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Making schools work

AS PRESIDENT of one of the region's oldest alternative schools, Delaware Valley High School-Bustleton, whose mission is to address the needs of at-risk, disruptive and motivationally challenged youth, I want to weigh in on an issue on everyone's mind: What can we do to combat the social ills that are plaguing our children?

There is no single solution to problems like rising truancy and dropout rates or escalating youth-related violence, nor can any one group or agency be charged with solving them.

But during my years in education, I've also found that most of the disruptive conduct we see in our students results from inadequate support and guidance. We can't expect adolescents to recognize on their own that their actions may force them to miss a chance for future professional success. Adolescents need discipline, but they need boundaries and limits to be imposed in a caring and consistent manner.

How do alternative schools like ours take the most disruptive students from Philadelphia and the suburbs and turn them into respectful and civilized

young adults who attend school regularly and who work hard at becoming graduates instead of dropouts? I believe we're able to accomplish this because for the first time in many of their lives, these students have a team charged with making them feel valuable, encouraging them with a positive reward system and addressing their social issues and problems in addition to their academic needs.

This approach, coupled with strict and uniform enforcement of the rules and across-the-board accountability, is at the heart of the solution and has made alternative programs like ours a phenomenal success.

Unfortunately, if we as a city don't begin look for comprehensive solutions to our youth-related issues, everyone will continue to incur tremendous costs in increased crime, poverty, costs for incarceration, homelessness and a less productive society overall.

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