

Wanting The Best For Our Children

by Dr. Dorothy Rich

Is there anyone who doesn't want the BEST education for children? I can't find any, but what is increasingly harder to find, even for education policy makers, is the answer to: What is the BEST?

Is it as headlines tell us computers in every classroom? Choice? Vouchers? Is the answer all of the above? None of the above? Even rational minds can go bonkers with the multi-messages of today's multi-media.

The good news is that we already know the answer. It's in the heart of every adult and on the lips of lots of children. We just have to recognize it.

When I ask adults about the BEST we want for children, answers from across the country sound just like this: *Self-confidence, responsibility, dependability, curiosity, eagerness to learn, independence, self-discipline, sensitivity to others, kindness, consideration, hard working.*

The interesting thing about these answers is that they are the same everywhere. It makes no difference who we are or what city and state we live in. These are the true basics and we know them.

These are education values. They are found well outside the Rose Garden and the campaign trail and they don't show up only in an election year. Moreover, they do not belong to any one configuration of the family. These answers come from families of all shapes and ages.

If we believe, and we do, that these values are the best we can hope for, desire, expect for our children, what do we do we to get this BEST?

I'd almost like to be able to say that we can do it the "easy way," with more computers, with vouchers, charters, smaller class sizes. But, these are answers keyed primarily to a narrow vision of education: they are in-school answers. And while fine-tuning the classroom is a fine goal, it's far from a complete answer, no matter what we do within the school walls.

Time studies confirm what we know...that children up the age of 18 spend most of their life outside of the classroom. We know this, even when we obsess about what happens in school. Otherwise, the hit parade of hopes for our kids would not lead off with the values that are originally taught at home.

The reality is this: the best that we hope for our kids, the values that we hold dear, have to be taught the "hard" way, the old-fashioned way, by adults who care about children, at home and in school.

Kids know what counts too. At the Home and School Institute, we ask children across the nation, of all ages including teens, what's the BEST your parents can give you. The answer is not a certain brand of gym shoes. The answer is TIME.

The best thing that can happen in any school chosen by parents or forced on them, is that when children walk into that school, they are treated as valued persons by adults who want and can teach the best. The curriculum has to speak to both the head and the heart. We are not pouring knowledge into empty vessels. Kids come to school with heads full of media hype, information galore, and yet, lots of hopes and dreams.

In the current discussion about major education reform, the major basics, what I call “the inner engines of learning, the MegaSkills” *confidence, motivation, effort, responsibility, initiative, perseverance, caring, teamwork, common sense, problem solving and focus--* have not yet received the teaching that is needed. Some might ask if they can be taught. The good news is **Yes**. But, they grow incrementally...and most importantly they grow through partnership between school and home.

One of the key points of the MegaSkills Program is in integrating academics and character development so that the power and responsibility for learning transfers to the student for the classroom and beyond.

The picture is not all rosy. Two-thirds of adults surveyed in a Public Agenda study on what Americans really think about the next generation said teenagers were “rude,” “wild” and “irresponsible.” Nearly half described younger children as “spoiled” and nearly a third called them “lazy.” The blame was pinned on parents and the schools. It doesn’t have to be this way. We can teach what we believe is important.

Children, teens too, basically want to do right, to achieve, to feel meaning in their lives. The best thing in any classroom, in any home are adults who put across the message to children: “Education is important: you can do it. We are here to help: We will hold standards; we will talk about them. We will practice the education we preach. We will, in short give you the BEST.” The best news of all is that the BEST is truly within everyone’s reach.

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