiteracy.

There are, however, growing concerns throughout the state that an increasing number of children are arriving at the first grade with serious learning deficiencies.

Unless children gain a solid educational foundation during the early years before school, they will enter the first grade academically far behind their classmates. And, without massive and costly intervention, they will never catch up. If children do not learn to read by the third grade, they will probably never have a successful educational experience.

The long-term impact of the childhood
years has been carefully documented. If children have grown up without adequate care and nutrition, love and development, their lives can be tracked through learning and attention disorders, behavioral problems in higher grades, increased dropout rates and in many instances, unproductive, antisocial or even criminal behavior in adulthood.

The associated costs to society in alienation, unemployment or underemployment, underachievement, health and welfare programs, drug and alcohol abuse programs and often incarceration are truly staggering.

Research on these children has become an increasingly exact and often chilling science. School districts are now able to predict with better than an 80 percent accuracy rate, the number of third graders who will ultimately drop out of school.

The state of Indiana has gone even further: Researchers believe that they can predict the number of prison cells the state will need during the next decade by studying second graders. In America today, over 80 percent of the men and women in prison are high school dropouts.

It is now evident that schools deal only with "the tip of the iceberg" when it comes to children whose early childhood experiences have placed them "educationally at risk." The problems these youth face are deeply embedded in their home and family situations. If the associated problems facing these youths are to be dealt with, and dealt with successfully, schools and communities must work together. Increasingly, that is beginning to happen.

Research has documented that early childhood programs can make a significant difference in the lives of children. Research has shown that early childhood prevention programs are far more cost effective than later intervention programs.

We now know what causes children to be educationally disadvantaged; why some child care programs, preschools, kindergartens, and elementary schools work so effectively, and why others don't. We know that IQ scores and learning capabilities are not static, they are not predetermined at birth.

We now know the characteristics of effective programs that can enhance and improve children's learning capabilities. Research has shown that high-quality child care, strong preschool or head start programs followed by all-day kindergarten and elementary school enrichment programs can have tremendous positive success.

Programs for needy children can be effective, but they must start early and involve community health, child care, and preschool programs as well as the elementary school.

The growing awareness of the importance of the early childhood years is reflected in President George Bush's National Education Goals for America and Governor Cecil Andrus' Strong Start Program. Both the president and the governor have established that the Number 1 goal facing education is ensuring that all children arrive at school ready to learn.

At Boise State University, the College of Education has developed a major early childhood education program that has been approved by the Idaho Board of Education and forwarded to the governor's office and the Legislature for their consideration.

The BSU proposal promises to provide technical assistance to schools and communities in southwest Idaho attempting to upgrade and improve their early childhood, preschool and kindergarden programs. The proposal promises to expand and enrich the BSU programs that prepare specialists in the early childhood area and it promises to raise public awareness concerning early childhood education.

Robert Barr is dean of BSU's College of Education. A nationally known speaker on education topics, Barr started at the university in August after serving as dean of education at Oregon State University since 1982.