It starts at HOME

Dallas Morning News, The (TX) - April 18, 2010

- Author/Byline: TOD ROBBERSON
- Edition: EDITION1
- Section: POINTS
- Page: P01
- Column: TOD ROBBERSON

Principal Lucy Hakemack got a shocking response from her H. Grady Spruce High School students when they were told that their Pleasant Grove neighborhood ranks second in the nation in teen pregnancies.

They applauded.

It seems the students regarded their school and community as having accomplished something noteworthy. They just didn't get that a top national ranking for ruined futures is not a good thing.

This newspaper and others who advocate on behalf of southern Dallas can badger City Hall all we want about inattention to quality-of-life issues like code enforcement and crime. We can keep lamenting the lack of business investment south of the Trinity and Interstate 30. But there's a significant component to the north-south disparity in Dallas that starts right at the doorsteps of southern Dallas residents themselves: the importance of parental involvement in their children's academic lives.

Some people in southern Dallas may hear this message and feel the finger of blame pointed at them. That's not the intent. In fact, this is a problem throughout the city. But the problem is particularly acute in the southern half, where failures at home help perpetuate the developmental gap between students in the north and south.

Some southern Dallas residents argue that issues such as teen pregnancy don't constitute the crisis everyone makes it out to be. Others say elitist white northern Dallas residents don't have any business telling them how to raise their children. Fair point, but this newspaper is not the lone voice recognizing a lack of parental engagement as a serious and pervasive problem.

I've spent several months canvassing southern Dallas residents, educators and members of the clergy to test our theory that a deficit of good parenting skills is contributing mightily to the underperformance of southern Dallas schools. I've let them do the talking, and they are adamant that increasing parental involvement is fundamental to solving southern Dallas' ills.

Hakemack's story, which she recounted during a recent Editorial Board roundtable discussion on parental involvement, reflects only a small piece of the gigantic challenge facing our city. Much of the neglect and injustice to southern Dallas requires money to fix, and these days, the money just isn't there. Our philosophy: Let's work on the problems we can fix even when money is tight. Increasing parental involvement seems to be something everyone can and should embrace - on both sides of the Trinity.

Ensuring that southern Dallas children perform well in school and have the opportunity to pursue bright futures is in everyone's best interests - and thus is everyone's business. Tomorrow's workforce of doctors, computer technicians, welders and middle managers are today's students. Those who go on to college or seek professional certification will likely become productive, tax-paying, home-owning, product-buying members of our community. They're exactly what every balanced city with a healthy economy strives to attract.

When a serious imbalance exists, one side winds up well-employed but overburdened with taxes while the other side is overburdened with poverty and unemployment. Those on the tax-overburdened side have as much at stake in fixing the imbalance as do those on the poverty side. Neither side will get the relief it demands if the imbalance isn't addressed.

Here's a vastly oversimplified explanation of why the health and well being of southern Dallas children affect that balance: When our children on the southern side don't get a good breakfast before school or their homework done at night because something at home is distracting them, their grades tend to suffer.

When kids grow up in single-parent households, they face much stiffer challenges. A single parent has to work longer hours to make sure there's enough money for food and housing. That affects how much time that parent can devote to his or her children. When children don't get proper guidance and attention at home, the first indicators of that imbalance emerge at school, usually through falling grades and attendance.

If you have high concentrations of students coming from overstressed households, entire schools start showing signs of failure. Look at the levels of poverty and single-parent households in southern Dallas, then compare the numbers of struggling schools in southern Dallas to those in the north, and you'll see where a major part of the problem lies.

There are, of course, high-performing students and exemplary parents all over southern Dallas. They are swimming against the tide, though, and I've heard plenty of stories about good students being dragged down by low performers, or putting on a mask of mediocrity to

avoid being ridiculed at school. If good students are working undercover and parents are disengaged, where are the role models?

Even if the Dallas Independent School District threw all of its best teachers and principals into southern Dallas, their effectiveness still would be limited if thousands of students don't have healthy and stable home lives to reinforce the considerable effort being made to help them at school.

If you're reading these words, chances are your reading and language skills were nurtured by parents early in life. It's easy to take such things for granted and hard to imagine what life would've been like without that good grounding.

