

## GUEST EDITORIAL



Top left, Rocbelle Frederick of Abbotston School, Baltimore, Maryland, photograph by Susie Fitzhugh. All other photographs from Uniphoto, Inc. Design by Al Way.

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### THE BEST KIDS THEY HAVE

Ready or not, here they come. No, ready or not, here they are! In September 3,600,000 youngsters entered school; 25 percent of these children live in poverty; for blacks the figure is 50 percent and for Hispanics, 40 percent. Today, out of 80 million households in the nation, 9½ million are headed by a single female parent, 16 percent of whom are under age 25, 50 percent unemployed, 42 percent living in central cities (Mirga 1986). In fact, every day in America, 40 teenage girls give birth to their *third* child (Hodgkinson n.d.). In 1955, 60 percent of households matched the traditional family image of one mother, one father, and two children; today it's 4 percent (Mirga 1986).

The 1950's family is gone. The family today is different, maybe no better or no worse, but different. As Larry Lezotte (1985) said, "The parents are sending us the best kids they have. They are not keeping the good ones at home." We can look at the changes with foreboding and exasperation, throw up our hands, and place blame; or we can face the challenges before us. For many of our children, we may be the only stable adult in their lives. For many, we may be their only hope for a brighter tomorrow.

Often we feel frustrated because we fear our efforts are futile, when measured against the odds many of our children face. Often our success cues become fewer or less frequent. Our customary ways of knowing we are doing a good job and making a difference become less obvious. We do not always have the resources needed to make a difference. Then we lose hope or begin to believe that these children have deficits so large that learning is unlikely, and this in turn becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and a prescription for failure.

But we need not search for what to do—we know what to do. Each school, each department, and each teacher must believe and act on the belief that all children can learn. Edmonds (1979) was correct when he said, "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that."

We must examine the messages we send to children: *you are poor, unwashed, unmanageable, or you are capable, able, and worthy.* And, further... *as your teacher, I will do everything in my power to teach you that effort leads to success, that the circle of poverty can be broken, that education can help break down the color barriers, that what you do now can pay dividends, and that you are Somebody.*

If we only mouth the words, then we will surely doom another generation to failure. We must teach—and show—our children that we can be responsible for each other and we can care for each other and help each other. We can show them that school is a place to gain knowledge; a place to learn how to solve life's problems; a place to give and receive love; a place to become successful; and most of all a place of high expectations that sends this message: "This is important, you can do it, and I won't give up on you" (Gower and Saphier 1987).

I am not so naive as to believe that schools can solve all of society's problems. Policymakers as leaders and society as a whole must act to save our children. Parents, communities, businesses, and schools must act in concert. But we in the schools cannot wait for other segments of society and other institutions to step up to the challenge. The children are here—now. □

#### References

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