

The Crisis of Education and Spiritual Malnourishment

Claire Redmond
May 8, 2013



America's urban public schools are failing its people. Over one million students drop out of high school every year, but 50% of dropouts come from just 12% of schools – schools located in the depths of America's ghettos. This dropout crisis is recognized but not yet understood by policymakers.



The most notable reforms and initiatives of the past 15 years, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the 2009 Race to the Top Initiative, have resulted in a decrease in overall graduation rates for minority students. This, in turn, creates the “prison pipeline” phenomenon. People who do not graduate high school are eight times more likely to serve time in prison or jail. As graduating class sizes are shrinking, prison cells are beginning to burst with former students turned desperate cons.

I spent the last ten months working in a school rated in the bottom 5% of schools nationwide. I served with City Year, a non-profit dedicated to resolving the dropout crisis by providing mentoring and tutoring to students who show early warning indicators of dropping out. While serving, I had a chance to observe the education crisis firsthand. Lacking a real family, my students had their needs neglected from a very young age. Every part of them is in need, and so every part of them must be recognized, healed, and fed.

The crisis of education can be recognized by symptoms of spiritual malnourishment and are attributed to the degradation of the family structure. As found by Johns Hopkins University studies, students that exhibit signs of poor course performance in English and math, poor attendance, and behavior problems are 75% more likely to drop out of high school than other students. Each of these early warning indicators can be correlated to a lack in one of the three drives in human beings: intellect, heart, and will.

The first early warning indicator is poor course performance in English and math, which is related to the intellectual development of a child. With the cost of education ever-rising and funding for public schools ever-shrinking, schools face a significant amount of pressure to blast students through the system. Schools in poorer districts simply cannot afford to hold every remedial student back, so they are pushed through the system despite failing to master foundational skills.

Some students are almost pre-determined to be remedial based on the quality of their early language development, which affects literacy for the rest of their life. Numerous studies have shown that as infants, children raised in single-parent homes hear thousands fewer words per day than do their peers in two-parent homes, which leads to underdeveloped language learning pathways in the brain. When families are unstable, the intellectual development of children suffers, which leads directly to years of increasingly poor course performance in school. I treat students with this struggle by offering individualized tutoring to recover lost skills, but it is nearly impossible to make up for so many years of lack of language development.

The second early warning indicator, truancy, can be linked to the emotional drive of a person. Too often, I find that my truant students have been the most emotionally malnourished or poisoned. Due to trauma in their lives, problems at home, or bullying at school, these students have no desire to attend school. Their parents often allow this because they do not understand the value of education, or they wish to ease the emotional suffering of their child any way they can, even by allowing harmfully excessive absences.

In addressing truancy, the first step I often take is ensuring the student knows there is someone who notices and cares when they are gone. This targets their emotional needs by acknowledging their needs and loving them openly, a phenomenon that many of my students don't experience in their personal lives. People are naturally drawn to wherever they feel valued; by overtly showing my students that I care about who they are and how they are doing, I show respect, esteem, and affection for them. It is nearly impossible not to respond to such feelings. By creating a common base with my students and initiating give-and-take centered on their attendance and success in school, my students become more likely to come to school the stronger our give-and-take becomes.

The final early warning indicator, behavior, is affected by the development of a student's will, or norm of behavior. Students who exhibit difficult behavior often have tough family situations. Many of the children I work with do not have fathers constantly present in their lives, or their family life is constantly adapting to new members and situations. A family cannot be built upon shifting sands; my students lack consistent, respectable models by which to learn how to behave properly. This compels them to seek models wherever they can find them: the hip-hop industry, the NBA, or the violent gangs in their neighborhoods. Their behavior is outrageous because their parents have been unable to teach them any differently, and the models they see in pop culture support destructive and unsustainable lifestyles.

Addressing behavioral problems is the most difficult challenge I have faced in the schools. The situation calls for true love, love that can set and maintain boundaries while seeking to nurture the student's original mind. However, I cannot replace the role of their parents, even while trying to offer them parental love. The best alternative I have found is to try to replace their destructive models with more responsible ones. I have acted as a model for them, and have inundated them with stories, videos, and quotes from inspirational and altruistic people. Because I cannot be their parent, the best I can do is to broaden their worldview, so they can more clearly choose their place within it.

It is difficult and unprincipled to usurp the role of the parent, but too often, that seems to be the only workable solution. Damage done by the parent cannot be undone by teachers, administrators, or even young volunteers who really, really love their students.

The crisis of education cannot be solved with archaic and single-sided views on human nature and potential. There is a thread that pierces through each aspect of the colossal and incontrovertible failure of America's urban public schools, but it has yet to be addressed by policymakers. When the crisis of education is viewed through an Applied Unificationist lens, however, it becomes clear that a whole-child approach must be taken. The intellect, emotion, and will of a student must be supported and nurtured, an approach validated by research in the field.

However, treating the symptoms of spiritual malnourishment will never be enough. Family is the common theme, the binding thread that winds its way through every early warning indicator. If the crisis of education is to be fully resolved, it must begin with policies and movements that support healthy and sustainable two-parent homes for students. Only then will my desperate, forgotten students find comfort enough, finally, to learn.

Claire Redmond is a volunteer with City Year, an education-focused nonprofit organization that partners with high need public schools to provide full-time targeted student interventions. She has served 9th grade students in the Metro Detroit area for the current academic year, and is pursuing a career as an educator in urban schools.