

Attending to the kids: Partnerships with public schools

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Discussions of education have been dominated in recent years by arguments for and against school choice: Should governments offer tax-funded vouchers for use at religious and other private schools? These arguments have stimulated debate in creative ways, primarily by drawing attention to some of the crucial ingredients for school success—discipline, teacher commitment, parental and community involvement—that are often highly visible at religious schools. But the arguments have also distracted attention from a fundamental reality: regardless of what happens in private education or with the various voucher proposals, the vast majority of American children will continue to be educated in public schools.

Private education accounts for about 11 percent of all children. Even were attendance at private schools to double in the coming years—which is highly unlikely—eight of ten children would still be served by public schools. Therefore anyone interested in the health of American society has to care about the state of public education.

Last year the National Council of Churches issued a statement urging congregations to support public schools by providing after-school tutoring programs and other kinds of support to teachers. The NCC suggested that congregations consider adopting a neighborhood school as part of their mission.

A direct effort of this sort has been launched by Kids Hope USA, which pairs volunteers from churches with at-risk students for an hour of mentoring each week. Since Kids Hope draws mostly from evangelical churches, which often house some of the loudest critics of public schools, director Virgil Gulker sometimes has to convince people that the work is worthwhile. *Wall Street Journal* writer Joseph Loconte reports that Gulker's argument is simple: "By abandoning public schools, you create a society where your children and grandchildren can be sure they will not be safe."

Kids Hope targets kids who have been abused, or who come from troubled families—anyone who needs some extra attention from an adult. The volunteers help with homework or just talk to the kids. Such one-on-one involvement, even when it's as little as an hour a week, Loconte reports, seems to make a difference in students' attendance and behavior.

Jonathan Kozol is a critic of public education who has deep respect for what public school teachers can accomplish, often despite underfunding and administrative mismanagement. He also has great respect and hope for the kids who inhabit the schools that many other critics of public education would write off as hopeless. Above all, he wants each child to be given the “essential dignity of being seen and celebrated for the person that she actually is.” He himself is skilled at such seeing and celebrating, as is evident from his article in this issue. It's not incidental, we would add, that his story about listening and appreciating public school children begins in a church.