In 1642 the Massachusetts General Court passed one of the very first laws about education in what would become the United States. It ruled that because it was apparent “the good education of children is of singular behoof and benefit to any Common-wealth,” all parents and guardians were required to make sure children received “so much learning as may enable them perfectly to read the English tongue, & knowledge of the Capital Lawes.” Educating children well enough to read and understand the laws of the community was considered so critical that local selectmen were put in charge of making sure it was done—and they would be able to tell children hadn’t been educated properly if they became “rude, stubborn & unruly.”

For generations to come the power of education to develop good character and put young people on the right path remained a cornerstone of American thought about teaching our children. Building good citizens stayed right up there with reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic as a key goal of education and was one of the early justifications for providing public schools for all, as leaders continued to argue that if educating every child benefitted the whole community neglecting education was dangerous for everyone.

Thomas Jefferson, a strong advocate for expanding educational opportunity across classes (at least for Whites), said in an 1818 letter: “If the children are untaught, their ignorance and vices will in future life cost us much dearer in their consequences than it would have done in their correction by a good education.” A few decades later education reformer Horace Mann, considered the “father” of the common school movement in America, made a similar point: “Jails and prisons are the complement of schools; so many less as you have of the latter, so many more must you have of the former.” For many more years teachers remained deeply respected community members who were often revered for being strong positive role models. This was considered especially critical when teachers were filling this role for children who otherwise might not be getting it at home.

But today something has changed. We still say all of the same kinds of things about the power good schools and teachers have to radically transform a child’s chances in life. We’ve now measured the connection between how much education a child receives and future success. We know the dangers of dropping out, especially for the most vulnerable children and youths who have fewer high quality schools and resources than affluent children and fewer positive options for spending unsupervised time away from school. Politicians and celebrities do public service ads urging children to stay in school. But as soon as a child gets in trouble, too often the

very first thing schools do is to kick them out of class. A public school student receives an out-of school suspension every second and a half during the school year. I've never understood how it makes any sense, for example, to suspend or put a child out of school who is absent, truant, or tardy and is not coming to school. Wouldn't it make more sense to find out why they are not coming to school? And when as many as 7.5 million children are chronically absent, as a new report by Johns Hopkins' Robert Balfanz says, shouldn't we have more vigilant policies to determine why and tackle the causes?

Data released this spring by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights showed in 2009 that 6.9 percent of all students received at least one out-of-school suspension; the out-of-school suspension rate went up to 14.7 percent for Black students. We may continue to talk about education as the great equalizer, but when it comes to pushing children out of school we are failing Black children most, especially Black males. One in five Black boys and more than one in ten Black girls received an out-of-school suspension. Black students were over three-and-a-half times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers. We need to get to the root of these racial disparities.
The findings are even more troubling for the most serious school forms of discipline: Over 70 percent of students involved in school-related arrests or who are referred to law enforcement are Hispanic or Black. Zero tolerance school discipline policies only add to the problem. The stories of six-year-old kindergartener Salecia Johnson, who was arrested in handcuffs at her Milledgeville, Georgia elementary school in April and driven to the police station in a squad car for throwing a tantrum, and Desre'e Watson, who underwent the same ordeal several years ago as a six-year-old kindergartner in Avon Park, Florida, were horrifying reminders that even our youngest children are at risk of being poorly handled. I find it hard to believe that one, two, or three adults can't manage a six-year-old during or after a temper tantrum without calling the police and arresting them. Sometimes I think we adults have lost our common and moral sense!

Instead of educating children well enough so that they will not become "rude, stubborn, & unruly" we now reject them at the first sign of any disobedience using widely subjective catchall phrases and offenses like disrespectful or disruptive. Most suspensions are for nonviolent offenses. Too many schools are pushing children into the juvenile and criminal justice systems to make them someone else's problem. It should be little surprise when so many of the same children who are punished by being pushed out of school go on to become the same ones who drop out and stay away for good. A public high school student drops out of school every eight seconds during the school year. And it should be even less surprising when many of the young people who drop out are the same ones whose behavior we continue to complain about and fear and for whom we pay to build costly prison cells later. It's called the cradle to school to prison pipeline. States are spending on average two and a half times more per prisoner than per public school pupil. I think this is a very dumb investment policy which hurts children and the nation's future workforce.

If giving all children an education still benefits an entire community, and if not educating children still makes it more likely their future “ignorance and vices” will “cost us [dearly] in their consequences,” every time a child is excluded from school by adults or is chronically absent without any actions to determine why, we are failing the child and undercutting the importance of education.

Hundreds of years after Americans first made that connection, what will it take for us to get it again today?

Geoff Canada, CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone, Dr. Robert Balfanz, and a distinguished panel of educators will be discussing the importance of closing the achievement gap for poor children at CDF’s national conference on July 24th. The first step to educating children is keeping them in rather than putting them out of school.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org .