



Web of Support

Reaching out and engaging with students is more important than ever

Robin Elvig

After returning from the National School Boards Association's annual conference this past March in Denver, I took some time to review all of the information and ponder the varied and numerous ideas I took from the break-out sessions and conversations I had with school board members from across the United States.

One theme that seemed to be pervasive throughout was this:

"Young people need a web of support in order to learn and succeed to the best of their abilities."

So, what does this mean?

Picture a spider web strong enough to hold a human. This beautiful web with its interconnecting supports is holding a young person, preventing him or her from falling through it.

Each young person needs a proverbial web of support to help positively shape his or her future and

support them during times of struggle. This web should consist of at least five caring adults. While teaching skills, these adults have high expectations for the young person — providing opportunities for success, and celebrating achievements and milestones. These adults may include parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, parents of friends, teachers, other school staff, care-givers, babysitters, community members, and the list goes on.

If young people don't have a positive web, they are more apt to suffer from depression, turn to destructive habits, and continue to look for a person or group that accepts them. Unfortunately, the accepting group may not be positive.

The combination of a lack of a positive web with an immature, growing brain can be a recipe for negative outcomes. Young people often cannot comprehend the idea that situations can change and lonely feelings will pass. They only know that it hurts at the time and they

want the hurt to stop. This is especially applicable to our teenagers. They may look like capable adults, but their brains continue to grow until around age 26. And, the part of



the brain that is last to fully develop is responsible for problem solving, impulse control, judgment, and social and sexual behavior.

So, are these young people without positive webs who may act out in negative ways naughty or bad? Or are they responding in a way that is the best they know how? Regardless, all human beings have a need to be noticed, to be acknowledged, and to know that someone “sees” them.

■ Why does this matter to community members?

As we all know, our current society is vastly different from the one in which we grew up. Family structure is different. The days are filled with more structured after-school activities. Sit-down family meals are not the norm, and most neighbors aren't helping “parent” the children in the neighborhood.

We have to adjust to that which we live in today. Our young people need

connections — “a web.” The more they know they can rely on caring adults to support them, the stronger and more resilient they become. These young people are more likely to become successful - to graduate, to further their degree after high school, get a fulfilling job, to have more control over their futures, to be hard-working and responsible employees, and to have self-respect. Furthermore, connected young people often become productive citizens who give back to their communities.

■ What can we do?

“See” the young people in our community. Ask them their names, then shake their hand, look them in the eye and greet them by name. Some may not be familiar with handshakes or eye contact, but you will have taught them something that will be useful in the future. You also will have just made a connection.

Engage young people. Get to know

them. Ask them questions. Choose a community event, church event, or volunteer group in which you can work alongside young people.

Volunteer in the schools for any age group. Show young people that you care about and support them. Attend events at school to help you stay connected.

Support fundraising events for structures or opportunities that will help grow our young people's webs. Examples may include supporting music and the arts, after-school programs such as the Boys and Girls Club, or other youth initiatives or programs in your community.

I know we are all busy, but the time or effort we put toward investing in our youth is time well spent. I encourage you to make an effort to reach out and support the youth in your community. ■

Robin Elvig is president of the Altoona School Board.



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