

Children

What Teachers Say About Children in America

Schools, families, and communities must work together to meet the educational and emotional needs of children.

The nation's teachers are not satisfied with the impact of school reform. In a Carnegie Foundation survey of thousands of teachers, we found that 23 percent of today's teachers feel morale in the profession has improved since 1983; 49 percent say it has declined. Further, despite all of the talk about school renewal, three out of five teachers report that they still have virtually no time for classroom preparation during the school day, nearly 30 percent have ten or more class preparations every week, and more than a third say class size has increased since 1983.

But the most troubling responses we received from teachers concerned students and the growing gap between the school and the home. Nine teachers in ten said lack of parental support is a problem at their school; 89 percent reported abused or neglected children to be a problem, and nearly 70 percent said that poor health and undernourishment were among the problems children face.

Begin with the Children

At the end of our survey, we asked teachers if they had anything else to

say about their work. Half the teachers—11,000—took time off between correcting assignments to jot down their thoughts, and what they wrote was powerful—and often poignant. Many comments revealed great frustration about working conditions—too

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many students, too much paperwork, and too many mindless interruptions. But a surprisingly large number talked, not about themselves, but about their students.

A kindergarten teacher in urban Minnesota who has taught for 19 years wrote:

The difficult part of teaching is not the academics. The difficult part is dealing with the great numbers of kids who come from emotionally, physically, socially, and financially stressed homes. Nearly all of my kindergarten kids come from single-parent families. Most of the moms really care for their kids but are very young, undereducated, and financially strained. Children who have had no breakfast or who are fearful of what their moms' boyfriends will do to them—or to their moms—are not very good listeners or cooperative partners with teachers or with their peers. We are raising a generation of emotionally stunted and troubled youth who will in turn raise a generation of the same. What is the future of this country when we have so many needy youngsters?

To improve the quality of the nation's schools, we must begin with the children. For years we have been talking about them in dry, disaffecting terms. They are *students*, *cohorts*,

The Secret Club

James Ray Ross

Children going through the trauma of divorce often feel alone and ashamed, as we found out when we began school support groups to give children a chance to acknowledge their problems and talk about their feelings. In the very first session, when the therapist began to explain what the meeting was about, one student suddenly turned to a classmate and said, "You mean this is happening to your family, too? I thought I was the only one in the world it was happening to." Later, when the group was selecting a name, another child shyly suggested they call their group "The Secret Club," and to a person, everyone agreed enthusiastically on that name.

Such deep and private feelings are not clearly visible in classrooms, and divorcing parents rarely notify the school of the disruption in the family. What teachers and principals are likely to see is a sharp drop in a student's achievement or a sudden change in attitude. Then, when they make inquiries, they often discover that the family is breaking up. With several children in our school experiencing this trauma, my staff and I designed a program to help them over the worst of their difficulties.

With the help of Child and Family Services, a community agency, we secured private funding to cover the cost of therapists during this project. I then arranged an agreement with central office for group therapeutic services to occur during the school day at two primary schools, one intermediate school, and one middle school, all in the same neighborhood. The school counselors easily identified 10 children in each school who needed help in coping with their emotions during the family crisis. Next the counselors contacted the children's parents, informed them that a permission form was coming home, and explained the nature of the program. Two therapists then met with each group during the last period of the day, one day a week for six weeks.

The therapists' goal was to enable the children to open up, share their feelings, and discuss ways to cope with their troubles. Their techniques varied, of course, according to the age of the children. In our primary school, the therapists provided coloring books illustrating what children go through in these circumstances. As children talked about the feelings expressed in the pictures, the therapists gleaned information they needed to draw all the children into the discussion.

After the first two sessions, we asked parents from all four groups to attend a night session at the middle school. There the therapists explained problems children have in adjusting to a family breakup and described behaviors children typically exhibit during the crisis. Parents were nodding their heads in agreement; a number of them began to share concerns with each other, and a few stayed late to chat with the therapists.

To evaluate our efforts, we held debriefing sessions for teachers and central office supervisors; and we solicited feedback from parents and students in the program. The teachers noted especially their own increased awareness of the difficulties their students had encountered and their ability to respond sensitively as a result. But the students made the most rewarding comments of all, such as: "It was good to make friends" and "It made me feel better to know that other people in the school had the same problems" and "Thanks for taking the time to care."

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classes—in short, abstractions we do not have to touch. In fact, only once in *A Nation at Risk* is the word *children* used.

Seek the Child's Perspective

Thomas Jefferson, playing out one of the first schemes for public education in America, argued that the mission of schools should be to make children "useful instruments for the public." And we've been talking in these utilitarian terms ever since. Our need to "produce" these "instruments" might be why we put so much emphasis on

workbooks, tests, and quantitative measures of children's progress.

