

Who Comes to Our Schools?

By Paula Levensailor

Principal, Jamaica Elementary School

Over the past seven years I have witnessed a major change in the students we serve in our schools. Would you believe that a large part of our time is spent in discipline of Kindergarten and First Grade students? I believe that we need to pay close attention to the trends we are seeing regarding the students who come to our schools today.

I am reminded of something that Larry McBiles, an Arizona education consultant said recently. He talked about how colleges blame high schools for not preparing the students well enough and high schools blame middle schools for not having them ready and middle schools blame the elementary schools for sending them on ill prepared and the elementary schools blame daycare and preschool and ultimately blame the parents. Yet like it or not—blame them or not—parents are sending us the best they have. They don't have the perfect kids hidden away somewhere. They send us what they have raised thus far due to whatever circumstances they face.

Now don't get me wrong. I am not complaining. I love my job and I have a wonderful school with an excelling label. I could write many articles about our accomplishments. Many of you probably think—well sure—that's the new "rich" school. That's why they can do so well. Not so.

All six of our elementary schools are more alike than they are different. I am always

impressed with the high quality that each and every principal expects and that each faculty delivers. My school is representative of the kind of students that all of us deal with. When we get together the stories that we tell are very similar. Let me give you some examples of who comes to our schools.



Jamaica Elementary School principal Levensailor (on the left) and Lake Havasu Unified's superintendent Malay show school's "Excelling" banner to students.

WHO COMES TO OUR SCHOOLS?

Kids from dysfunctional families—kids who may have been shipped across the country to live with a relative who does not even have power of attorney let alone custody . . . Kids who have not been in school for weeks or months while parents are moving and trying to find a job . . . Kids who have a parent hiding from the other parent or

hiding from an abusive relationship and continue to run from place to place . . . Kids who speak no English . . . Kids whose parents are in jail, on drugs, are unemployed, alcoholic, or promiscuous.

WHO COMES TO OUR SCHOOLS?

Kids without an identity . . . who may not know their real last name . . . who only know the first name of their mom's latest boyfriend . . . who live with so many different people that they don't know who they are really related to . . . kids who are not safe.

WHO COMES TO OUR SCHOOLS?

Kids with severe behavior or emotional problems . . . Kids who try to run away, leave the classroom, lock the teachers in the room with the door stop on the outside . . . run to

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the parking lot and get underneath the car . . . who cry and shriek when they arrive in the mornings and refuse to go to class . . . Kindergartners and 1st graders who use the "f" word masterfully.

WHO COMES TO OUR SCHOOLS?

Kids who don't know where they'll be tonight . . . Who will pick them up? Where will they stay . . . mom, dad, boyfriend, girlfriend, ex, grandparent, friend, neighbor?? Will mom or dad be in jail tonight?

WHO COMES TO OUR SCHOOLS?

Kids without the background to be ready for school . . . no sense of respect for authority . . . no sense of proper behavior in public let alone at a school . . . kids who are strong willed because that is how they have learned how to survive. These are kids who have not been read to—have not had exposure to 45 million words as they would have if they were our 1,000 book kids—the kind we expected to get. Kids who are late every day because they have no one modeling the value of education or of being on time to them . . . Kids raised by daycare or ignored in a world full of problems the parents have not been able to cope with. Kids whose parents use alcohol, drugs, are involved in illegal activities . . . kids exposed to sexual behavior before their time.

Now are all of our kids like this? Of course not—but there are more like this today than there used to be and it makes our jobs much harder. There was a time when we could say that the job of the school was to reinforce what is learned in the home. We can't say that

anymore. In fact, the last thing we want to do is reinforce that.

So what do we do? We create a safe environment with our structure, routines and procedures. We provide food where needed. We take care of cleanliness and health issues that are otherwise neglected. We are relentless about early assessment and early intervention. We build character through education and recognition. We teach anti bullying and accountability for one's actions. We capitalize on strengths and build the gifts and talents of our students through music, art, sports, and leadership activities. We have teachers who go above and beyond in their preparation, training, and communication with parents. We partner with the community in so many ways to fill in the gaps which exist in the lives of these kids: Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Interagency, Havasu Interdisciplinary Team, Hospice, Havasu For Youth, Humane Society, Rotary, Kiwanis, Soroptimists, Elks, Lions, Eagles, VFW, our City Fire and Police Departments—the list goes on and on and also includes business partners like Sterilite and Windsor Square.



LHUSD has exemplary schools: no schools below performing plus, schools far ahead of the state, and schools that are proactive not reactive. We teach all students all the time. **Are we successful? Yes we are.**

Our local newspaper ran a two-part related story.

[Part 1](#)

[Part 2](#)