

Christopher T. Cross: In search of victory in service to children

By Christopher T. Cross -

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With mayors across California -- indeed, across the nation in such places as Oakland, Los Angeles and St. Louis -- recently fighting with boards and unions to take over the schools, perhaps they should put aside that agenda to pursue a different strategy, one much more likely to benefit children. What is needed is a plan that is a win/win situation for all concerned.

Mayors should mobilize the considerable resources that they command in social and health services and law enforcement, plus use their ability to inspire the nonprofit sector, to work with school boards and superintendents in creating comprehensive plans to serve children.

By starting with a number of neighborhoods to look at the needs of children, the roles that all agencies could play in meeting those needs and then developing an iron-tight agreement for cooperation, mayors could become national leaders and a local heroes. This plan should assure that everything from health care to after-school programs to internships for middle and high school students and real jobs for older students are provided, as well as help with college admission and costs.

There is widening agreement that meeting the educational, social and citizenship needs of students in this century requires the combined efforts of all segments of every community.

A report by the C.S. Mott Foundation provides a clear rationale as to why children need a "New Day for Learning." (www.glef.org/aneewdayforlearning.) To make this work, adults will have to learn to "play well together," not to engage in fights for power and control, but to focus on how to prepare their progeny for a world that is flat.

Children learn every waking moment, in varied ways and by a mix of means, and we must maximize those opportunities. This is essential if we are to close the pernicious achievement gap and educate all children to world-class standards -- public education's truest mission for the 21st century.

While some may think that providing after-school programs is sufficient, the model proposed in the Mott study would involve a much bigger idea. The approach is one in which K-12 systems would be integral, but that would also include other key players.

It would bring to bear specialized knowledge from the nonprofit world and public agencies.

Today, most poor children, already hampered by low expectations and inadequate support, leave the school environment too early in the day, with little in the way of guided learning options. Is it

any wonder, then, that their time ends up being utilized in unproductive or risky activities? Children from middle-income and wealthy backgrounds would benefit as well.

Much needs doing if the Mott task force's aspirations are to be achieved. But the good news for California is that, unlike many other states, many of the right readiness factors are already in place -- a responsive juvenile justice system, a critical mass of results-oriented nonprofits, and public system innovators in key organizations such as the San Bernardino County superintendent's office, as well as new political leaders in a growing number of other cities who are focused on solutions-oriented approaches to meeting children's needs.

There are also places that have done well in putting a great many of the pieces together. Pasadena has created partnerships with organizations from the Jet Propulsion Lab to community groups. In Northeast Philadelphia, there is Kid's Zone; in Boston, Citizen Schools play a role.

Because of an inadequate focus on talent development in California and in the rest of the nation, our competitive economic advantage is at risk. The old industrial model of providing education, created in the 19th century, is especially unsuited for present needs, and we must re-imagine both its format and purpose, incorporating lessons from other sectors. Technology and the demands of a society where people, jobs and money cross borders as easily as water flows in a stream have made our existing silo-like approaches obsolete. A more comprehensive approach must be developed instead.

Let us see mayors exert the extraordinary leadership that they possess to turn a battle over power into a victory for service to children.

About the writer:

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