



EDITORIAL: Guiding kids toward a brighter future

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Ruby Redekopp's A1 story in today's Leader about the growing local need for foster parents illustrates both the problem and at least one solution involving an increasing number of American children.

Kids growing up in struggling families who receive help from outsiders face a brighter future.

Yet, despite their good intentions, the work of foster parents, teachers, county social workers and the courts alone cannot reverse the disturbing "opportunity gap" that has grown between kids from have and have-not backgrounds. It will take a strong, focused effort from numerous fronts.

That's one reason we're pleased that Hutchinson School Board members will begin to discuss this alarming trend at their quarterly meeting at 5:30 p.m. Monday, Jan. 23, in the Hutchinson Middle School's media center. If you have a chance to attend this meeting, please do so.

A majority of School Board members last month traveled to Marshall, where Harvard University's Robert Putnam lectured on why he thinks the American Dream is vanishing and our children and nation are on a collision course with crisis. Today, he says, it is much less common for kids from all social classes to get a good education, achieve success and enjoy lives better than those of previous generations. In other words, if you are born into poverty, it is becoming more difficult to escape it.

But he is optimistic and sees ways out of this predicament.

Fortunately, the Southwest Initiative Foundation has recognized the seriousness of Dr. Putnam's warning, and is working to do something about it. The future of our 18-county region will depend on how we respond.

Data compiled and released last week by the Economic Policy Institute appear to point out the importance of the School Board's desire to confront the crisis. The data show that those who obtain a high school degree but receive no formal education beyond that are less likely to have a job, be married, own a home or contribute to their own retirement plan.

That would indicate the Hutchinson School District is on the right track by directing students, as early as their middle school years, into learning pathways designed for future careers. It would

also suggest that interventions and preventions at a much younger age, such as those being used in Hutchinson, are correct approaches.

One caveat for those who tend to view the world through a more conservative lens: The Economic Policy Institute is affiliated with the labor movement and is generally considered to provide a liberal viewpoint on public policy issues.

That's why we encourage those who plan to follow the School Board's and Southwest Initiative Foundation's efforts in this area to consider more reading.

One can start by reading Dr. Putnam's book, "Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis." It's available where books are sold.

Our take on the book? It's reasoned and balanced. It shows how traditional values more commonly espoused by conservatives can make families stronger and lead kids out of poverty. For example, read between the lines and you'll recognize the "success sequence" — get educated, married, have kids, in that order. Highly traditional. At the same time, the book subscribes to many of the ideals lauded by the Economic Policy Institute.

Next, read the CATO Institute's policy analysis, "Five Myths about Economic Inequality in America." Written by Michael D. Tanner, the 41-page report published this past September contends many of the beliefs about economic inequality that have risen to the top of the political agenda are based on misperceptions and falsehoods.

For example, Mr. Tanner argues that policies designed to reduce inequality by "imposing new burdens on the wealthy may perversely harm the poor by slowing economic growth and reducing job opportunities." It quotes people such as Dierdre Bloom, a recent Harvard Ph.D. candidate who finds "little evidence of a relationship between individuals' economic mobility and the income equality they experienced when growing up." Read the report and decide for yourself.

Public policy is a complex matter, and for any of us to view it only through a "liberal," "progressive," "conservative" or "libertarian" lens might be blinded to truths found elsewhere.

President Barack Obama alluded to this in his farewell speech this past week, when he spoke about "our own bubbles." He observed that we tend to surround ourselves with people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. "Increasingly," he said, "we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there."

As we examine issues as great as class disparities, economic inequality and social mobility, we need to get outside of our bubbles. The future of our region and the entire nation require us to have open minds.