

OPINION

For the Sake of Our Children

Start a conversation on child abuse

BY ANN HANSON

As I watched and listened to the unfolding story of the Penn State scandal this month, my feelings of intense anger were focused on the accused pedophile and a system of power and privilege that apparently was engaged in protecting its honor and status at the expense of vulnerable boys who were cleverly groomed and seduced by one of their coaches.

One of the brief interviews I watched involved a young adult who said that he, too, had been involved with the Second Mile Foundation and had been with the accused pedophile Jerry Sandusky.



The young man went on to say that on a couple occasions, Mr. Sandusky had placed his hand on his thigh and caressed it. He knew then, as a child, that deep down this was not right, and it gave him the "creeps," so he stayed away from the perpetrator and did not become another victim of even more horrible abuse. Did he tell anyone in authority about the creepiness of his experience? No.

This story prompted me to reflect on my own experience. When I was 16, my driver's training instructor (a young, charming, handsome and charismatic man) put his hand on my thigh during one of our classes. By some miracle, I knew on many levels this was very wrong.

I shot him a look that made him know that this was not right. He never bothered me again.

Did I tell anyone in authority about the creepiness of my experience? No. Were others hurt because of my silence? Yes. I wonder what might have been different if my parents, my school, my church had taught a 5-year old me that my body was sacred, and that if anyone touched me inappropriately, I was to tell.

Hopefully, this Penn State scandal will start a conversation all over the world – a conversation that involves the court system, institutions that care for children, our churches, schools, and yes, our own homes.

Every child, starting at a young age, needs to know that their body is precious, and that no one

has the right to touch any part of their bodies without permission.

Parents and guardians are often uncomfortable with conversations that might involve sexuality. Our silence, however, allows our children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren to be vulnerable to a predator's grooming process and abuse.

We also need to tell children they must trust their instincts, and if someone makes them feel "yucky" or "creepy," or if they are touched inappropriately, they have a safe place to come and talk about it.

The term 'good touch/bad touch' is often times not helpful – a predator's grooming process may consist of touch that feels good, especially if a child is in need of loving touch. 'Stranger danger' is another term that is

misleading – most predators are known to the child. If your child attends a program (whether it be in church or the community) make sure a 'safe child' policy is in place: no child is ever left alone with an adult.

Mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse varies from state to state. Teachers, social workers, clergy, physicians, etc., are not mandatory reporters in all 50 states.

If you ever see or suspect child abuse of any kind, contact your local child protective services office or law enforcement agency so professionals can assess the situation. Do this for the sake of our children.

Ann Hanson is minister for sexuality education and justice for the United Church of Christ.

Cuts in Education a Failing Choice

Few dollars saved today will cost us in the future

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Aristotle got it right when he said, "All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of youth."

Once upon a time America, professed to believe in a strong public education system—at least for some children. We still talk about public education as the great equalizer and pathway out of poverty, but continue to fall far short in assuring millions of poor children, especially those



of color, upward mobility.

As if children and families were not suffering enough during this economic downturn, many states are choosing to balance budgets on the backs of children and to shift more costs away from government onto children and families who have fewer means to bear them. That is a shameful trend in public education today.

Even when students are in school, they're getting less than they used to. Of the 46 states that publish data in a manner allowing historical comparisons, 37 are providing less funding per student to local school districts this school year than they provided last year, and 30 are providing less funding than they did four years ago. Seventeen states have cut per-student funding more than 10 percent from pre-

recession levels, and four—South Carolina, Arizona, California, and Hawaii—have reduced per student funding for K-12 schools more than 20 percent.

These cuts have major effects on critical learning opportunities. They come at a time when American education is in dire straits.

The United States ranks 24th among 30 developed countries in overall educational achievement for 15-year-olds. A study of education systems in 60 countries ranks the United States 31st in math achievement and 23rd in science achievement for 15-year-olds. More than 60 percent of all fourth, eighth, and 12th grade public school students in every racial and income group are reading or doing math below grade level. Nearly 80 percent or more of black and Hispanic students in these grades are read-

ing or doing math below grade level.

A recent report by the Education Trust notes more than one in five high school graduates don't meet the minimum standard required for Army enlistment as measured by the Armed Forces Qualification Test. Among applicants of color, the ineligibility rates are even higher: 29 percent of Hispanics and 39 percent of African Americans are ineligible based on their scores.

Children should be getting more quality instructional time, not less, to prepare to compete in the rapidly globalizing economy. Instead they're being held back and provided less school days and hours by stopgap solutions to budget problems they didn't cause.

Too many adults seem to lack a moral, common, and fiscal sense context for making decisions about what to cut and what

to invest in. At the Children's Defense Fund we believe education is a basic human right and an essential tool for evening the odds for all children and promoting upward mobility for children left behind.

Education gives you the tools to improve not only your own life, but the lives of others and to leave the world better than you found it. How can we expect our children to create a better America if we don't give them a good education?

Cuts being proposed in Congress, the states and localities around the country may be saving a few dollars on a balance sheet today—but they will cost us dearly tomorrow as a nation. How shortsighted we are. Where are our priorities? What are our values?

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

The Portland Observer Established 1970

USPS 959-680

4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd., Portland, OR 97211

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, PUBLISHER: Charles H. Washington

EDITOR: Michael Leighton

DISTRIBUTION MANAGER: Mark Washington

CREATIVE DIRECTOR: Paul Neufeldt

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