

It's Resolution Time ... For Education, Too!

By Dorothy Rich

President Obama is sounding the call for family educational involvement and responsibilities for children's development and achievement. There is no better time for this vitally needed education reform.

As the new year begins, all manner of lists get made. Among them, year after year, is the list of the most needed, top educational reforms. The usual suspects get rounded up: charter schools, more technology, vouchers, choice, new curricula, new tests, merit pay and so on.

There is one major educational reform that somehow has previously been omitted from the list. And it's the top educational reform of them all — the family.

Research study after study points to the crucial, determining influence of the family on children's achievement.

“The Family: American's Smallest School” from The Educational Testing Service, finds that development and cognitive gaps begin well before children go to school and

persist when children go through school. While schools may be doing their jobs, the differences that children bring with them from home continue.

Yet, school policy-makers keep up the drumbeat about what needs to be changed in the school itself. It is not as if school needs no improvement. But, really no matter what we do at school, if we don't focus on the home then what is done at school is almost like changing the deck chairs on the Titanic.

These findings about the importance of the home and family do not let the schools off the hook. Instead, they point to the extraordinary educational role and responsibilities of all families especially with children in their early years.

It is within the reach, within the power, of all families to make an extraordinary difference in their children's education — and their lives. It's true that families are under great stress today and many parents are exhausted and unsure about how to help their children ... or even if it matters. It matters more than we may even know. Let me propose for parents three resolutions that can make a major difference for children's achievement. They take place at home, in spare moments of time, and don't cost money.

- **Look around you to find real-life education experiences:** Extend and expand your child's curiosity. What is on the underside of that rock? What is the shape of that cloud? And keep going.
- **Listen and talk with your children about what you see and find together.** Conversation and language building are keys to school and life success. Talk about the time it takes water to boil or time for lights to change at street corners ... and keep going.
- **Provide for sensible routines and structures in your day.** When do we read books? How long do we watch TV or use the computer? It was reported that Bill Gates, the computer billionaire, limits his children's computer use to 45 minutes on school days and one hour on weekends. Gates is telling parents that what happens at home is important and that sitting in front of the computer for too long a period is not a good idea.

When I ask teachers about educational issues that come from home, they list: children's immaturity, need for a lot of attention, inability to concentrate, lack of motivation and respect for educators, impulsivity, too little self-worth, and

poor health.

It's tempting to say that teachers are making excuses for not being able to work effectively with these children — but teachers start where children are. Everyone makes progress when children come to school equipped with these home basics for school learning.

I have spent many decades discovering the secrets of really good education. The idea is to find education wherever you are: while sorting the laundry, fixing dinner, riding in the car, waiting for the bus. Discover with your child the joy and mystery of the world: a walk when it is turning dark, listen to the wind and the birds.

The bottom line for this list of resolutions is that we can change education; we can change the world; and we do it, within our reach, in our own homes.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Dorothy Rich, developer of MegaSkills Teacher Training Programs, in over 4000 schools nationally is the author of MegaSkills: Building Our Children's Character and Achievement for School and Life. She is the founder of nonprofit Home and School Institute and former member of the National Assessment Governing Board. She can be reached at Web site: www.MegaSkills.org.

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- *MegaSkills® for Babies, Toddlers and Beyond*
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For more information on ordering these books, see www.dorothyrich.net

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