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Opinion

A school reform aces test

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By NAT HENTOFF

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has nearly \$5 billion in “Race to the Top” stimulus funds that could enable every child to be a confident lifelong learner, not just a nameless statistic in national reading and math scores. At least, I hope that is the secretary’s goal.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, once asked: “Can you imagine a federal law that promoted community schools — schools that serve the neediest children by bringing together under one roof all the services and activities they and their families need?”

Slowly, various versions of such schools are beginning to take shape around the country. Secretary Duncan should take note of Public School 636 (formerly 304) in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Only a third of fourth-graders there were reading at grade level. Now 44 percent are. And as the New York Daily News noted, 20 percent of these kids live in homeless shelters.

The change began a year ago with an after-school program primarily financed by a federal grant from the After-School Corporation “to maintain the extra programming other schools have been forced to trim because of budget cuts.”

Says Principal Danika Lacroix: “I just knew that the kids did not have successful experiences academically. They needed to feel good about being in school.”

Now, P.S. 636 kids are “dancing, cooking, fencing or building robots until 6 p.m.,” the Daily News reports. “Hallways once filled with fistfights are now calm, and test scores are rising.”

Explains one of the after-school instructors: “When we first started, the kids were extremely aggressive. Enrichment allows for team-building and respect, and that helps them work in the classroom together.”

Kids are not the only ones being enriched. The principal says this partial “community school” has affected parents, too. “We have families who come in who need shelter. We have mothers who come in and say, ‘My husband’s beating on me.’ We make sure they get help.”

Says Lakisha Samuels, a parent with three children in the school: "This is the best thing that could have happened to us."

The cost — please take note, Secretary Duncan — for each child’s enrichment is \$1,700 a year. The stimulus billions should cover that.

Looking ahead to a future of full-scale “community schools,” Joanne Yatvin, a public school teacher and administrator for more than 40 years in Portland, Ore., wrote on the New York Times letters page (Oct. 17):

“How about turning schools in poor neighborhoods into year-round community centers, with health and dental services, nutritious meals, up-to-date libraries and computer labs, after-hours tutoring and recreation for children” and “job training, counseling, recreation and educational classes for adults?”

Yatvin added, when I interviewed her, that this approach would be “far more effective than allowing more charter schools and establishing a system of teacher merit pay,” as Secretary Dunhopes to do.

This could become change we can really believe in.

— *Syndicated columnist Nat Hentoff is a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and a senior fellow with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.*

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