

Young people deserve ongoing commitment

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During graduation season last spring, a prominent national politician was criticized for delivering a “what’s wrong with kids these days?” speech.

While I didn’t have the opportunity to hear the speech, only the commentary surrounding it, I did consider the circumstances in which our children and young people find themselves and how well they are able to navigate through them. So, what’s it like being a young person these days?

KIDS COUNT, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the U.S. According to the report, by providing policymakers and citizens with benchmarks of child well-being, KIDS COUNT seeks to enrich local, state, and national discussions concerning ways to secure better futures for all children.

Sadly, South Carolina perennially ranks at or near the bottom on most of the indicators that are used to determine the status of children. For the years 2003-2004, South Carolina’s overall ranking was 47th in the nation. The overall ranking uses ten indicators to determine rank: percentage of low-birthweight babies; infant mortality rate; child death rate; teen death rate; teen birth rate; percentage of teens who are high school dropouts; percentage of teens not attending school and not working; percentage of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment; percentage of children living in poverty; and percentage of children in single-parent families.

In addition to the national and state data, KIDS COUNT also publishes a report for each county in the state of South Carolina using over 75 indicators of child well-being. The broad categories explored are family, economic status, health, readiness and early school performance, school achievement, and adolescent risk behavior.

Several Kershaw County statistics drew my attention. In 2003, 139 babies, 20.1% of all babies born in Kershaw County, were born to mothers of all ages who had not completed the 12th grade. Additionally, births to single mothers have increased steadily over the past four decades. In 2003, 259 babies, 37.1% of all babies born that year, were recorded as born to single

mothers, including babies whose fathers formally acknowledged paternity but had not married the mothers.

In 2003, 331 domestic assaults were recorded by law enforcement officials. The report cautions that “since most family violence is not reported, the true incidence of family disruption is much more widespread than even the large number of reported cases would indicate.”

Low-income families struggle with providing the necessary enrichment tools for healthy child development. In 1999, 2,337 children and youth under the age of 18 lived in 1,047 families with incomes below poverty, comprising 17.2% of all children and youth in Kershaw County.

While it might be best if all children were born in stable, educated, financially secure families, the truth is that many children do not start life with that advantage. All of these statistics and many more that I have not listed contribute to the fact that the report finds “an unacceptably large number of students begin school without good prospects of success in future school achievement and graduation.” Children who aren’t ready to start school in the first grade often have a difficult time ever succeeding.

Dropping-out of school is often the result when a student finds it difficult to succeed in school. Depending on which method is used to calculate the drop-out rate and which factors are taken into account, studies show that between 20% to 30% of students fail to graduate. Regardless of statistical method, too many students do not complete school. Furthermore, poor attitudes and risky behaviors develop with academic and social frustration. According to a 2001-2002 South Carolina survey, students who smoked cigarettes, drank five or more drinks on one occasion in the past 30 days, or used any illicit drug in the past 30 days were most likely making F’s in school.

Children who don’t stay in school often flounder and lose critical time and the opportunity to position themselves for purposeful employment. During 2000, 327 Kershaw County teenagers ages 16-19 were idle, meaning they neither worked nor were enrolled in school, even part-time. The report estimates that a much larger number, perhaps twice as many, were not engaged full time in either school or work. This failure in the critical transition from school to work significantly affects these teenagers’ development as future contributors to our workforce.

There may not be a legislative solution to all of the problems that our children face. Many of the challenges that children face were created by the choices made by adults. However, there are policy decisions that can make a difference in the lives of children and help them succeed. I am glad that we as a state are waking up to the fact that increased funding for early education will significantly impact children's readiness for school and increase their chances for life-long success, and in turn, the success of our communities.

If we really believe that kids count, then we need to provide them with the positive experiences that will build their success and worthwhile contributions to our communities. A combined effort from families, schools, churches, and community organizations is needed to meet the various needs of young people.

Each new school year is an opportunity to begin again and to do it better than before, not just for Kershaw County but for all of South Carolina. I hope that we can all recommit to find ways to give our children a future that is full of promise.