

OPINION

Rededication needed

Education must become more important to all

Our wish for the new year is a rededication to education. We live in what has been called the greatest country in the world. Unfortunately, our literacy levels are in a free fall. There are many reasons for this, including students who are unable to learn because of severe problems in their homes, be it abuse, malnutrition or a lack of support from parents. Sometimes they can't learn because they or their parents have damaged their minds with drugs.

Grade inflation is also a problem. We've heard stories of parents, lawyers at their elbows, insisting that grades be raised so the student can qualify for a better college. We've also heard of teachers — even in elementary school — who are afraid to give students bad grades, even when told by parents they should give their child the grades they deserve.

The result of all this is that only 19 percent of United States adults are at high literacy level — ninth out of the 17 industrialized nations rated — according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's figures for 1998. Those figures also show the United States is seventh out of 17 countries in the percentage of adults at a low literacy level — almost 50 percent. It seems obvious that we need to rededicate ourselves to education.

We can start by having teachers give the grades students deserve. A report card with all A's doesn't mean much if the student gets to college and can't compete. Schools that don't present qualified students eventu-

ally end up on lists that colleges keep to let them know which schools have grade inflation or other problems.

We need to send the message to our young people that education is important. Good students should get the same kinds of accolades as athletes, for example. We need to show our young people by our actions that we think their education is important — perhaps turning off the TV one night a week to read, or playing games that require knowledge or reasoning skills.

Parents and other adults can help by joining school support groups and volunteering in the schools.

Children must once again become the center of attention. Fifty years ago, society paid much more attention to children and their schooling than it does today. Many of today's parents aren't able to focus on their child's education because of the many distractions present in our modern world — fending off drugs, keeping children safe from molesters, or just putting food on the table. In other words, it's often difficult to focus on a child's education when so much effort has to go into just keeping him safe and healthy.

Parents need support from society in general. So will their counterparts of tomorrow — many of today's students who will grow up to find they cannot deal with the requirements of the world because they don't have the skills or the abilities.

We can't depend on Washington to change this. Real change will be achieved only when each parent and each community becomes dedicated to the task.

Meanwhile, here on the ground in Hillsborough County, New Hampshire, we need to become much more aware of the long-term consequences of an epidemic of high school dropouts. In November Governor Lynch referred to a projection that 2,500 students a year drop out of New Hampshire high schools. It has been predicted that 31 percent of students now in Boston High Schools will drop out in the next two years. At this regional level we see increasingly alarming evidence of "institutionalized low performance through low expectations."

As business and community leaders, parents, guidance counselors and teachers we must work together to help our young people understand the often irrevocable consequences of failing to pursue opportunities available to them through continuing education through high school and beyond. And we must find ways at all levels to help make post-secondary education more affordable.

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Institutionalized low expectations causing problems

To the editor:

In a statement in Business Week (Dec. 19, page 108) Craig Barrett, CEO of Intel said, "U.S. business needs to help turn out more math and science grads if it is to stay competitive." While he focuses on the need for more business initiatives to support math, science and engineering education, what he has written applies to a broader and important challenge for all of us.

Relative to math and science he wrote "American K-12 students are consistently outperformed by their foreign counterparts on international math and science assessments. And we have a graduation gap. While the number of jobs requiring technical skills is increasing, fewer U.S. students are entering and graduating from degree programs in science, math and engineering. ... Science and engineering are the engines of economic growth and national security in the U.S. and we are no longer producing enough qualified graduates to keep up with the demand. ... These graduates ... represent a resource vital to American competitiveness." He writes "A report released earlier this year by Achieve, a nonprofit organization that helps states raise academic standards, contends that we have institutionalized low performance through low expectations ... and that much of the content on state high school exit exams is basic at best, similar to material covered by many foreign students in the eighth grade."

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