Trends

Home Economics

JERELYN B. SCHULTZ

Teenagers on Family Life Concerns

What issues are of concern to today's teenagers? How do they view themselves and the world in which they live? How do they rate their schools in terms of helping them prepare for adulthood? These were the basic questions answered by the 1988 American Home Economics Association's Survey of American Teenagers. Interviews with 510 high school juniors and seniors, selected to represent the U.S. high school population by sex and by race/ethnicity, indicated that the world of today's teenagers is a balance of positive and negative influences.

Teenagers identified issues relating to money, the future, and health as ones that worry them most. At least 3 in 10 were "extremely" or "very" concerned about being able to pay for college, not earning enough money, making the wrong decisions about their futures, contracting AIDS, and the future of the United States. Issues relating to career choice, marriage, family financial well-being, combining work and family responsibilities, dealing with family crises, and nutrition and disease were of concern to at least one in five surveyed.

Further, teenagers reported that the schools are doing only an "adequate" job of teaching them the skills necessary for a responsible and productive adult life. Schools received the highest ratings in life skill areas related to health concerns (substance abuse, human sexuality, and AIDS), choosing a career, and making important life decisions. But teenagers perceived that they were least prepared by schools in matters related to family life—parenting, choosing a marital partner, and dealing with family crises such as death and divorce. However, many teenagers (75-79 percent, according to U.S. Department of Education figures) have not taken an adult roles and functions course, a family living course, a life skills management course, or a child development/parenting course—all of which may be offered through home economics programs in place in their schools.

The sponsors of the 1984 Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act (P.L. 98-524) were right on target when they identified areas for program improvement and curriculum development in consumer and homemaking education. This legislation calls for funds to be spent on (1) managing individual and family resources, (2) managing home and work responsibilities, (3) improving responses to family crises, (4) strengthening parenting skills, and (5) improving nutrition. For more information on how these funds have been used in their states, decision makers can contact the state supervisor of vocational home economics education at their state departments of education.

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In addition, concerns about adolescent pregnancy and parenthood, suicide, and sexual and substance abuse have led many state policymakers to draft legislation to mandate K-12 family life education in the schools. Kansas, Virginia, West Virginia, and Iowa are but a few of the states that have recently passed legislation to ensure that the schools provide all children with education to help them become responsible adults and contributing family members.

While recent school reforms have increased the number of academic course requirements, they have decreased the number of elective hours available to students. Therefore, because home economics courses usually are electives, only a small proportion of today's teens can choose instruction in life skills areas that are of concern to them.

The results of the Survey of American Teenagers suggest that family life education is urgently needed and should be required for all students. If policymakers and academic counselors believe that home economics is for girls, or teaches only cooking and sewing, they should review course outlines or visit classes in which budgeting, nutrition, sexuality, and parenting skills are presented. Home economics offers a curriculum designed to provide young people with the skills they need for daily life. One student interviewed as a part of the survey said that attending a family living class "was like having a door to a library opened that had always been closed." It is critical in today's society that schools open that door for all teenagers.□

Jerelyn B. Schultz is Professor and Chair, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences Education, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, 219 MacKay Hall, Ames, IA 50011-1120.

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