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OPINION

Time to Redefine the Measures of Our Success

What do we Americans truly value?

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

What do we stand for as a nation and who do we wish to be? In a 1968 speech at the University of Kansas, Sen. Robert Kennedy correctly worried too many used our nation's wealth as the standard of greatness rather than the human values that should matter most.

Our Gross Domestic Product — now \$17.7 trillion — includes many things for us not to be proud of. So we should ask ourselves how well America is doing on the things that should matter most—the well-being of our children and families and the quality of justice and life in our communities and nation?



Among high-income countries the United States ranks first in Gross Domestic Product and first in the number of billionaires, and second worst in child poverty rates — ahead only of Romania whose economy is 99 percent smaller than ours. It is a national disgrace that children are the poorest group of Americans with 14.7 million living in poverty.

We are first in military spending — \$11.1 billion a week — and first in military weapons exports.

We are first in the number of people incarcerated and worst in protecting our children against gun violence. A black boy born in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime and a Latino boy a one in six chance of the same fate. Children and teens in America were 17 times more likely to be killed by gun violence than those in 25 other high-in-

come countries combined.

We are 30th in preschool enrollment rates and 17th in reading, 23rd in science, and 31st in math scores for our 15-year-olds. Nearly 60 percent of all fourth and eighth grade public school students in the U.S. and more than 80 percent of black and almost 75 percent of Latino children in those same grades could not read or compute at grade level in 2013.

We rank first in health expenditures but 25th in low birth weight rates, 26th in child immunization rates, 31st in infant mortality rates, and second worst in teenage births — just ahead of Bulgaria.

If we compare black child well-being in America to child well-being in other nations, the U.S. black infant mortality rate exceeds that in 65 nations including Cuba, Malaysia, and Ukraine. Our incidence of low-birth weight black infants is higher than in 127 other nations including Cambodia, the Congo, and Guatemala.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child spells out the basic rights children should have everywhere and is the most widely and rapidly ratified international human rights treaty in history. For years the United States and Somalia, which had no recognized government, were the only United Nations members that had failed to ratify the convention. In January 2015 Somalia became the 195th nation to do so. The United States now stands only with new U.N. member state South Sudan as the two countries that have not ratified it — and South Sudan has started working towards ratification.

The United States stands alone, despite recent progress, in still permitting life-without-parole sentences for juvenile offenders who were under 18 at the time of the offense. The U.S. Supreme Court has banned capital punishment for crimes committed by juveniles but America remains one

of 58 nations that continues to use capital punishment for adults. In 2013 the U.S. had the sixth highest number of executions — after China, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and North Korea.

If America wants to be a truly great nation on the world stage, it's time to redefine the measures of our success. The litmus test I propose is that of the great German Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed for opposing Hitler's holocaust, who said "the test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children." The great South African president Nelson Mandela agreed with him and believed "there can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

On the Bonhoeffer-Mandela measure of success, we must do much, much better.

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

Indebted Students are Force to be Reckoned With

The time bomb of student debt

BY CHUCK COLLINS

There's a generational time-bomb ticking — and the student debt crisis is the trip wire.

Adults under 35 disproportionately bear the brunt of escalating inequality.

America's educated youth are graduating into an economy with stagnant wages and a torn safety net. Federal and state budget cuts, meanwhile, have spiked tuition costs and cut public services that aid young workers, such as transportation and affordable housing.

A rumble of legitimate discontent is mounting from the 40 million Americans saddled with student debt totaling \$1.16 trillion — a number expected to increase to \$2 trillion by 2022. College debt now touches one in five U.S. households and exceeds total credit card indebtedness.

The most frustrated students are blocking highways over tuition hikes. Others are launching "debt strikes" by refusing to pay the for-profit schools that bilked them.

Many more are defaulting after facing the stressful realization that they can't find a job that pays enough to repay their debt. Over

half of outstanding student loans are presently in deferral, delinquency, or default.

The student debt debacle has huge implications for the future. The average college graduate is now almost \$30,000 underwater, with some on the hook for over \$100,000.

This debt keeps young people from starting families, buying houses, and taking risks on new businesses. It also exacerbates the growing problem of wealth inequality and declining social mobility, since it gives debt-free graduates from wealthier families an enormous head start over their peers.

Many baby boomers without kids in college don't fully appreciate how the economy is tilted against the rising generation — or how much higher education financing has changed from previous generations.

Since the 1970s, tuition rates have risen over 1,000 percent, while state funding of universities has declined by 40 percent. And the proportion of young Americans with education debt more than quadrupled, from 5 percent to 22 percent.

The powerful student loan industry lobbied for — and got — draconian laws that penalize student debtors more than people holding mortgages, car loans, or credit cards. Servicers can gar-

nish young graduates' wages and disability payments to get their due.

And not even bankruptcy can cancel out these loans.

In some states, student debtors who fall into default can lose their professional certifications and even their driver's licenses. Imagine borrowing money to get a nursing or cosmetology degree, falling behind in your payments, and having your source of livelihood revoked.

It doesn't have to be this way. Other countries have offered free public higher education for decades.

In the 30 years after World War II, the government expanded access to debt-free college for millions of Americans. These included GI Bill recipients, but also millions of men and women without military service records who attended the great public universities of our land, paying a tuition bill they could afford with only a summer job.

Lawmakers should reverse the cycle of state budget cuts in higher education that shift tuition costs onto students and their cash-strapped families. Some states are considering creating "opportunity trust funds," capitalized by state estate taxes on the richest 1 percent, to finance debt-free public education.

The national Strike Debt movement calls on Congress to

spend an additional \$15 billion a year to make public education free. They could accomplish this by cutting out for-profit colleges and the parasitical college loan industry, and by simplifying the existing labyrinth of education subsidies.

The vast majority of college debtors still suffer in isolation, viewing their struggle as a personal problem, not a societal is-

sue. But this is about to change. When college debt borrowers wake up and flex their political muscles, they'll be a force to be reckoned with.

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