Breaking the Cycle: A long-term plan for improvement

Program Goals

- Kindergarten and first grade students enter school prepared to learn
- High school seniors exit school with a knowledge of how the brain develops
- Increase awareness of the importance of early mental stimulation in young children
- Adapt curriculums to allow information about brain development to be shared with students

A staggering number of Mississippi's five, six, and seven year-old children are entering the public school system unprepared for the learning and challenges associated with formal education. This problem of students beginning school at emotional and academic disadvantage manifest into a variety of issues that schools and officials in education are forced to contend with. Research and observation support that when a child enters first grade functioning on the level of a 3-year old, the probability of that student ever performing "at grade level" is unlikely.

Key findings from a nationwide survey among parents of zero-three year olds conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates concluded:

- Parents know that they have an important influence on their infants' and toddlers' development, but they do not fully understand the connection between their own parenting practices and the social, emotional, and intellectual aspects of child development.
- Parents feel least knowledgeable about fostering their child's emotional growth than any other domain.
- 53% of parents feel that they know what signs to look for in monitoring their child's physical growth. Far fewer feel they have a total understanding of the way a child develops intellectually (44%), socially (37%), and emotionally (38%).
- Couples who are youngest and have the lowest income or are single parents feel particularly unprepared to raise a child.

Where We Are Today

Teachers in Mississippi's lowest-performing schools feel that they are fighting a losing battle. Kindergartners are coming into the system lacking basic skills in communication and social interaction, much less with the ability to meet other age-appropriate academic challenges. We encourage teachers to identify and work with individual students not functioning on grade level. In some instances, this expectation applies to the majority of the teacher's class. In these situations, there is neither enough time nor support for teachers to focus on the needs of struggling individual students. Our student test scores are reflecting that there are major problems in some of our education systems, yet the teachers in these systems express that the problems are beyond their abilities to control.

The question is, must we accept that the way things are is the way things are going to be?

Scientists have conducted studies showing the dramatic influence of very early experience on the actual wiring of the human brain. Early stimulation, they have said, prepares the way for later growth and development.

At birth, the human brain is underdeveloped. It is during childhood that the brain matures and capabilities develop in a sequential fashion. The brain develops and modifies itself in response to experience. Neurons and neuronal connections (synapses) change in an activity-dependent fashion. Lack of stimulation or negative stimulation can make such growth and development impossible or extremely difficult.

A Proposal

Most parents, regardless of religion, nationality, race, gender, or socioeconomic status, want to provide for their children the opportunity to succeed. However, in the more economically depressed areas of our state especially, parents do not realize the importance of the early years of life in the total development of their children. They lack the knowledge about childhood development and research-based theory and practice to be the parents that they would like to be.

The amount of research on early childhood development (particularly the development of the brain) is boundless. A significant amount of research concludes that if connections are not made in the first few years of life, later learning will be more difficult. This scientific research should be shared with our students as part of understanding the wonder of how humans develop. We have reached a miraculous point where we hold the knowledge that would help break the cycle of ignorance. If we can teach people about how the brains of children develop before they become parents, they will be more likely to provide appropriate stimulation for their children. Providing enriching cognitive, emotional, social, and physical experiences in childhood could transform our culture. But before our society can choose to provide these experiences, it must be educated about what we now know regarding child development.

How It Fits

President Bush's legislation, *No Child Left Behind*, is one of the more relative examples of the current understanding that we must begin providing stimulation for our young children. However, we can be even more proactive by not waiting until a child enters Head Start or kindergarten to begin laying the foundations for future learning. Current research suggests that by this age, important time has passed.

I am proposing that we begin teaching students in grades 6-12 about the development of the human brain. EVERYWHERE this topic fits into the curriculum- comprehensive health, biology, sex education, drug awareness, etc.- we seize the opportunity to teach students how the adults in the world impact the development of a child's brain. We begin explaining to them in middle school the consequences of ignoring a child's development. We continue this lesson, in every applicable situation, enough times for this research and these facts to become interwoven into the students' base knowledge. Whether a student chooses to apply this knowledge when he/she becomes a parent is out of our control. But at least we can provide for those parents eager to do the best for their child information that may not only create better prepared parents but, ultimately, better prepared students.

Liz Williamson
May 21, 2003