

Schools shouldn't be blamed because society fails children

Editor's note: Last week, addressing the National Conference of State Legislatures meeting in Cincinnati, Princeton Schools Superintendent Richard A. Denoyer challenged a report by the non-profit Twentieth Century Fund calling for restructuring of the way schools are governed. He explains his remarks in this column.

By Richard A. Denoyer

The Task Force of School Governance in its report tries to convince readers that the restructuring of school boards is vital if reform — such as site-based management, class size, teacher preparation, and student assessment — is to occur. This is all based on the premise that "public schools are failing." Logic class in college taught us that, when the premise was wrong, the conclusion is considered wrong also. The premise that public schools are failing is ludicrous. Society is failing — not the schools!

There are a number of societal problems that affect our society and children — a soaring, \$4 trillion national debt, pollution, crime, drugs, special interest legislation, corporate take-over artists and a shift of industrial production facilities to countries with low-cost labor.

Other factors affecting our students are preoccupation with movies, television, and radio which sensationalize sex and brutality; drug pushers using children to act as runners and to sell drugs to other children; and a materialistic society that creates an atmosphere that causes many students to work long hours to get material possessions at the expense of doing their school homework. Finally, imagine how much homework is completed or the quality of homework when 73 percent of students, 13 years of age, watch television three or more hours per day.

More women are working because of need or choice. In 60 percent of the married couples, both members are working. Divorce is at an all-time high; there are many children being born to unwed mothers; thus, there are more single-parent homes. America's preoccupation with sex and brutality and its drug and alcohol consumption have produced teenage pregnancy, AIDS in children, drug-exposed babies, sexually and/or physically abused children which, in turn, cause psychological and emotional problems for our children. The number of children coming from socioeconomically deprived families is significantly increasing. All of these factors have had or are having a drastic impact on the children entering our schools.

Let's assume that researchers in 1960 or 1970 studied the problems and conditions, demographics and student achievements for those years and the years preceding. Suppose they had a crystal ball that told them the societal problems, conditions and demographics through 1992 but no information on how students were doing in school. What would they project the students' achievements to be?

They more than likely would have projected that the student achievements would not be as good as those of the children of the 1960s or 1970s because of the societal problems and conditions affecting today's students.

Let's now take a look at how students have done in school over the years.

- In 1971, according to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), which ranks student performance on a scale of 0 to 500, reading proficiency for 9-year-olds was 207.3; in 1988, it was 211.8. For 13-year-olds, it was 255.2 in 1971 and 257.5 in 1988. For 17-year-olds, it was 285.4 in 1971 and 290.1 in 1988.

- The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that in mathematics



Changing families

- The divorce rate increased 143 percent from 1965 to 1988.
- The poverty level of students in public schools increased from 16 percent in 1975 to 25 percent in 1992 and is projected to increase to 28 percent by 2020.
- The percentage of single-parent homes rose from 11 percent in 1960 to 25 percent in 1988.
- The percentage of working mothers with children 5 years or younger rose from 29 percent in 1970 to 51 percent in 1988.
- In 1989, one out of every six babies was born to a teen-age mother.

happened demographically and educationally over the years. Also, many research reports verify that the public schools are, overall, providing students a good to excellent education in spite of the many problems and conditions that our students face day to day.

The premise that American public schools are failing, thus the governance of these schools should be changed or restructured, is too simplistic. What really has to be corrected and improved are the societal problems and conditions affecting our society, families and children.

Neither the public school system nor its governing body is "broken." It is the leadership of our society that has been unwilling to face the national, state, and local problems and conditions that confront our citizens. It is time that we realize our students' problems are those caused by a weak, materialistic, and permissive adult society.

Governance of school districts should be left in the hands of locally elected school board members. State and federal laws and regulations that interfere with local control of school districts and restrict the creativity of local school boards and educators should be eliminated.

proficiency, the students 9 years of age scored 219.1 in 1973 and 221.7 in 1986; the 13-year-olds scored 266 in 1973 and 269 in 1986; and the 17-year-olds scored 304.8 in 1970 and 288.5 in 1986.

■ The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that in 1970, in science proficiency, the students 9 years of age scored 224.9 and in 1986 224.3; the 13-year-olds scored 254.9 in 1970 and 251.4 in 1986; and the 17-year-olds scored 304.8 in 1970 and 288.5 in 1986.

■ The percent of 25 to 29-year-olds who did not finish four years of high school dropped from 61.9 percent in 1940 to 14.1 percent in 1990.

■ The percent of minority students, 25 years of age and over, completing four or more years of college climbed from 2 percent in 1950 to 17 percent in 1990.

■ The percent of minority students, 25 years of age and over, completing four or more years of high school rose dramatically, from 14 percent in 1950 to 67 percent in 1990.

■ Twenty-three percent of U.S. students finish four or more years of college. No other country comes close to this achievement.

The statistics provide much data on what

and education's future.
Fifteen years from now, there will be an even greater number of retired and poverty-stricken citizens living in the United States. The baby boomers will have retired; thus, there will be fewer people in the work force to pay for the care of the elderly and deprived. These factors will lead to more deprivation and societal unrest.

Today's leaders must make a concerted effort to develop strategic plans for each societal problem discussed; the plans must be both short-term and long-term if they are to benefit future generations.

Take a moment to consider the factors leading to the fall of the Roman Empire. The similarities of today's society and the Roman society are real and shocking. We cannot permit our society to suffer a tragic ending like that which happened in Rome. We must take the responsibility today to assure a brighter tomorrow for our society. It is time to stop criticizing each other and to find ways of identifying the real problems in our society and what we have to do as educators, legislators, and parents to "turn things around."

Clarence Page will return next week.