

# The Times Herald

## Teachers, education reformers bypass individual students

By: Nat Hentoff – March 29, 2013

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The March 18 headline in USA Today blares: “More teachers are grouping kids by ability.” What’s wrong with that? Because the actual problems of individual kids are overlooked when students, especially those starting in elementary schools, are tracked as a group by what they’ve learned.

But Patrick Boodey, principal of the Woodman Park School in Dover, N.H., tries to remind us in the same story: “As a teacher, you know in your heart you need to meet the needs of each child” (Greg Toppo, USA Today, March 18).

Really? How many teachers do know that and act accordingly?

Disturbing answers to that question are documented in the most important article on education I’ve seen in many years: “The ‘Quiet’ Troubles of Low-Income Children,” by Richard Weissbourd of the Harvard School of Education. The article was first published in the March/April 2008 issue of the Harvard Education Letter and is also included in a valuable book: “Spotlight on Student Engagement, Motivation and Achievement” (Caroline T. Chauncey and Nancy Walser, editors; Harvard Education Press, 2009).

I have been an observer and interviewer of students in many classrooms around the country, and caught signs of some of these “quiet troubles.” But I had nowhere near the research depth of Weissbourd, whose revelations should be seen by teachers, principals, school boards and legislators in cities, states and the U.S. Congress.

His article, of course, should also be seen by those parents whose own troubles give them hardly any breathing room to focus on how well their children are actually able to learn in school.

Weissbourd, whom I have also interviewed, cites a study he conducted with other researchers:

“Some teachers fail to detect vision and hearing problems and sleep deprivation. Kids who are depressed and withdrawn can also escape teachers’ notice. One reason may be that teachers are often consumed by small numbers of students with loud problems. Teachers may also stop registering these quieter problems because they know that their schools don’t have the resources or time to deal with them.

“As one school counselor puts it, ‘You have to be extraordinarily withdrawn to be referred to me.’”

At a school where I was a guest lecturer on the Bill of Rights for a short time, one female eighth-grader in the back row never said a word in class or looked in my direction. After class one day, I came over to her and found that when she listened closely — she was hard of hearing — she was very interested in poetry. We talked for a while about Emily Dickinson. It was quite a large class, and she told me no teacher had noticed her hearing problem.

That reminded me of another school I once visited, where teachers did pay close attention to “the whole child.” There, a fifth-grade boy said to me: “Gee, in this school, they know my name!”

Weissbourd writes, “The number of children with undetected or untreated vision problems is a national scandal. In any urban classroom, it’s not uncommon to find one or two children squinting at their books or at the blackboard. By one estimate, at least 25 percent of urban students have uncorrected vision problems.

“Part of the problem is that kids lose their glasses easily, and it can take Medicaid up to six months to replace them. When they do come, they’re often big and chunky — the kind of glasses that no school-age child wants to wear.”

A “quiet trouble” I hadn’t known about: “Staff members in one elementary school I have worked with estimate that about one-quarter of their students experience sleep deprivation consistently enough to interfere with learning,” he writes. “That percentage is likely to be far higher in high school.”

Weissbourd suggests that “schools can ... work with community health centers to prevent sleep deprivation among children — for example, by coordinating messages to parents about the importance of establishing bedtime routines and reducing late-night television watching.”

And what about the “quiet troubles” of some of these children’s parents?

Weissbourd writes: “Somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of parents will suffer from acute, severe depression, experiencing some combination of fatigue, loss of appetite, withdrawal, hopeless moods and suicidal thoughts.

“But a range of studies suggests that 30 to 60 percent of low-income parents will suffer from moderate depression for longer periods of time.

“I am not talking about mental illness. I am talking about the steady drizzle of helplessness and hopelessness that can afflict those trapped in poverty for many years, especially when these adults are isolated and in constant stress.”

While “many of these people, despite their depression, are warm, effective parents ... children of depressed parents are more likely to suffer from an array of problems, including development delays, juvenile delinquency and depression. What’s more, it’s far harder for depressed parents to do the things critical for their children’s school success.”

Are you aware of these quiet, smoldering troubles being recognized — and acted upon — by many school boards, education reformers and legislators? Presidents who have school-age children send them to private schools, so they’re often silent about all of this, including in their state of the union addresses.

If more of the citizenry were not silent, many of these students’ blighted lives could begin to be revived. They’d be surprised at their new capacities to become lifelong learners.