Regardless of the motivation, public policy matters are viewed, all too often, from the perspective of an adult, not a child. The call for better schools is often framed in terms of a desire to make America more competitive in foreign markets. Certainly, this is crucial, but it has little to do with the needs of children.

Many teachers surveyed share this concern: they contend that pressures within the classroom are too great and may result in children's "turning off" to learning. A kindergarten teacher

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with 18 years' experience in rural Pennsylvania voices her uneasiness:

I am extremely concerned about the stress our children are exposed to. We don't seem to allow our children to be children any more. The push is for earlier learning—do it faster! It all starts in the elementary grades. The children are not able to learn in a relaxed atmosphere. We no longer have time to read a story every day, do creative dramatics, learn through experimentation, and review previous learning.

A primary school music teacher in suburban New Jersey speaks for many colleagues when she criticizes the pressures caused by the growing reliance on test scores to measure students—and teachers—performance:

In the large, affluent suburb where I teach, the pressure is on the kids and the teachers from kindergarten through high school to get good grades, bring up the test scores, and be the best (on the test). Classroom teachers are locked into curriculum, scheduling, and test preparation that leave little time for innovation, creativity, or diversity in teaching. Those teachers who would like to have the freedom to exercise their professional judgment are discouraged and frustrated. Of course, the competitive atmosphere affects students, too. Somewhere the meaning of education has been lost.

Teachers understand exactly what is lost when a "testing mentality" takes over. A 2nd grade teacher in suburban California describes her frustration:

We must get them through workbook after workbook. We must make them produce on paper to be verified by all. We feel guilty doing an art lesson or having a wonderful discussion.

Because elementary school teachers know how vital excellent teaching is in the early years, they are baffled and disappointed that few others share this

understanding. A 3rd grade teacher in rural Wyoming speaks for many of his colleagues when he makes this plea for the recognition of early education:

There is a tendency to overlook elementary schools, especially the lower grades, K-3. The opinion seems to be that anybody can teach those grades and that we need our master teachers in the upper grades and high schools. We need good teachers there, but that's not where the most important things in education are happening. How can I say this nicely? It's like a dairy farmer saying, "We need to feed those calves shredded newspaper so we can cut back on our feed bill and have enough money to pay the vet when they get sick." We are overlooking the causes and glorifying the cures.

Bring Families into the Schools

Teachers tell us that working parents are spending less time with their children, and as a result students may enter school with limited skills and less readiness to learn. While teachers realize they have little control over what goes on outside the school, they suggest ways that schools can help families and children. A 3rd grade teacher in urban California recommends that parents go up to school, too:

The parents must have an opportunity to go for training on how to help their children with the limited time they have. Parents must be involved in educating their children. They must know how important their help will be in the success of their children's educational future.

A 4th and 5th grade teacher in rural New Mexico offers a solution that may benefit children and adults by providing some valuable intergenerational connections:

We need more adults in our schools to provide for the educational and emotional needs of our students.

We need more adults in our schools to provide for the educational and emotional needs of our students. Since more women need to work, we cannot depend on volunteers as we did in the past. I feel that we need to hire literate education aides to work in the classrooms. Older women are the most poverty-stricken members of our society, and their potential as educators is not realized. Many older women would be happy to work a four-hour shift as educational aides at good wages. It would augment their pensions and make their lives easier. Older men could also be utilized in educational capacities. Many children who are the victims of absent fathers who don't provide monetary or emotional support lose the opportunity to form relationships with significant nurturing men. I really feel that schools are being put in situations in which they must provide extra services to children who suffer from sociological problems.

Listen to the Teachers

When children enter school less eager and less excited about learning, the tasks of elementary teachers become more demanding. Still, teachers remain undaunted. The response of the majority of teachers is to work harder to engage their students' interest; most teachers also advocate an increased role for the school in ensuring the well-being of the children. A 1st and

2nd grade teacher in rural Georgia expresses her belief in practical terms:

When kids don't have much at home, they need a vision to open the door of their future. It has to start in the classroom.

With all of the indignities and frustrations, the vast majority of teachers remain committed to their careers—and to their students. Most teachers we surveyed said they plan to stay in the profession. Most express satisfaction with teaching. And, by a wide margin, teachers say their expectations have been met regarding their ability to help students learn.

But we are living on borrowed time. In the push for quality in education, there is just so much that can be accomplished by directives from above. In the next phases of school renewal, partnerships between the family and school must be strengthened, communities must confront the growing needs of students, and all of us must listen to the voices of the teachers. □

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