

## OPEN FORUM

# A need to look beyond the school day

BY PETER FORTENBAUGH

The achievement gap that plagues our schools is a persistent and complex problem. But to solve that problem, we first need to focus on what we call the "opportunity gap."

Here in the Bay Area, high schools with some of the highest test scores in the nation thrive just a few miles from schools where two-thirds of the students do not even graduate.

The implications of these simple facts are dramatic. In a society in which low-skilled jobs account for only 15 percent of total jobs, post-secondary education is the key to staying above the poverty level.

The story is a familiar one. On one side of the gap, college-educated parents engage with the schools. Kids go to preschool before kindergarten, and they have coaches to prepare them for college, which is a given. They get tutoring if their grades falter.

For children on the other side of the gap, kindergarten is often their first exposure to school. Parents struggle to understand the complexities of the educational system. Many children do not see college as a real possibility because no one expects it of them.

Perhaps it is the daunting nature of this challenge that keeps many of us from getting involved. But those of us in the youth development arena know that certain things can help our kids bridge the opportunity gap.

School partnership programs provide opportunities for all of our students.

Working to improve the school day is necessary but insufficient. Schools alone cannot close the opportunity gap. Teachers cannot be miracle workers - educator, coach, tutor, big brother and mentor all rolled into one.

Partnerships between schools and youth services organization can bring opportunity to students by aligning after-school instruction with the school curriculum, reinforcing what students learn at school. Kids get a safe place to study and experiences they often do not have at school: sports, art and computer lessons.

We know these programs work; we have the success stories to prove it. But they require caring adults - staff and volunteers - to make them work.

Positive adult relationships are critically important.

At the heart of the solution to the opportunity gap lie a few simple truths. All kids need to feel a sense of belonging. They need to learn how to learn. They need to be surrounded by peers who appreciate the importance of education. They need to maintain the attitude of "I can" that all children begin with. They need to feel empowered to be the drivers in their lives and not detached spectators. Positive adult relationships are the only way to help them achieve all of this.

Youth services organizations give young people the chance to develop positive relationships with role models who instill constructive attitudes and life skills. Consistently caring adults connect with kids and help them understand how school is relevant to their lives. They don't lecture through programs; they influence over time through stable and trusting relationships.

We must help families get involved with the schools.

More parental involvement with the schools can return huge dividends. Many of the parents in our communities do not know how to work with the education system. They can't help their children choose high school classes or apply for college. They can't set expectations because they often don't know what's possible.

Youth organizations advocate for and engage with parents to help them navigate the system. Parents who are more engaged can unlock the opportunities available to their children - the chance to improve their academic performance, graduate from high school and attend college, today's prerequisite for finding well-paying jobs.

None of this is magic. But at the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula and other local organizations, we know these efforts can work. People are making a difference by devoting some of their time and dollars to help change the lives of our local children. If you want to play a part in that, your local youth services organization is eager to hear from you.

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