

## Get informed and support the needs of our schools

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This forum piece is written by Democracy in Action members Dorothy Brewick, Chris Coleman, Carol Lynch and Suzan Nolan. DIA is a progressive women's political organization.

At a recent Chamber of Commerce committee meeting Judge Janine Kern observed that our schools are a community asset and the schools' problems are the community's problems. She also pointed out that cases are crowding the juvenile court system, and a common theme is a failure to stay in school. More than 80% of all those in jail lack a high school diploma.

The women of Democracy in Action, a progressive women's political organization, concerned about the future of our schools, led us to investigate school programs currently operating. We visited elementary, middle and high schools and two alternative programs. We were both impressed and excited by what we saw.

We saw cooperation between Rapid City and the school system as evidenced by our community gymnasiums and the RC/ General Beadle School library. We spoke with Julie Ward, director of Partnership Rapid City, a program that develops and supports partnerships between our schools, community, and businesses, providing real life education, internships and job opportunities for Rapid City students.

We saw highly effective programs that are improving attendance and achievement throughout the district. At General Beadle Elementary School daily attendance has risen from 83% to 94% over the past three years along with achievement scores, despite a transient family population. At North Middle School the visionary efforts and hard work of staff have created a supportive climate among the students where attendance is emphasized and rewarded, and children are succeeding.

Other successful programs are the Ninth and Tenth Grade Academy. Smaller classes and more individualized instruction help students who can not handle the size of our large high schools. Jefferson Academy for students in grades 9-12 has a day care allowing young parents to stay in school. The Career Learning Center for 11th and 12th graders is a self-paced program allowing older students to pick up one or two classes at a time, clocking in and out while balancing a work schedule.

At Central High School we talked with an advisor for the "Lifeways" program that provides

support for students with drug and alcohol problems. Enrollment in the program reduces the out-of-school suspension time from 10 to 5 days and requires counseling and classes for both students and their parents. We also learned about a semester long program for freshmen to begin next fall, designed to provide a smoother transition into high school, a time when we lose many students.

The K-12 literacy program has helped raise reading scores throughout the district, and the very successful Title VII Indian Education program supports Native American youth and assists teachers in providing culturally sensitive classroom experiences.

The district's emphasis on meeting the needs of all students has led to a revamping of the gifted program, which is in its first year of implementation. All children will benefit as more teachers are supported in creating higher level thinking activities in their classrooms. Additionally, there are almost 600 students taking Advanced Placement classes in the two high schools, with more than 300 taking tests this month in advanced sciences, math, history/government and languages. They are trying to earn a head start on post-high school education.

Many of us do not presently have children in our community's schools and may be unaware that some of these successful programs may not continue. The school district is being forced to cut both programs and staff because of insufficient funding. Most money comes to the district from property taxes, state funding through the per student allocation and federal funding. Some legislators tried to increase the per student allocation in the 2008 session but were unsuccessful. The federal law named "No Child Left Behind" requires record keeping and frequent standardized testing but provides no funds.

What can we do? Remember that our schools are our greatest community asset and how we support our children's education will affect us for generations. Find out how your legislators voted on funding of our schools. Was education a high priority with your legislator in the last session? What are the views of current candidates? We can affect what happens to our schools at the ballot box. Make sure you are informed about these issues and vote for candidates who put a priority on adequate funding for our schools.

We have excellent teachers, sound programs, strong leadership and worthy students who have never needed community support more than they do now. Our students' education is vital to their success and the success of our community. Let's work together to support them.

