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Time for new strategies to create a sustainable vision for American education

By Rudy Crew
Special to The Times

MORE than 40 years ago, President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society aimed to eliminate the inequities created by poverty and racial injustice. Martin Luther King Jr. and countless others advanced the cause of quality education as the basis for economic prosperity and individual freedom.

Yet today, one-quarter of American eighth-graders cannot perform basic math. Nor can they read at grade level. A poor black or Hispanic boy growing up in Seattle or most any other large American city is more likely to go to jail than college, and many students will be unprepared for the work force.

This time bomb explodes slowly. It produces functionally illiterate people in communities already hard hit by double-digit unemployment. Moreover, it ensures that skilled jobs will continue to go to offshore labor pools.

So as the 2012 presidential election swings into gear, we should listen for proof that candidates are up to resolving these problems.

Artifacts, I expect, will be a proxy for truth — we'll hear about individual teachers or principals who deserve applause and the school here and there where students are doing incredible work. But if we are to build upon this propitious moment of global transformation, we must summon the resolve to reposition education into the equation for individual freedom, economic prosperity and employability.

We need a new vision to lead the nation to higher grounds, where the vantage point on our perennial achievement gap offers a fresh, new angle of solutions.

Politicians need to stop the debate about No Child Left Behind and the love affair with charter schools despite the lack of compelling results. Instead, they must put forward a sustainable vision that will stimulate business, arts, philanthropic and university communities to weigh in more strategically to improve math and literacy skills and that offers a national internship program for high-school students. We need greater accountability and transparency for teachers, administrators and boards of education, but it's for far more than just testing our children.

A new set of strategies that goes well beyond standardized tests expands the notion of literacies to include:

- An occupational literacy that connects our students to the careers in which they compete;
- A civic literacy that allows our students to participate in our community as informed citizens, and
- A personal literacy that empowers our students with the social graces they need to comport themselves with dignity and to respect unique cultures, different values and new ways of thinking and understanding.

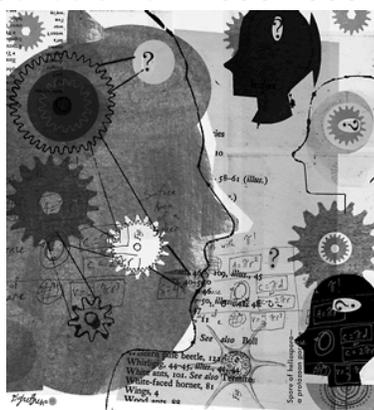
Let's start with investing in mathematics training for teachers and a national teacher supplement for skilled teachers of mathematics, the sciences and reading. By harnessing the newest network tools to what our teachers teach, and how they will teach it, with a commitment from political leaders to double down on teacher training and university supply chains, we can significantly increase the number and quality of math, science and reading teachers within five years.

A sustainable vision of leading the world in mathematics by 2020 will increase the number of SAT takers in urban cities by 30 percent over the next five years. Most important, a sustainable vision will give parents a reason to believe in the industry of public education, given the myriad existing choices.

Where there's a compelling vision, there's a way to get there. This road is not paved with more money or regulations. Nor is it a "Race to the Top," a wait for superman or any other hyperbole. More aptly, it is simply called, be good or be gone. Our schools can and will improve, but not without the audacity of hope, the vision of King, and the classroom strategies that will lift every child every year.

Together, we must embrace King's vision and implement sustainable education reforms that "open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. Now is the time to lift our nation."

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Public Schools from 1995 to 2000.



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