



The missing piece: What ordinary people can do to promote public school reform

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Stripped to its basics, the battle to reform public education in low-income communities is a struggle against isolation.

Families living in poverty continuously cope with immense and complex problems largely on their own — challenges as basic as keeping food on the table, preventing utilities from being turned off and making the next rent payment.

Our most heroic teachers, meanwhile, typically labor in obscurity. Periodically we honor them with a plaque, a sheet cake, maybe a little punch. But mostly they go it alone, not just as teachers, but also as social workers for the children they serve and even as personal shoppers for classroom supplies.

The isolation often is perpetuated by hidebound school administrators who just go through the motions, school boards that engage in petty fights, unions that reflexively resist new ways of doing things, education experts who seem reluctant to leave the ivory tower even during a prolonged period of educational crisis.

But the most profound isolation is that of the children themselves — some of whom want desperately for positive role models and reliable supportive adults, particularly adult males.

Kelvin Adams, superintendent of St. Louis Public Schools, told us that he recently had asked one of his high school principals to identify the single resource most likely to help his students succeed.

“Connections to the community,” the principal said, meaning “long-term commitment” and “encouragement from outside their families.”

These sentiments increasingly are shared by St. Louis’ business leaders.

“If we are serious about improving public education,

we have to accept a certain reality ... that many of our children do not have an engaged adult in their life,” said Tom Irwin, executive director of Civic Progress. “All the discussions about teachers, programs and facilities will never really result in anything if we fail to realize that in order to be successful, some adult needs to stand behind every child.”

Teach for America is one organization that is trying to break this isolation. The celebrated program, launched in 1990, last year recruited nearly 4,500 high-achieving college graduates to teach in low-income communities — nearly 200 in the St. Louis region.

Wendy Kopp, Teach for America’s founder and CEO, was in St. Louis last week. She said that young teachers are changing the “life trajectories” of students and, by their example and ideas, helping to quicken the metabolism of efforts to reach and energize children.

There also are many dedicated individuals in the St. Louis community who take extraordinary steps to connect with and encourage these children — by tutoring, supporting teachers, becoming involved in youth organizations and helping students prepare for and navigate through the complicated college admission process.

One fascinating effort that holds great promise comes from a venerable and proven volunteer program — Big Brothers Big Sisters of Eastern Missouri.

The organization is being reshaped in ways that hold special promise for broadening community involvement in public schools. The foundation of the program remains “building relationships that encourage and support young people.” What’s new is how that relationship is being focused to promote success in school.

The ABC Education Initiative seeks to measure how these “trusting and enduring relationships” might

influence school performance. With parents' permission and with assistance from the schools, BBBS staffers are tracking children's attendance, disciplinary matters and performance in math and reading.

Each child is supported by a team made up of the child's big brother or sister, teacher, school administrator, parent and agency staffers who keep everyone up to date on the child's progress. Donors, who make the program possible, also are part of the team.

When the indicators move — up or down — the team responds. They celebrate successes and intervene to reverse setbacks. The program puts "good hearts and data, side by side," said Mr. Adams, the district superintendent.

Even small gestures by a big brother or sister who has won the trust of a child can have a potentially large and lasting impact. The "big" doesn't become the "little's" tutor or educational overseer. He or she is there to provide caring support, timely concern and encouragement. He or she often is able to reach children in ways teachers and parents cannot.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Eastern Missouri typically has between 1,800 and 2,000 active relationships. By fall, 850 will be taking part in the ABC program. The rest eventually will. The ABC program has been rolled out in St. Louis and Cape Girardeau public schools; it will begin in the Normandy district next school year.

Big Brothers Big Sisters has staff members on site at five St. Louis schools and will expand into two more

this fall. The agency hopes to increase the number of children in the program, which has a significant waiting list. That requires increased financial support and more committed adult volunteers.

The program is desperate for men who can offer two visits for a total of four hours a month.

Potential volunteers sometimes mistakenly think they are being asked to find and free up this time from busy schedules. But the idea is simply to include the child in something you already would be doing — making a meal, going to a sporting event or even just watching TV.

No one can predict the ultimate success of the ABC program. But it has this going for it: It's the kind of thing people would want to do for children they love and want to succeed.

As a city, a state and a region, we can revolutionize school curricula, impose new testing regimens and move from traditional schools to charter schools to something in between. We can blame teachers, strip them of tenure and punish or reward them until the cows come home.

But it's difficult to see how anything we do will matter unless children have caring and encouraging adults on their side when school is not in session.

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Big Brothers Big Sisters
of Eastern Missouri

www.bbbsemo.org

St. Louis

501 N. Grand Boulevard, Suite 100
St. Louis, Missouri 63103
Phone: 314.361.5900

St. Charles

1236 Jungermann Road, Suite G
St. Peters, MO 63376
Phone: 636.939.2227

Cape Girardeau

1610 North Kingshighway, Suite 305
Cape Girardeau Missouri, 63701
Phone: 573.339.1518

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