

***Mid-Michigan Legislative Reception for Early Childhood Education
Promoting School Success through Community Action***

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“One-third of the new homes being built in America today are being built behind bars,” and we are not talking about gated communities. Let me say that again, “One-third of the new homes being built in American today are being built behind bars.” That’s a quote from *Ghosts in the Nursery: Teaching the Roots of Violence* published in 1997, written by Robin Carn-Moseau and Meredith S. Wiley. They go on to say, “We wait for the babies to be abused or neglected, to fall behind in school, to become delinquent or pregnant. While clearly recognizing the warning signals, we wait. We wait for parents to fail and for children to appear in the system. By that time, it is too late, and we pay dearly.” These words are so true.

Right now I’ve been told that we are exceeding the capacity of our prison system. We will react by implementing early release programs and continuing to build more new prisons. These measures are costly to our society, particularly during a time when our economy is down and our state is making tremendous cuts just to keep our system afloat. What we know in America today is that the number of people in U.S. prisons will soon exceed the number enrolled in college. More people are incarcerated in our country than in any other Western industrialized country.

Juveniles commit 30% of all crime. Young people, ages 14 to 24, are responsible for 14% of all violent crimes, 50% of all murders, 24% of all property crimes and a majority of all arsons. Children are the fastest growing segment of our criminal population. Every four minutes a child is arrested for a violent crime. Over 100,000 young people, under 18, are in jails, prisons or juvenile facilities. We're talking about an issue that begins in the nursery, moves into the classroom and continues to the jail cell.

As a high school principal for 16 years, I saw firsthand the relationship between poor literacy skills, truancy, substance abuse, violence and failure. It is a cycle, usually ending up with a dropout, push-out or throw-out. When these factors converge in a young person, the chance of school success is extremely minimal, but we all continue to try, and there are some great success stories. The first chapter in the dropout book begins at birth in the nursery, and the last chapter of a young person's dropout story usually starts in the principal's office discussing truancy and other problems. A review of the student's record shows failing grades, discipline problems and poor citizenship. A closer check shows poor test scores, reading two or three levels below grade level. A check at home or with the police finds a

pending court date for breaking and entering or shoplifting, arrests for possession of marijuana or alcohol or worse. The student is already in the system.

As the principal, you change class schedules, arrange for extra tutoring, work out regular meetings with the parent, prescribe social work, meet with the counselor, refer to an alternative program, do all the right things, but in many cases it is too little, too late. You work against the odds to keep the student in school and out of the county jail. Researchers at Duke University tell us that academic problems and discipline are top reasons for dropping out.

Our dropout rates are low in most districts. Years ago, our dropout rates were higher. However, we had a place for students. My high school was down the street from a very large Ford complex. From time to time as principal, I would get a call from the Personnel Office regarding openings on the line. Usually by that afternoon, we had sent students to the plant for interviews. Within a few days, these seniors and juniors who weren't making it in school were gainfully employed. Many of them would earn more than their teachers. The military was another option. All you needed to join at that time was a birth certificate. No high school diploma, criminal records check, substance abuse check or anything else, just a simple physical. Our

students who weren't successful often times entered military service, got their life together and moved forward, were given the gift of time and an education. These options do not exist today for the school dropout today.

The relationship between school truancy, literacy, substance abuse, student outcomes, dropping out of school and incarceration is well known and well documented in literature. Our jails are filled with individuals who do not have a high school diploma. Forty-one percent of prison inmates have not completed high school or earned a GED, compared to 18% in the general population. Fourteen percent of prison inmates completed eighth grade or less, compared to 7% in the general population. Youth confined to correctional facilities while in the ninth grade, on the average, read at the fourth grade level. Dropouts are extremely costly. The average operating cost per prisoner per year is approximately \$20,000. It is suggested that a 1% increase in male high school graduation rates would save as much as \$1.4 billion or about \$2,100 per additional high school graduate. That is a startling statistic. \$1.4 billion or about \$2,100 per additional high school graduate.

How did it all start? That student probably started school with a minimal vocabulary. He may well have grown up without love and encouragement. The

percentages will indicate that he has lived in poverty, is probably a minority and has other family members in similar situations. We know that students from some of our high-poverty areas come to school with a vocabulary of less than 3,000 words.

According to researchers Hart and Risley, a child from a low income family enters kindergarten with a listening vocabulary of 3,000 words, while a child of a middle income family enters with a listening vocabulary of 20,000 words. When vocabulary is studied, one of the most alarming findings is that vocabulary differences between students appear early, and the vocabulary gap grows increasingly large over time. In other words, students never catch up. What's the solution?

All of you probably have heard of the Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti. The longitudinal study associated with the program dealt with 3 and 4-year olds that attended a high quality preschool program back in 1962. Researchers reported that data for the original participants at age 27 indicate that arrests were dramatically down, high school graduation was up, commitment to marriage was up, earning and economic status was greatly improved compared to the control group that didn't attend preschool. Here in Genesee County, the first results of the Bendle/Carman-Ainsworth Learning Community are available. The first group of participants are

doing better on their fourth grade MEAP tests. A big plus! Throughout our county, Project S.K.I.P. is underway. This partnership program puts 120 home visitors in the community working with families and children to change the cycle. Several years ago, Ready, Set, Grow! Passport was initiated to ensure that young children come to the schoolhouse door healthy and ready to learn. Over 10,000 families are currently enrolled in the Passport Program. These efforts, coordinated with the K-12 program, will break the cycle. We are prime for the Governor's new early childhood initiative. We will apply for the grants to support and expand the many programs we have here in Genesee County. Again, a step in the process to break the cycle.

On the school side, in addition to our regular programming, we will deal with special populations, utilizing the latest technology, individualized instruction techniques, before- and after-school programming, alternative education, extra time for at-risk students, special materials, small class size, quality teachers, extra counseling and a caring adult in every child's life. Believing that all children can learn and all children can graduate from high school, we will address the needs of our students. These programs, along with a robust fully functional birth-to-five program, will make a difference in the overall outcome. It's a great challenge, but using research

and our resources properly, we can build a system that will change current outcomes.

We can rewrite the dropout book so the last chapter doesn't end with prison!