

Education Reform Starts At Home
By Dorothy Rich

Education reform starts at home. Why is that so hard to understand?

We have all this talk about improving education. The big words are: Testing, Accountability, Standards. And these all center on what happens in school.

Schools have a big job to do. And, yes, many need to be doing a better job. But, the current reform emphasis in education is way too narrow. The reform vision has to be broadened so that it includes the work and responsibilities of families and of communities.

The problems facing American education are not problems of the school alone. Mounting research evidence indicates that family involvement in children's education leads to higher achievement and improved school performance. Findings on crime and drugs point to the central preventive role of the family. Business has identified education as a top priority to ensure its competitive future and that of the nation.

These are not insurmountable challenges. But, they take re-direction of our thinking about how to improve education. In reality, we are all educators, not just the teachers in the classroom.

From my earliest teaching work, it was clear to me that we were ignoring the important educational responsibilities of the home. Experience also confirmed for me that intellectual achievement is determined to a great extent by student emotions, motivation and commitment. Students need and don't get enough active, hands-on learning. That's why I created learning recipes and became known as "the recipe lady." Recipes are easy, at-home activities to teach complex content.

Learning recipes are what you would find in cookbooks, except ...they are activities that show how to use a rug to teach math, a clock to teach

reading, the bathtub o teach science. These recipes work. Families get involved” children succeed. tAnd yet, they exist primarily in “demonstration projects.” There is not yet a wide enough understanding among policymakers about how wide our education outreach has to be.

For special education students in the District of Columbia. I developed The Family Place Center. It was a replica of a home set inside a classroom, with sofas, beds, rugs, pots and a cardboard stove. Home learning recipes on single sheets of paper were attached to each item. Families took the recipes home and met as a group to share what they cooked up. By the end of the school year, all of the students were mainstreamed.

For a workplace in New York, we provided recipes in magazine racks for employees. In the cafeteria, they picked up learning recipes to take home to use with their children, from preschoolers to adolescents, The employer reported the only problem was keeping the rack filled.

There are new frontiers awaiting the effort. Take for example, pediatricians. In every office and clinic, there can be handouts of recipes to help parents know how to keep kids healthy (no small job) and also be more prepared for school. In the long waits to see the doctor, how about a video on ways to teach and learn at home, math in the kitchen, science in the yard, reading instead of TV.

We need more ways for us all to get involved in education. Learning is everywhere ,and we are all teachers. One way is to distribute home learning recipes throughout the community. Let’s remember churches, community organizations, gas stations and supermarkets. And there are others. Ordinary daily life routines are teaching moments that put children on the road to academic and life success. It’s time to bring everyone into the work that is everyone’s— this work is education.

About the Writer