

Who cares for our neglected children?

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Friday, 07 October 2011 18:16 - Last Updated Friday, 07 October 2011 18:17

By Craig R. Christiansen

Executive Director of the Nebraska State Education Association

When I decided to adopt a dog, I was surprised at the process.

It included a legal document that provided for the return of the dog if I later decided I did not want it, a signed affidavit that I would maintain certain living standards, and a thorough home inspection.

The inside of the house was inspected to see where the dog would sleep, whether there were any structural conditions in the house that would pose a danger, and whether there were exposed household chemicals or poisonous house plants.

The inspector walked through the yard with a clipboard to note whether the yard was safely fenced, was big enough for the dog to exercise, and whether the yard was “interesting and stimulating.”

Luckily, I was approved to adopt a wonderful dog named Buster.

As a teacher, I cannot help but wonder how the lives of so many of our nation’s children would be improved if there were a similar exercise for every child. Yes, I know there would be cries of intrusion into the rights of parents and the home. But I also know that there are simply too many children in this country who do not have the level of routine medical care, nutrition, quality time, exercise, social environment, or just plain attention that my dog gets.

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I can't help but wonder who cares for those children.

'Disposable' children

A recent news story highlighted the fact that some communities now provide special housing for those who raise their children's children.

Incarcerated or "drugged out" parents must often rely on grandparents or great-grandparents to raise their children.

Too many times, children are simply shunted from one

custodian to another.

One hundred years ago, there were about 110,000 children in orphanages in the U.S.

Today, nearly one half million American children are in foster or institutional care. Are things really getting better for our children?

The not-so-secret fact is that more and more children are considered disposable. As a society, we are outraged and saddened when we hear news of animal neglect or abuse. Yet, it is not news to anyone that thousands of children go to school every day with no breakfast, no warm clothing in winter, no help with homework, no encouragement or intellectual stimulation, and too often, without their dental, medical, or vision needs met.

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It matters. Young children who do not have proper nutrition are twice as likely to need special education or to be significantly behind other students in their later grades.

Ironic challenge

Schools and teachers are attacked every day for failing to ensure high achievement for all students. Some criticism is legitimate. Our education system needs to continually improve. But the problems of significant low achievement may be simply too late to address for those students who show up at school with so little parental attention that they do not know the colors, the alphabet, how to count to 10, simple nursery rhymes or songs, or sometimes, even their own names.

They have been raised by television or electronic games.

Yes, student achievement matters. Good schools and teachers matter. And, not surprisingly, good parenting.

The prospect of high student achievement begins long before the student ever sets foot in school. It begins with the decision by our society... and by the parent of every new-born child...that no child in America should ever get more love, more care, more attention, more time, more food, or a warmer bed by trading places with somebody's pet.

We all know people who treat their pets like children. The ironic challenge for America is to make sure that our children are treated at least as well as our pets. But until that is a reality in every community in America, we will continue to fail miserably at ensuring high achievement for every child.

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Craig R. Christiansen is the Executive Director of the Nebraska State Education Association. Founded in 1867, the Nebraska State Education Association is the state's oldest professional association and represents more than 28,000 teachers, education support professionals, higher education faculty and staff, retired education employees and students preparing to become teachers. NSEA is an affiliate of the 3.2 million-member National Education Association.