

LEADERSHIP

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OVERVIEW

America's Challenge

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Recent developments confirm that communism is dead not only in Eastern Europe but in the heart of the U.S.S.R. itself. The doctrine of enforced sharing has been thoroughly discredited. The reason is obvious: the Russian people live miserably, while most citizens of the United States and other capitalist countries enjoy a far higher standard of living.

But that is not to say that Americans have achieved the ideal system. For example, the living conditions of some of our children are disgraceful.

As in other generations, many of today's kids are well loved and cared for. In every school there are fine, wholesome youngsters who will grow up to be healthy, contributing adult citizens. But there are other children in need of more than any school can provide.

In *Beyond Rhetoric*, the 32 distinguished members of the National Commission on Children summarize the situation this way:

... among all races and income groups, and in communities nationwide, many children are in jeopardy. They grow up in families whose lives are in turmoil. Their parents are too stressed and too drained to provide the nurturing, structure, and security that protect children and prepare them for adulthood. Some of these children are unloved and ill tended. Others are unsafe at home and in their neighborhoods. Many are poor, and some are homeless and hungry. . . . The harshness of these children's lives and their tenuous hold on tomorrow cannot be countenanced by a wealthy nation, a caring people, or a prudent society. America's future depends on these children, too.¹

In this issue, ASCD staff writer John O'Neil (p. 4) documents the numerous social problems that put so many children in jeopardy. Hill Walker and Robert Sylwester (p. 14) report research showing that boys identified for antisocial conduct in 5th grade were likely to engage in serious criminal behavior when they grew older. That will not surprise experienced educators, but the researchers say it is an important finding because it demonstrates a need for early intervention, and they suggest some elements of a sound intervention program.

A contributing factor to antisocial behavior, as well as to such other problems as drug abuse and poor achievement, is low self-esteem. Jim Beane (p. 25) has carefully examined the research literature to sort out the known from the unknown and the sensible from the superficial. In his balanced article, he condemns "fluff and radical individualism" but argues that schools have a role to play in enhancing self-esteem. They can best fulfill that role, he

maintains, through "authentic participation, collaborative action, a problem-centered curriculum, and independent diversity."²

Schools now provide many more services to children than they did only a few years ago, but schools simply cannot do it all. Especially when working with multiple-problem families—those with very low incomes, inadequate housing, physical and mental health problems—schools must cooperate with community agencies. Because the services of these groups are often overlapping and poorly coordinated, schools in many communities are sponsoring interagency collaboration projects in which the participants patiently sort out who does what. Grace Pung Guthrie and Larry Guthrie (p. 17) offer guidelines for such an undertaking, which they say may help educators and others "reconceptualize the role of the school and the relationship between the school, the community, and the larger society."³

Better coordination of services to needy families is clearly necessary; the benefits to children are more than worth the extra effort educators must make to get representatives of community agencies talking to one another. But many social agencies are relatively ineffective because, like many schools, they are poorly staffed and inadequately funded. Across the country, states and local governments are slashing budgets for public services from libraries to social work to education. Americans need to reconsider their priorities.

The failure of communism shows that enforced communal responsibility doesn't work. But can the citizens of our democracy be convinced to willingly forego some of their personal pleasures for the common good? The National Commission on Children believes we must.

Clearly, the problems that harm children and threaten the nation have their roots in the failure of individuals to assume responsibility for themselves and the children they bring into the world. But they spring as well from society's failure to invest in children's well-being and to support and encourage families in the critical and often difficult task of rearing children....

The time for blame and recrimination is over. Too many children have already paid too high a price for our carelessness. We may not all be equally guilty of creating this situation, but we are all equally responsible for changing it. □

¹National Commission on Children, (1991). *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office).

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