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OUR AFFILIATES



OPINION

Wednesday, January 10, 2007

It's not enough to control guns

By CORINNE GREGORY
GUEST COLUMNIST

Last week's shooting at Foss High School in Tacoma proves there is a fatal disease in our schools that no one wants to talk about.

To say I'm absolutely outraged by this incident is an understatement. Not just because this is yet another senseless killing in schools, but also because of the reaction it generated. Immediately after the shooting, major lawmakers and policymakers such as Gov. Chris Gregoire, Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels and Seattle police Chief Gil Kerlikowske were essentially quoted as saying that the shooting proved that we need to have a better gun-control policy for our schools.

What? "Control the guns." What about the shooters?

How many more children have to die before people are willing to take a real hard look at our education system and decide that we *must* address the issue of school discipline, behavior management and social skills? The proposed "solutions" being batted around just won't work. Why? For many differing and varying reasons:

- Throwing money at academic performance won't do a whit if kids don't attend schools because they're afraid.
- Metal detectors in schools won't help if students shoot one another before they get in the building.
- More police on site won't generate more productive learning time and encourage students to pay attention in class, which won't improve academic test scores or educational outcomes.
- None of these things will help recruit or retain qualified teachers and staff.

And they certainly won't level the playing field for disadvantaged or minority students and their families or improve the overall educational experience and effectiveness.

While controlling access and use of firearms is necessary, it's not enough.

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If we're to make a lasting difference in the level of school violence and discipline, we must address the root of the problem and not simply throw more money at it for metal detectors, police on-site, etc. as a Band-Aid when we're dealing with a systemic disease.

Although it certainly costs money to implement new programs, it is not a matter of "How can we afford it?" but rather, "How can we afford *not* to?" The cost effects of poor social skills is not only staggering but increases with every year. Schools presently are hemorrhaging money due to the high cost of behavior management and discipline, not to mention the long-term impacts. What may initially be a small cost impact due to disciplining a young student may escalate dramatically through school suspensions, expulsions or, ultimately, incarceration, or worse.

Seattle Public Schools (as well as other schools districts within the state and nation) are in desperate need of reform, and it's my belief that true, effective education reform must deal with the issue of school discipline and inadequate social skills in our children. It's not an add-on; it's a critical, integral part of building not only good students, but good people.

Comprehensive, effective social skills education and its related positive impacts on the entire education process is not a pipe dream. It's been proven to work, repeatedly, in schools across the country. And, while it may not solve every problem plaguing schools today, it will go a long way toward repairing a great majority of them, and providing a long-term solution, at that.

Corinne Gregory is the president and founder of Bellevue-based The PoliteChild Inc.; www.politechild.com.

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