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MINNESOTA'S FIRST NEWSPAPER

HINDER NOT THE CHILDREN/EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DESERVES FURTHER SUPPORT

BY MARTIN OLAV SABO

Looking back at 1999, it's hard to find a positive news story about young people. Tragic acts of school violence last year have so tainted our view that, when we think about America's youth, we often wonder where the next school shooting will occur - not whether the next Albert Einstein or Mae Jemison is studying at a high school in our own community. I recently visited students at 12 public high schools in the Twin Cities, which prompted me to think twice about the tarnished, media-generated image of our young people.

During the time I spent with these students, we talked about current events, the federal government and my job as a member of Congress. They peppered me with provocative questions, and I was impressed by the students' thoughtfulness and poise. Most of these students are well on their way to realizing their adult potential. They will go on to college or jobs, and lead productive, rewarding lives. As a society, we have served them pretty well.

However, I am concerned about those who - in the years ahead - will fall behind and fail to enjoy the same success. Rather than wring our hands over the "inevitable few" who become violent or fail to thrive in school, we should focus our efforts to help all young people reach their full potential. All students - especially those at risk due to a lack of financial resources or encouragement at home - should have an equal opportunity for success.

America has made significant progress this century in providing quality education to its young people. In 1900, only 11 percent of Americans ages 14 to 17 were enrolled in high school. Now 93 percent are in school. This is progress, but we can and should do more. What about the 7 percent of children who have fallen through the cracks somewhere along the journey from preschool to high school? How do we get them engaged and learning?

Historically, the federal role in education has been limited, but important. With about 7 percent of elementary- and secondary-education funding coming from Washington, the federal government has traditionally focused on evening the odds for disadvantaged children and promoting educational innovation and reform. I think this is a prudent course. It keeps most policies and decisions affecting our children's education at the local level - closest to the students.

Title I, the largest federal K-12 education program, provides grants for educational resources and services to children in schools with high numbers of low-income students. The goal of Title I is to ensure equal opportunity for all children to learn and excel in school. In 1999, Minnesota received \$93.6 million in Title I funds.

We also know that high-quality, early-childhood education is a critical indicator of a child's academic and social achievement as she grows. Most experts say children

should begin before age 3 with pre-school and early intervention programs, so they can build the basic mental skills needed for learning. The Head Start program, which provides early childhood development services to low-income children ages 3 to 5, prepares children for school, improves their health and nutrition, and teaches their parents to actively participate in their education.

Unfortunately, federal Head Start funding falls far short. Next year, only 38 percent of eligible children will be served by the Head Start program. In addition, Early Head Start, a federal program designed to serve low-income children younger than 3, will receive enough funding to allow only 1 percent of eligible children to participate.

It is clear that, within its traditional role of promoting equal opportunity, the federal government must do more to focus needed resources on early childhood education and child-care programs so that all children are ready to learn.

America's youth hold tremendous promise, but helping them realize their potential poses a great challenge. We owe it to the kids at our own dinner tables - as well as to those across town - to make the right investments, so that no child is failed by our education system.

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