

OPINION

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The Injustices of the Juvenile Justice System

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Recently, an 8-year-old boy in Williamsburg, Va., became one of the latest casualties in our nation's tendency to criminalize childhood.

The second grader was handcuffed and led away from Rawls Byrd Elementary School after an incident in which he allegedly threw a tantrum, overturned desks and head-butted the teacher. According to local reports, police were considering whether to file disorderly conduct and assault and battery charges against the child, who is 4 feet tall and weighs approximately 75 pounds. He also was suspended from school for 10 days.

His mother said the boy had been sexually assaulted by a relative when he was 5 years old and had witnessed the

drowning death of his half-sister. She also said she had been in prison from the time her son was a newborn until shortly before the classroom incident, and that she believes living with several different caretakers has taken a toll on his young life.

This is a child who has suffered more emotional trauma in eight years than any child ought to experience in a lifetime. The triggering event at school was described by his mother as a spelling worksheet her child couldn't successfully complete.

What is wrong with this picture?

This 8-year-old child is in imminent danger of becoming stuck in a pipeline to prison. Children need to have hope that they can succeed and they need family stability and adults they can trust. They also need counsel-



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—Marian Wright Edelman

ing when trauma affects them. At critical points in their development, however, from birth through adulthood, a disproportionate number of poor children of color lack access to these important keys to healthy development and struggle to compete on an unequal playing field.

Many fall inexorably behind. The pipeline to prison robs children of their God-given birthrights to opportunity, fulfillment

and self-actualization, making it far more likely that they will end up behind bars.

The Williamsburg mothers said the police officers who arrested her son were "nice" and did everything they should have. The painful truth, however, is that the moment the police were called in and the 8-year-old was hauled off in handcuffs, it was just one more in a long line of abandonments this child in need

suffered. He, like hundreds of thousands of children at risk of being caught in the pipeline to prison, have no say over the circumstances of their birth and no vote to influence our nation's priorities that favor the desires of millionaires and billionaires.

We are the adults, and we need to step up to the plate to protect our abandoned children who are desperately crying out for help. They need

treatment, consistent and positive adults and a stable home environment with love and safety and limits, and schools with enough counselors. They need to know they are not alone. They do not need criminal charges. They do not need to become statistics in a juvenile justice system that increases the likelihood that they will end up in prison as adults.

There are no easy solutions to such painful and complicated life stories. Unfortunately for our at-risk children, passing the buck to an ill-prepared juvenile justice system is increasingly becoming the easiest answer of all.

Marian Wright Edelman is chief executive officer and founder of the Children's Defense Fund.



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John Paul's Vision for Equality

BY U.S. REP. MEL WATT

The world is diminished by the loss of a great moral and spiritual leader, Pope John Paul II.

The pope, who was an inspirational leader to more than one billion Roman Catholics, had an incredible ability to connect with all people, regardless of race, color, nationality or creed.

With his lifelong concern for the poorest people, the pope



was committed to ending the disparities that exist in every aspect of our lives and believed that the calling of the church

was to work for social justice.

He was committed to alleviating the poverty and suffering felt by people around the world.

His vision was that all people were children of God and should

share equally of God's blessings.

We in the Congressional Black Caucus share Pope John Paul II's vision and will continue to work toward addressing disparities that continue to plague our world.

Our thoughts and prayers are with all who grieve for Pope John Paul II."

Congressman Melvin L. Watt, D-N.C., is chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Our Schools Need Tax Reform

BY SEN. AVEL GORDLY

Thank you Portland School Board, Superintendent Phillips, the African American Alliance, and every parent and concerned community member who participated in some of the most difficult decisions this community will make regarding its children and its schools.

Through the painful recounting of how paternalism and institutional racism have bred distrust and mistrust, we have learned that what we value as a community is real and meaning-



ful communication—communication that honors different voices, honors history, and honors choices for all parents.

Given our history, hopefully we have

all also learned, and affirmed, that nothing is more important than delivering a quality, non-racist education to each student in every Portland school.

As a legislator who represents school districts including Portland 1J, I am proud to represent a community and school

board that struggle so mightily to improve the quality of instruction and achievement for all of its students and schools.

But still we must do more, and that includes reforming our outdated tax structure now to include a sales tax dedicated to funding education (pre-kindergarten through higher education) and getting rid of archaic corporate tax breaks. Today's students cannot and should not have to wait any longer for this stability and commitment.

Sen. Avel Gordly represents northeast and southeast Portland in the State Legislature.

More Black Doctors Can Help

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Much discussion is being given as to how we can close the gaps in healthcare that exist between blacks and whites. One way to increase the quality of healthcare for African Americans is to increase the number of African American doctors.

We must advocate for increased health clinics in our communities and increased incentives for African Americans to attend medical school. Tying financial aid and scholarships to doctors who practice underserved communities would go a long way in closing the health gap.

Although different eating habits may account for some of our health problems (our love for fried and fatty foods) the primary reasons for the health gap is a lack of access to quality healthcare.

According to the National Center for Health statistics, only 58 percent of African



Judge Greg Mathis

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Americans have private healthcare insurance compared to 71 percent of whites. Additionally, white men are nearly twice as likely to have healthcare insurance than are black men.

African Americans who do have healthcare insurance still suffer more and die earlier than whites because the quality of care we receive is often less than that for whites. Studies have shown that racial bias stereotyping, and cultural insensitivity all influence the type of treatment that doctors pursue

for their patients. That is why it is important to increase the number of African American doctors.

In the meantime, we must take charge of our own health. We must begin eating healthier and include exercise in our daily routine. Those two lifestyle adjustments will help us individually.

Judge Greg Mathis is chairman of the Rainbow PUSH-Excel Board and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.