

# Thriving

children • youth • families

 Learning online journal



## Schools That Matter™

*Steve Van Bockern*

*Let us put our minds together to see  
what kind of life we can build for our children.*

~Lakota leader, Sitting Bull

Many of us in the United States wonder what kind of life the new administration will build for our children. During the contentious 2016 Presidential campaign, education never really took the center stage. Politicians often use their “love” of children to climb their personal ladders of success but either knowingly or unknowingly step on children to get their wins. Schools and teachers often become the whipping boy for politicians who know little about child growth and development and the devastating effect that poverty can have on that development.<sup>1</sup> They do not seem to be really interested in tackling that problem or the accompanying issue of racism. Instead, most seem to be attracted to test scores like magpies are attracted to shiny objects. They use those test scores to blame and create a sense of crisis in our public schools, when in reality, our public schools do quite well when children arrive at the front door well-fed and rested. As more and more of our children show up stressed by the effects of poverty, learning often takes the back door. To fix this problem, “accountability” is championed through competition, charter schools, vouchers, and more testing.<sup>2</sup>

### ***As more and more of our children show up stressed by the effects of poverty, learning often takes the back door.***

Time will tell what kind of life this new administration will build. While I point at politicians and criticize, my dad told me, “Remember, when you point a finger, three of your other fingers are pointing right back at you.” I don’t want to spend my professional life as a naysayer. I want to be part of the conversation about creating schools I would be happy to see my grandchildren attend.

My colleagues, Dr. Brendtro and Dr. Brokenleg, and I have argued that only when their needs are met, can children thrive. That statement begs a number of questions including, “What are the needs of children?” Our initial research indicated Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity are the needs of all children. These needs transcend

cultural and economic boundaries. Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, and I represented those ideas in what is known as the Circle of Courage<sup>3</sup> in our book, *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future* (1990, 2002).<sup>4</sup>

## ***What are the needs of children?***

More recent research has helped us identify six areas of human need which must be nurtured in all children. These needs are laid out in the Model of Leadership and Service<sup>5</sup> and include Belonging, Achievement, Power, Purpose, Adventure, and Safety.

*Schools That Matter* presents this vision for all schools:<sup>6</sup>

- The need for belonging is met in schools where children say, “The adults in this place like me.”
- Schools that work to meet achievement needs are filled with students who think and believe, “I can solve problems.”
- The child’s need for independence happens in schools where children are given increased responsibility so that each can say, “I have power in this school.”
- The child’s need to feel important and helpful, the sense of purpose, is apparent when they say “I can help.”
- Students say “This school is fun” to indicate they enjoy the novelty and risk taking adventures made available to them.
- “I feel safe”, is experienced in a school that matters to children and families.

Belonging, Achievement, Power, Purpose, Adventure, and Safety are the underlying structure of any school that matters, public or private, traditional or alternative. All of these needs seem to be hard-wired into the brain at birth. When these needs are met, children are free to reach their full potential. Unmet, the repercussions can be enormous. Consequently, schools that ultimately matter to students and parents (our nation, too) can and should determine how those needs take center stage.

These interconnected and interdependent needs are illustrated in the Model of Leadership and Service in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
**The Model of Leadership and Service**



At the center of the wheel is safety. At our human core is a biosocial drive to survive, so we seek safety. The model illustrates how safety is central to all other needs. For example, safety is secured when we join with, or belong to, others. We learn skills (achievement) to keep ourselves safe. When we assert our independence (power) appropriately, we establish safe boundaries. When we help others (purpose) we strengthen the community. A strong community is a safe community. Finally, safety anchors our need to stretch ourselves when we take risks in satisfying explorations and adventures.

Likewise, adventure “wraps” around and strengthens all other human needs.<sup>7</sup> Adventure often connects us to others. It builds skills and teaches us how to cope with challenges. Adventure provides opportunities to monitor and control ourselves. Adventure teaches us how to include others and lookout for their welfare. Ultimately, adventure supports our ability to stay safe.

The real challenge for schools is to actually create a place where students have their needs met. *Schools That Matter* shift from standardized data to professionals determining whether or not students are getting their needs met. Of course, standardized data does matter (it helps us determine a degree of achievement), but it does not solely direct the work of *Schools That Matter*.

A significant cultural shift from management by accountability and test scores to management directed by needs invites all sorts of questions. For example:

- Is safety better created with metal detectors and armed officers in the school, or is relationship building a more powerful cost-effective measure?
- How do schools balance adventure and the accompanying risk-taking and unpredictability of those adventures with safety demands?
- What do school adventures look like? What do belonging, achievement, power, and purpose look like?
- What does the school do to address marginalized children—those with disabilities, those traumatized for any number of reasons, the poor, and racial minorities?
- How much power is too much for children?
- What does a need-based curriculum look like?
- What skills, attitudes, and behaviors do teachers need in order to be effective?
- How, when, and what do you measure to determine student and school success?

There are answers to these questions, sometimes multiple answers that work better in some places than others. From a general perspective, the answers generated demand three things. First, *Schools That Matter* require the adults be emotionally competent. These adults are aware of their emotions and have the ability to manage them, are aware of and can manage the emotions of others, and can self-motivate and contribute to healthy relationships.<sup>8</sup> Loving, smart, powerful, and giving teachers are in the best position to create school life that meets the needs of kids.

Secondly, teachers must have instructional competence. Our schools need to be filled with teachers who have the knowledge and skills to teach well. At the heart of instructional competence is the teacher’s ability to create enriched social environments and meaningful content that is presented in nonthreatening ways.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the stakeholders must share the vision that schools can and should be a place that builds wellness in our children. Wellness is a product of having our human needs met.

What vision will drive our new administration? Time will tell but let's not "wait and see." Let us put our minds together and build a school life that works for our children.

**Steve Van Bockern, EdD**, is a professor of education and special education at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. His book, *Schools That Matter*, published by the University of Winnipeg Faculty Press, will be released in the summer, 2017.



(Endnotes)

1 *The Real Crisis in Education: An Open Letter to the Department of Education* by Krista Taylor (January 9, 2017) provides a reasoned criticism of the accountability movement including the pitfalls of poverty on learning. Retrieved from <http://angelsandsuperheroes.com/2017/01/09/1112/>

2 For one perspective on the administration and education see Abdul-Alim, J. (2016). Experts wary of Betsy DeVos as education secretary. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, 33(24). Retrieved from <http://diverseeducation.com/article/89868/>. See also Klein, A., & Ujifusa, A. (2016). 5 key takeaways on education from the white house candidates. *Education Week*, 35(22), 20-21.

3 The Circle of Courage is a registered trademark of Starr Commonwealth

4 *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future* was written by Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, and Steve Van Bockern and was first published in 1990 by Solution Tree with the second edition printed in 2002.

5 Cal Farley's, Amarillo, Texas, created The Model of Leadership and Service in 2008. We are now sharing this model with colleagues throughout the world.

6 *Schools That Matter* has an anticipated summer 2017 release date. It is being published by the University of Winnipeg Faculty Press.

7 For information about how adventure connects to kids see Strother, M. (2012). A mind for adventure. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 16(1), 17-21.

8 See Dan Goleman's bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Matters More than IQ*. Goleman used Yale's Peter Salovey's definition of emotional intelligence. I've taken some liberty with that definition in this article. See <http://www.danielgoleman.info/topics/emotional-intelligence/> for Goleman's discussion of emotional intelligence.

9 For a discussion of these ideas see Wenger, L. & Van Bockern, S. (1999). Educational best practice or malpractice? Our choice. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 7(4), 212-216, 223.