

Academic success is the first crime-fighting tool

Chief's Corner
Chief Jim Bueermann
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When my parents made the choice to return to Redlands after attending the University of Redlands – and my dad's stint in the U.S. Army – they knew they were deciding to raise their kids in America's greatest town. I'm not sure they knew that they were also giving my brother, sister and me another precious gift in the form of an unparalleled education courtesy of the Redlands Unified School District.

Recently, my dear friend, and community treasure, Barbara Phelps, arranged for me to speak to the local chapter of retired teachers. I was delighted to see that my second and fifth grade teachers were in attendance (thanks again Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Sutner!). Amazingly, they remembered me.

My sister and brother claim my teachers' recollection probably has more to do with my behavior than my academic performance but I think this is simply younger sibling payback. Not, mind you, that as their older brother, I actually DESERVE their unwarranted retribution. I mean, really, I didn't torment them THAT much. Ask my mom. Well, wait a minute. Maybe that's not such a good idea. Just trust me, they're exaggerating. They do that a lot when telling stories about me and our childhood!

While I enjoyed speaking to my former teachers and their colleagues immensely, I really benefited more than they did from our conversation. They reminded me what heroes our schools' teachers are and how important they were in my life and in those of so many Redlands kids. Moreover, their contemporary counterparts provide daily gifts to my sons who are both current RUSD students.

Every day, our schools are entrusted with America's greatest resource – its children. The future of this great country is predicated on the status of its young people. Their success in life – and ultimately our country's – will in large part be determined by their academic experiences. Children with firm academic foundations are more likely to find success in life via socially acceptable paths. Extensive, nationwide research has shown that young people who experience early academic failure are more likely to engage in problem behaviors such as delinquency, violence, substance abuse and teen pregnancy.

I can probably count on one hand the number of academically successful career criminals I've arrested during my career. Academic success opens the doors to the positive and productive futures we hope for our kids. If they have opportunities to succeed at life in a manner we all find appropriate (i.e. getting a job, contributing to society, raising value-based families, etc.) they are much less likely to end up in the criminal justice system. If they fail to realize these healthy, pro-social opportunities, they will frequently find their own version of success through criminal enterprise. This behavior is invariably framed around the availability of drugs, alcohol and firearms, persistent images of violence and the messages communicated to them in movies, songs, video games and celebrity antics that anything-that-makes-you-feel-good is OK, and that they must have "stuff" like fast cars, iPods, cell phones, etc. to be successful – no matter how you obtain them.

I don't need a PhD to figure this out. I've seen it first hand in almost 30 years of being a cop and dealing with crime and the ruined lives that are the products of violence, drug abuse and academic failure.

Similarly, great teachers – without any special training – know this intuitively and can provide early warnings of kids' tragic futures. But only if we listen to them. Kindergarten teacher Linda Browning is one of those teachers we should listen to. Along with my own kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Putnam, she holds a place of honor in the Bueermann Family "Teacher Hall of Fame!"

Years ago, while I was working in my older son's kindergarten class, Linda told me, that, in her opinion, the class had three kids who were seriously at risk of future problem behaviors. Without some form of intervention, she said, their academic skills lagged so far behind that they were likely to fail in school and I'd be seeing them someday in my work. I expressed my skepticism but several months later found myself agreeing with her. Unfortunately, the passage of time has proven her beliefs to be true.

The dedicated professionals in the RUSD and at the Redlands Police Department care deeply about the future of our children. Believing that by working hard on preventative and interventive strategies, we can help change the future for those youth that are at risk for problem behaviors. We have worked to leverage the knowledge of great teachers like Linda Browning and create an effective system for enhancing school safety and student success. But we need to do more. We are working to better utilize teachers' knowledge and classroom observations as part of an early warning system that flags a child's challenges so we can wrap support around them to help them avoid problem behavior and reduce the impact on the taxpayer-funded, overworked criminal justice system.

The RUSD and the RPD meet monthly in a *School-Police Liaison Committee* to discuss trends and issues affecting the safety of students. Our school resource officers meet with teachers and administrators daily to provide support for staff and students alike and focus on removing "off-campus barriers to learning" that confront many kids from dysfunctional family environments. How is a kid to build on his on-campus learning if he goes home every day after school to a family environment that is violent or abusive or replete with illegal parental behavior? Our officers work to reduce this type of chaos.

This is what we mean, in part, through the RPD's credo of "controlling crime before it occurs." Unfortunately, the city's current budget woes place these efforts at risk. Time will tell whether we can maintain these efforts.

I'd like to express my sincere appreciation to the following teachers that cared about me and helped me become a better person. Thanks Mrs. Putnam, Mrs. Ruff, Mrs. Wilson, Mrs. Mitchell, Mr. Durham, Mrs. Sutner, Mr. Thornquist, Mr. Hargrove, Mr. Branstetter, Mr. Mooney, Mrs. Moore, Mr. Hopp, Mr. Poore, Mr. Maloney, Mr. Earp, Mr. Steffins, Mr. Solter, Mr. Stutt, Dr. Raumin, Mr. Bates, Mr. Crookshank, Mr. Young, Mrs. Clifford and the other teachers, administrators and certified staff at Kingsbury and Kimberly elementary schools, Cope Junior High and Redlands High School that all worked together to help educate me. I will be forever in your debt.

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