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The Boston Globe

Prescription for School

AS MASSACHUSETTS REVISITS ITS PLANS TO PREVENT SCHOOL VIOLENCE, CAMBRIDGE HEALTH ALLIANCE PSYCHIATRIST NANCY RAPPAPORT AND THE BOSTON CITY COUNCIL EXPLORE OUR KIDS' MENTAL HEALTH.



(Esdras M Suarez / Globe Staff Photo)

By Keith O'Brien | October 22, 2006

What can schools do to help kids now?

I'm all about access. School-based centers, school-based social workers - that makes a huge difference. If you have a parent working three jobs, and you tell them, "The answer to your problems is, you go once a week to a psychotherapist who meets between 4 and 5, down at a clinic across town," that's a joke. That's unacceptable.

Is that the status quo?

I'm not informed enough about the Boston school system. But I can say, having worked in many districts, it depends where you are, it depends what school you're in. . . . Oftentimes, schools are faced with the difficult decision: Do I have a teacher, an extra teacher, or do I

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end up having a school social worker?

The argument for a school social worker is, you're addressing barriers to learning and you're providing services that will allow kids to succeed. And, clearly, the argument for a teacher is you want a lower student-teacher ratio. You can clearly see where my bias is. But I'm not arrogant enough to say I know the answer.

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Your study of 33 troubled Cambridge students got Boston city councilors interested in the causes of school violence. What did your report say?

That these kids are often very complex and have very compelling lives where they have faced an inordinate amount of stresses - from a parent dying to witnessing domestic violence - and that also many times these were kids that had untreated psychiatric disorders. And the sort of take-home was that some students that are violent and aggressive at school have a desperate need for an intensity of resources.

What causes school violence?

One of the things that I would say is, you want to have super strong schools, with outreach to parents, and an engaging curriculum. Because I think sometimes you have students coming into school, where they don't feel like they have a promising future, and they are struggling to find a sense of the applicability of education and how they're going to make meaning in their lives. It's imperative in schools that kids have the connection to "Why am I here?" and "How that's going to help me have a promising future?" Because it's been shown over and over again, if you do well in school, you're less likely to be violent.

It must be hard not to bring your work home with you, especially because you have three adolescent children yourself. Are you the . . .

Helicopter parent.

What's a "helicopter parent"?

The helicopter parents are the ones who are very vigilant, and they stay very close to their kids, and they know exactly where they are.

That's you?

No. I think my kids would say that I have an active imagination, meaning that I will ask them questions about what they're doing. And they will remind me that they're not my patients. ■

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