

Why are there so few male mentors?

GRAIG MEYER



Across the Triangle, there are dozens of mentoring programs trying to support young men by providing them with male role models. We know firsthand what newspaper headlines tell us: Too many boys in our society are failing school and falling between the cracks.

Like most mentoring programs, the program that I run has one challenge that surpasses all others: Recruiting enough male mentors.

Twice a year, our program trains a group of new mentors and brings in new students. Last fall, we faced a crisis. With only one week to go before our training for mentors was to begin, no men had stepped forward to volunteer.

That's right. No men had volunteered to become mentors. Zip. Zero. Zilch.

Recently, a social worker from one of our local elementary schools told me that she asked teachers at her school to recommend students for our program. They recommended two girls ... and eight boys. That's no surprise. There are probably about four times as many boys who need mentors as girls. Unfortunately, our female mentors outnumber their male counterparts 2:1.

Why don't men volunteer? (Are you reading this, men?) They consistently tell me four things:

- 1) I'm too busy.
- 2) I'm not patient enough.
- 3) I wouldn't be good at it.
- 4) I'm not sure it really works.

Guys, I'm calling you out. Those are excuses that are leaving our young men behind. First of all, it does work. We have a 100 percent high school graduation rate for our male students and 100 percent of them have also gone on to some type of post-secondary education.

You *would* be good at mentoring. You *are* patient enough. There is no movie-influenced Supermentor role that you need to fulfill. You just need to be yourself. There are boys in our community who need you.

Making the time is something you can choose to do. And I promise you that you will be rewarded.

Mentoring is not always easy, but our mentors consistently say that once they begin mentoring it's other stuff that they have to make time for – mentor time is something they look forward to.

So, what can you do?

Men: Step up to the plate. Mentoring programs need to hear from you. Most programs ask for you to give just a couple of hours per week. You can include your protégé in things you're already doing, like going to a basketball game, fishing, fixing your car or cooking dinner.

Women: Reach out to the men in your lives. The best way to recruit a mentor is to tell him, "You'd really make a great mentor." Give them some information on a mentoring program in your area. Or even better, call the program and give them a few names of your male friends. We'll call them on your recommendation. (P.S. We need female mentors still, too, so you can volunteer as well if you'd like!)

Couples: Sometimes it's easier for a married couple to mentor together. If a husband and wife volunteer together, we can match you with a male mentee. You can split the mentoring responsibilities between you. It's a great activity to do together.

So what happened with our volunteer recruitment last fall? We put on a last-minute male mentor recruitment push. We had five men sign up, so we brought five new boys into our program.

There are mentoring programs throughout the Triangle that need your support. It takes men stepping up to the plate to make sure that our programs don't struggle with this issue and that our society doesn't fail our young men.

Graig Meyer is the coordinator of the Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate Program for the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools.

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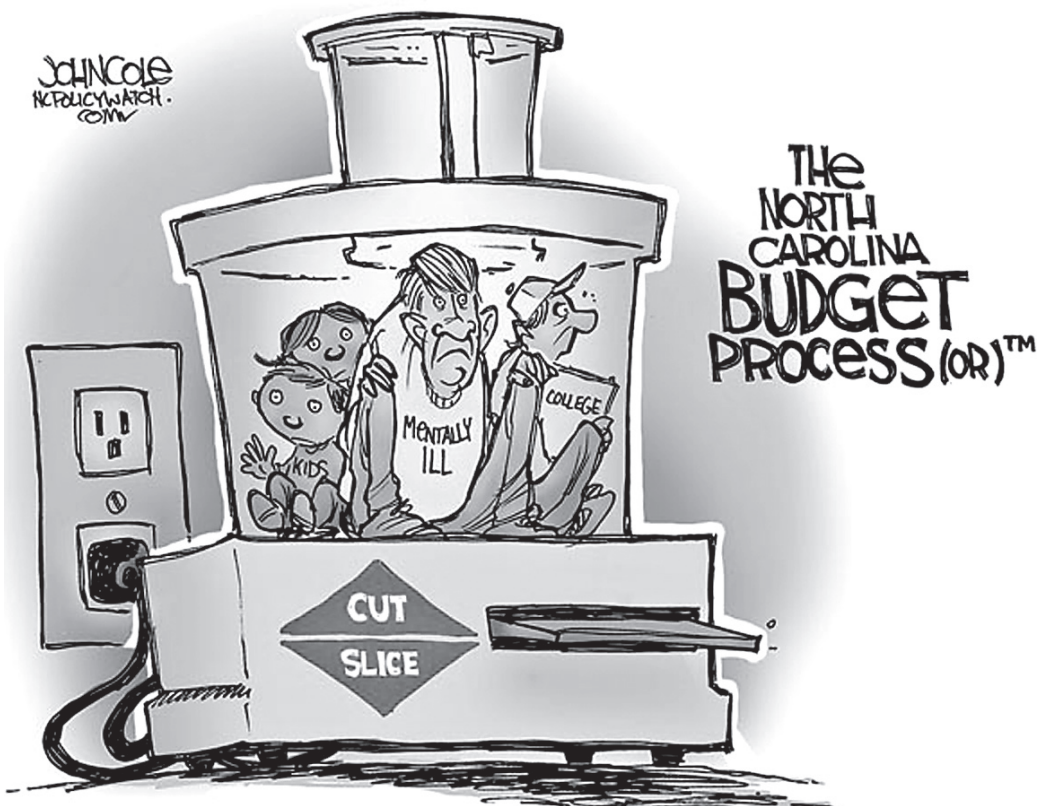
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Finding common ground on birth control

