

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
“Teaching to the Gap”
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How do you teach to a widening gap, asked a quartet of elementary teachers the other day? When they began teaching, the norm was parents who knew how to be parents. We're beyond blame. Our homes require remedial education.

More pupils than ever suffer from an incarcerated parent. One student said he wanted mom home from jail for Thanksgiving. Another student cried when summer recess started. School meant breakfast, lunch, plus the attentions of a teacher he loved. More kids are shuffled kids, leaving them confused as to where they left their book-bag or homework. At mom's? Dad's? Grandpa's house? In one classroom, only two children have mom and dad at home. Some kids arrive in ill-fitting clothes or clothes reeking of cigarettes. Some wear sneakers lacking shoelaces or socks. Some obviously slept in their clothes. Some arrive with damp pants from bed wetting. Some have such foul body odor that those sitting near them gag. Some smell of cat urine. Parents enjoy their Nintendo Wii, but their daughter wears no winter coat.

Our elementary school children exhibit an alphabet soup of emotional and mental illnesses, which means teacher faces more discipline than learning problems. At worse, they can feel more caseworker or police officer than teacher. When teacher raised a concern with a father that his son's packed lunch was filled with junk food -- ring-dings and cupcakes -- father replied that it was none of her business. A mom scolded teacher that it was her job to make sure her son did okay at school. That's what she was paid to do. These parents are defensive, feeling inadequate, lost, themselves victims, perhaps echoing sad and bad home and school memories of their own.

Gone is the norm. 1st graders arrive with cell phones but cannot spell their name, write their address, or identify colors. Gone are nursery rhymes. Gone are stories at bedtime. For that matter, gone is tucking kids in at regular bedtimes. Gone are family meals; kids forage for themselves. Gone are manners. Kids interrupt, they walk between persons talking, pleases and thank-yous are absent. The kids aren't rude; dad never taught them to be polite. Fewer homemaker parents can help out. One student couldn't pay for a lost library book. Lunch charges run up because dad has been laid off.

Are newspapers and books read at home? How many kids are allowed to watch inappropriate TV and movies? Our pupils can name the most vulgar movie, but cannot recite their ABC's or tie shoelaces (they wear Velcro). They have to be taught how to play hopscotch or 4-square. They're puzzled by dice and how to move game-board pieces. They have to be taught how to play.

Lunch recess has been reduced. Gym happens once in a five day cycle. There is no morning recess for Grades 3 and higher. Instead of them horsing around in the

playground before school, kids are chivvied inside to wait in the lunchroom. It's a matter of safety – schools (because of parents) are nervous about unsupervised play. Meanwhile, parents queue up their vans anxious to drop their children off when the doors are unlocked rather than wait for when school officially starts.

Schools try. Emotional support classes are provided for children who have difficulty dealing with school situations. Many children see, besides teacher, their math tutor, reading specialist, learning support staff, physical therapist. Some specialists had to be trained in effective restraint, taught how to respond when a child attacks teacher.

These efforts, however, eat into the school day. Government mandates chew away teacher time: computer labs, teaching for imposed standardized tests, taking the tests themselves, anti-bullying classes. When the district offered free tutoring after school, none took advantage of it. So tutoring was built into the school day. How do you move onto new material or even have fun projects with kids pulled out from class? The kid pulled out will get farther behind or miss out on the group fun. Teachers can spend most of their energies working with kids at the bottom of the gap that they can neglect the kids at the top. The arts and sciences also get neglected, as teachers budget what little pure academic time they are allotted to the essentials of math and reading.

Despite joys blunted by frustrations, hope also was voiced. One said, “Yes, we watch movies in class. Guess what? The students tell us, ‘We liked the books better.’” Another teacher said, “100% of kids love being read to.”