Hakemack knows both worlds, having grown up in a poor Hispanic home: "I didn't have the best parents, and I'm a parent of five - I wasn't the best parent. So I'm not going to judge anybody else."

Life for many of these parents is a constant struggle full of unfulfilled dreams. A lot of "inward anger" develops, and that gets passed to the child, she said. Her daily life at Spruce immerses her in all the problems stemming from underprivileged youths growing up in broken households. More than 40 of her students are felons. Parents of some students are in or have been to prison. Some students have more than one child. And in far too many cases, these are the conditions their parents and grandparents experienced growing up.

The cycle must be broken, but it's not easy. Hakemack is trying little steps, with positive results. During the first two weeks of school, for example, she requires her teachers to make phone contact with every student's parents. A courteous demeanor is essential because, if a wall goes up, the goal of getting parents involved is immediately undermined.

"I met with staff and said: 'You will not talk down to anybody. These are our clients. {ellipsis} We work for them; they don't work for us,' " Hakemack said.

Being courteous to parents is not a substitute for the tough message some need to hear about providing guidance at home. Teens don't get pregnant at the extremely high rates seen in Pleasant Grove unless kids are being left by themselves to make adult decisions.

"They are not adults," Hakemack said. "They need to not be treated as adults."

Michael Sorrell, president of Paul Quinn College in Oak Cliff, feels so strongly about keeping parenthood out of the student experience that he requires new students to sign a pledge to delay marriage and parenthood until after graduation.

Someone has to provide that crucial guidance if the parents won't. The kinds of nonacademic life skills Sorrell has to teach suggest a profound lack of grounding in matters that students should have learned in the home: basic table etiquette, correct grammar, respectful behavior.

Students need to know these things because their goal is to enter the upwardly mobile workforce, and the absence of such skills is an instant turnoff for employers, Sorrell says.

Because southern Dallas is so heavily dominated by blacks and Hispanics, some are tempted to mischaracterize the parenting issue as a racial thing. Wrong. It's a poverty and lack-of-opportunity thing, according to academic research. Whites who face similar circumstances, such as in Appalachia, tend to produce the same outcomes we're seeing in southern Dallas.

But poverty isn't the only explanation. Look at the Fort Hood area, for instance. It's a racially diverse. economically healthy community. Yet parental involvement remains a top concern. The school districts surrounding Fort Hood discovered several years ago that the multiple deployments of parent-soldiers to Iraq and Afghanistan were negatively affecting student performance. It had nothing to do with the student's race or family income. It had everything to do with the instability caused by a parent's prolonged absence, danger-related stress and the upheaval families experience transferring from base to base.

These same factors are widespread in southern Dallas: danger-related stress from gang activities, random gunfire, thugs looking for trouble. If a parent has a particularly long commute or works two or three jobs and is gone for most waking hours, the child probably builds resentments and anxieties similar to those of children of deployed soldiers.

The military ignored these stresses for decades. At Fort Hood, Gen. Robert Cone told me that commanders are now highly attuned to the cause of family stability. The base organized regular family activities and encourages soldiers to exercise with their spouses and children at base recreation facilities. Local teachers and counselors are constantly urged to monitor students for signs of stress related to what their parents are going through.

An organization called Student 2 Student helps newcomers adjust to the stresses of entering a new school and making friends. Think about the high level of transience in DISD, especially with immigrant families, and imagine what it's like to be a student trying to settle in to the already tough southern Dallas school environment. The transition is scary. And when the parent can't be around to help, sometimes fellow students can.

Around Fort Hood, volunteers in Student 2 Student "kidnap" the newcomer at school (with the administration's permission) and devote several hours to bonding, playing games, being goofy or just listening to each other.

"You get that whole perspective and understand that I'm not the only one going through this," says Andrea Young, 17, a senior at Harker Heights High School near Fort Hood. Coping with all the stress "is definitely a lot easier when you have someone else to talk to," she says.

DISD administrators might consider investing a tank of gas to see whether successful programs in the Fort Hood area could be adapted here.

DISD administrators are, of course, already developing projects to confront the problem. One addresses the well-documented fact that a lack of good parenting in one generation tends to have a perpetuating effect on the next.