PAIGE JOHNSON

It was a snow day like no other. With schools and businesses closed, a record number of North Carolinians tuned in to watch the 44th president sworn into office. For many viewers, the day ushered in a belief that we can finally move beyond the entrenched differences that divide us.

Two days after the inauguration was the 36th anniversary of Roe v. Wade, the U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in the United States. Few issues will test the power of President Obama's ability to bridge divides quite like abortion.

In fact, few issues test the resolve of all Americans to move beyond rhetoric to meaningful solutions the way this one does. Three decades after Roe v. Wade, Americans still remain divided. It makes little sense to continue beating the same drum.

People want solutions, not more of the same vitriol. In a time of economic uncertainty, when so many neighbors, friends and communities are struggling to make ends meet, our focus should be on remedies and, to the extent possible, on the areas in which we agree.

Birth control seems a common-sense place to begin. According to the Guttmacher Institute, a non-partisan reproductive health care think tank, 99 percent of women at some point in their life rely on birth control to prevent unintended pregnancies.

Birth control allows women and families to decide when they are ready for a child, which better prepares them to care for that child,

Sixty percent of women who have abortions are mothers already.

emotionally and financially. When women have greater access to birth control, fewer unintended pregnancies occur. This means fewer abortions occur. We can reduce the number of abortions by increasing access to birth control without stigmatizing or punishing a woman who decides that terminating a pregnancy is the right decision.

In North Carolina, 21 percent of women in their childbearing years are without health coverage of any sort. This means they must pay out of pocket for doctor visits or rely on publicly funded contraceptive services. An additional 11 percent of women in childbearing years rely on Medicaid for family planning services. Without taking teenagers into account, roughly a third of women in the state rely on or need some form of publicly funded birth control.

North Carolina has a remarkable history as the first state in the nation to provide voluntary, publicly funded family planning services. On average, every dollar invested in family planning services provides a state with more than four dollars in savings from public assistance. This makes birth control a common-sense solution as well as a cost-sav-

ings measure for our state.

We can do more to help women plan and space their pregnancies for healthier birth outcomes. And we can do more for women who want to parent but face financial challenges.

There is no experience more life altering than having a child. Sixty percent of women who have abortions are mothers already. The majority cite a need to care for others as the number one reason why they have an abortion. They understand the love a child promises as well as the responsibilities and obligations of caring for a child.

If we really want to help people care for their children, we should provide more support to parents. Take child care for example. It is not feasible for most families to live on one income, especially in today's economic climate. The average price of child care for an infant in North Carolina costs more per year than it does to pay tuition and fees at our state universities. No wonder there are some 30,000-plus families on the waiting list for child care assistance.

There are endless ways in which we can help provide greater access to health care, including birth control, responsible sex education and greater support for families struggling to care for their children. With all that we can and should do to make the world a better, healthier place, it seems like such a waste of time to cling to the entrenched differences that divide us.

Paige Johnson is the director of public affairs at Planned Parenthood of Central North Carolina.

EDUCATION MATTERS

With literacy and justice for all

BY STEVE PEHA

Staff Writer

Recently, I visited a number of schools: high schools, middle schools and elementary schools; public, private and religious schools. Each acknowledged the same problem with literacy: Too many kids were so far behind in reading that they couldn't function in their classes. But when I made suggestions about how to improve things, and modeled these suggestions in teachers' classrooms, I got distinctly negative reactions to new ideas.

The concept that set teachers off the most was the notion of teaching kids how to choose books they liked and could read. That way, instead of most kids struggling to read texts way above their heads (novels chosen by the teacher or selections from a publisher's anthology or test-prep packet), each student could read a book that was just right. This would make reading more meaningful for kids and allow teachers to teach important skills through brief one-on-one conferences in a context where kids could immediately apply them. It would also improve student motivation and help them feel more successful.

True enough, it's hard to teach better. But isn't it worth it, especially when it comes to literacy? Why are we so resistant? Why do we seem so unmoved by the connection between failure in literacy and failure in school? Why don't we acknowledge the connection between high school dropouts and low levels of literacy? Why, in something as

important as reading, do we justify using approaches (like whole-class novels and anthology selections) that we know don't work for the kids we're trying to teach?

