

ORAL TESTIMONY
HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON LABOR, HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES,
EDUCATION AND RELATED AGENCIES
BY
DR. MARTIN MITCHELL, CEO OF STARR COMMONWEALTH
10:00 A.M., March 23, 2004

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Mr. Obey and the Members of the Subcommittee for allowing me to testify today.

I am the CEO of Starr Commonwealth -- a nationally accredited, highly successful private, nonprofit educational and residential treatment organization that has been transforming the lives of underserved youth and their families since 1913.

Starr Commonwealth was founded by Floyd Starr, a dynamic leader and visionary, who believed until his death in 1980 that “there is no such thing as a bad child.”

We serve a diverse population of more than 4,000 children and families at our facilities in Michigan and Ohio. The key to Starr’s success is our ability to strengthen underlying values through community-based, home-based, residential and clinical support with special emphasis on a solid foundation of faith. We effectively redirect misdirected children by building on the child’s inherent strengths. We have a combined program success rate of 85 percent. We are pioneers in creating environments where children thrive and flourish.

My background is education. My father was an educator as is my sister. My doctorate is in education and one of my own children is a teacher. As a parent, my goal was to ensure that my children got the best possible education. My greatest resource to achieving this goal was, and I believe remains, the school.

Educators in the United States work longer hours than any other teacher in the developed world, yet only one in six African Americans and one in five Hispanics are proficient in reading by the time they are high school seniors. Every seven minutes a child is the victim of bullying on a playground.

The Columbine High School tragedy brought the topic of bullying to the forefront. It ushered in an era of surveillance cameras, metal detectors and zero tolerance in the places our children are supposed to be learning. Not only do these responses leave our children more frightened than safe, but they send mixed messages – how do we teach tolerance under a policy of zero tolerance?

I would like to propose a very different approach. For nearly 100 years, Starr Commonwealth has worked with children and adolescents that not only failed in school, but also were no longer welcome in their communities.

We have developed a program that addresses both the problems in school and in the community. The No Disposable Kids (NDK) program was created based on years of research at Starr and on the best practices in the field. No Disposable Kids is designed to implement broad systemic changes to prevent the increasing epidemic of bullying, racism, dropping out, poor academic performance and violence in our schools.

No Disposable Kids trains administrators, principals, teachers, counselors and students to create an environment where all people are treated with respect and dignity, even those who show objectionable behavior. Hurting another person physically or emotionally is not tolerated.

The Whitehall School District in Ohio is one example of the positive impact the No Disposable Kids program is having. Whitehall school was losing its battle to educate disruptive, non-achieving students. Most were lost to suspension and expulsion. More than 353 suspensions occurred in one year – over 1,600 lost days of learning. This shocking statistic led administrators to try some radically different approaches, including No Disposable Kids training.

After No Disposable Kids was implemented, change in the schools was dramatic. Fourth grade math scores were up 79 percent. Sixth grade science scores up almost 19 percent, and 12th grade reading scores up almost 12 percent. Even more remarkable, Whitehall reported zero suspensions, zero expulsions and a graduation rate of 90 percent.

The Whitehall environment changed, too. Previously, some adults had unknowingly escalated conflicts instead of diffusing them. No Disposable Kids training helped them understand the conflict cycle and how to intervene and operate in a problem-solving mode.

No Disposable Kids training redefines zero tolerance: no behavior that hurts another person will be ignored. The intent is to build a climate of genuine mutual respect.

I believe the success we have experienced with No Disposable Kids in the Whitehall Schools in Ohio and in many other school districts throughout the country can be replicated, but the training costs money and school budgets are more strained than ever.

I appeal to the Subcommittee to help organizations jumpstart time-tested, successful programs like No Disposable Kids, so that these kinds of programs, which literally transform schools and thus lives, may be readily available to more school districts.

The possibilities are endless and the need is great, but we are unified by what Starr Commonwealth's founder, Floyd Starr, reminded the public nearly 100 years ago – “there is no such thing as a bad child.” And in today's world, in a society that cares about its children – there is no such thing as a disposable kid.

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