DISD wants to break that cycle by reaching new parents as soon as a child is born. It is teaming with Parkland, Presbyterian, Methodist and Baylor hospitals to develop instructional DVDs that all new parents will receive at checkout. They will explain, in English and Spanish, the impact on early brain development of reading and talking to infants and toddlers. Other topics will include healthy eating habits. The key is to reach parents early, when the level of enthusiasm is high for acquiring good-parenting skills.

DISD spokesman Jon Dahlander notes that kids need to acquire at least a 5,000-word vocabulary by the time they enter kindergarten. The average DISD kindergartner is closer to 1,500 words. That means parents are delivering their children for the first day of class already at a disadvantage.

Locally, the NAACP chapter in southern Dallas also is making parental engagement a top priority. Last month, NAACP leaders devoted a Saturday workshop to hear recommendations from teachers and others who have witnessed the positive change that can happen when parents get involved.

One elementary teacher, Kimberly Lewis, said 85 percent of her students are poor. She's seen good results using this well-structured approach:

·Teachers and parents must coordinate to deliver a consistent message to the child.

·They must clearly outline goals and expectations.

·Reward the child when goals are reached, but don't let rewards become the goal.

·Don't ask the teacher to do the parent's job.

Other workshop participants called for churches, PTAs, recreation centers and others to get more involved in community outreach. Parents won't know help is available unless someone alerts them.

When I think of all the things that have gone wrong in southern Dallas over a long succession of decades, I find myself constantly fighting off a sense of hopelessness. I'm angered by the cynicism I hear from northerners. I'm frustrated by the defeatism among many southern Dallas residents. I know I'm not alone.

Securing the billions of dollars in expenditures and investments that southern Dallas needs is a long-term endeavor. But of all the things that can be done, finding strategies to increase parental involvement is an entirely realistic goal. What we're seeking really amounts to a change in the entire city's mind-set. It won't cost much, if anything, but imagine the dramatic difference it could make.

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DigitalExtra

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gapblog.dallasnews.com

Teen pregnancy in Dallas

Teen pregnancy in southern DallasLast year, The Dallas Morning News commissioned a study by University of Texas at Dallas' Institute for Urban Policy Research to help readers better understand the economic and social disparities between northern and southern Dallas. The statistics below reflect some areas where greater parental involvement could bring positive change. This data does not represent all of southern Dallas but rather focuses on five neighborhoods that have been a major component of our ongoing "Bridging Dallas' North-South Gap" project. Additional data is available online at dallasnews.com/northsouth.

Dallas citywide rates

· 29 percent of population age 25 and over has no high school diploma.

· 6 percent of births were to teen mothers.

· 51 percent of births were to unmarried mothers.

· 46 percent of births were to mothers who didn't finish high school.

Grand South Dallas

· 59 percent of population age 25 and older has no high school diploma.

· 12 percent of births were to teen mothers.

· 83 percent of births were to unmarried mothers.

· 38 percent of births were to mothers who didn't finish high school.

Pleasant Grove Crossroads

· 57 percent of population age 25 and older has no high school diploma.

· 7 percent of births were to teen mothers.

· 51 percent of births were to unmarried mothers.

· 64 percent of births were to mothers who didn't finish high school.

Red Bird Renewed

· 17 percent of population age 25 and older has no high school diploma.

· 6 percent of births were to teen mothers.

· 72 percent of births were to unmarried mothers.

· 27 percent of births were to mothers who didn't finish high school.

The Heart of Oak Cliff

· 51 percent of population age 25 and older has no high school diploma.

· 9 percent of births were to teen mothers.

· 52 percent of births were to unmarried mothers.

· 55 percent of births were to mothers who didn't finish high school.

West Dallas Gateway

· 63 percent of population age 25 and over has no high school diploma.

· 11 percent of births were to teen mothers.

· 68 percent of births were to unmarried mothers.

· 55 percent of births were to mothers who didn't finish high school.

- Caption: CHART(S): 1. Teen pregnancy in Dallas. 2. DigitalExtra. ILLUSTRATION(S): (MICHAEL HOGUE/Staff Illustration) Inner workings of mechanical child's head.

- *Index terms: BRIDGING DALLAS' NORTH-SOUTH GAP*
- *Record: 13893391*
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