When we teach reading, we hold kids' lives in our hands. And every time we hit them with texts they can't read (and tell them their grades depend on their understanding), we chip away at those lives until reading becomes odious and punitive. The consequences for kids who fall behind in elementary school can be devastating. By the time they reach middle school, their reading includes larger volumes of social studies, science and math texts written at grade levels for which they are not prepared. And their secondary teachers, almost never trained in reading, can't help them.

It's time our nation began to feel an urgency around reading that compelled us to do the right things: Teach kids how to choose their own "just right" texts; teach reading skills and monitor kids' progress in the context of authentic individual reading; create successful interventions and intervene early at all levels, K-12; make sure all certified teachers have a meaningful and practical background in reading instruction; put the needs of students above those of covering curriculum or preparing for tests.

When it comes to ed reform these days, we all seem to be nurturing dreams of kids becoming college graduates and going on to be the scientists and mathematicians who create our future. But here in the present, we're kidding ourselves if we

think we can get away with anything less than 100 percent literacy. Of course, it's our least advantaged children who are hurt the most by the old let's-all-read-the-same-novel-or-selection-from-the-literature-book approach. And yet this approach persists in the majority of our classrooms.

Now, you may be thinking, "I was taught the old-fashioned way and it worked for me." Or, "My children read just fine and they're taught that way." But that's not the point. A significant percentage of kids learn to read outside of school and others can learn just about anything on their own no matter how poorly they're taught. But what about the 10 to 20 million kids in our country that our testing data tells us don't read as well as they should and who aren't getting better as they get further along in school?

It makes sense to tackle this problem at the beginning. Most schools have an informal goal that all kids will be fluent readers by third grade. But what happens if some kids don't make it? Send them to fourth grade and hope. And then on to fifth and middle and high school thereafter, all the while postponing our obligation.

Reading delayed is reading denied. Kids who don't learn to read well in elementary school rarely, if ever, catch up. And just about everyone who's ever worked in a school, or been a parent of a struggling reader, knows this. If education is truly the new civil right, it's time we got serious about creating a nation with literacy and justice for all.

More than a budget driver

CHRIS FITZSIMON

Tuesday's budget and tax briefing for state lawmakers was billed as a look at the "major drivers" in the growth of the state budget, with most of the time spent on trends in education and Medicaid. Lawmakers will hear more detailed reports on both issues in the coming days, but Tuesday's Medicaid overview and the questions and comments it prompted are reminders of how many legislators view the program — as a burden from which we need relief, a major drain on the state budget.

Medicaid costs have grown an average of 9.3 percent a year in the last nine years and the program now covers 18 percent of the people in North Carolina. The budget passed last session included \$2.9 billion for Medicaid, the single biggest state expense in health and human services.

Evan Rodewald of the Legislature's Fiscal Research Division said three factors contribute to Medicaid's growth: inflationary increases, new technologies and higher enrollment, though the costs of Medicaid generally grow less than the costs of health care in the private sector. The questions from lawmakers were not about technology or the escalating costs of medication. Instead they wanted to know if the state's eligibility standards were in line with other states and how generous were the services that Medicaid offers.

That's a version of a talking point from the market fundamentalist crowd – that North Carolina's Medicaid program includes too many services not mandated by the federal government. Raleigh's leading right-wing think tank has called many times for North Carolina to drop all optional services, which include ambulance service, orthotics and medication.

One version of budget cuts this year included ending podiatry coverage, even though some seniors with diabetes are at risk of losing their feet and never walking again.

Medicaid isn't just a budget driver, it's a life saver.

Just over 1.6 million people in North Carolina qualified for Medicaid in 2007 based on income and health status. The majority of recipients are very poor children or seniors or people with disabilities. Two-thirds of people covered by Medicaid are female and the majority of them are white.

Many uninsured adults do not qualify for Medicaid regardless of income. It is a program targeted to specific groups of people. It is also a success story, providing a health care safety net for the most vulnerable people in the state with far lower administrative costs than private insurance.

Many lawmakers and think tanks proposing cuts in Medicaid don't want to talk specifics, because the details make their suggestions absurd. Sixty-four percent of Medicaid spending goes to help seniors and people with disabilities. Another 14 percent covers poor kids. Then there are pregnant women and AFDC recipients under 21.

People advocating significant reductions in Medicaid should be forced to explain which group they want to deny services to or who shouldn't have access to an ambulance when they have a heart attack or an artificial limb when they lose an arm or leg.

Rodewald told lawmakers Tuesday that Medicaid costs usually increase during economic downturns. More people are eligible after losing jobs and the health care that comes with it. That makes talk of Medicaid cuts this session even more irrational.

The stimulus package that finally emerges from Congress is all but certain to provide more Medicaid funding for North Carolina. That will help. So would a different view of Medicaid.

It is a public program that works and helps thousands of people every day. That's something to be proud of, not something to complain about. And it's also something to protect, especially this year.

Chris Fitzsimon is the director of NC Policy Watch.