

ANOTHER VOICE

Sharon Rich Peterson



For Neighbors' Good

We are called to love and serve God in this world. We are called to be salt and light. We are invited to contribute to our neighbors' good. Christ's love is evident to our communities when we send our children to local public schools.

That might seem a radical statement to many Christians today (especially urban Christians). After years of struggling to identify what we can do to help solve this complex problem and praying about it, I have developed the strong conviction that sending our children to public schools is the most important action we can take to improve our society and live out our faith. Isn't this what Covenanters have always done?

Good schools cannot exist without good students. The trend for Christians to educate their children in private schools or at home in order to ensure a "better" education ignores the fact that our neighbors' children need the same quality of education we want for our own children. When dedicated parents remove their children from public schools, the entire school system suffers. Involved parents are needed *even more* in challenging situations.

How can committed parents improve a school? They can both assist teachers and hold them accountable. They can volunteer to help with field trips, cheer on sports teams, help musical groups rehearse, make hot chocolate for student patrols in cold weather, and volunteer as parent safety patrols to walk children to and from school. Once a parent feels welcome in a school and the school knows the parent's offers to help are genuine, a mutually beneficial relationship develops. As well, our own children see us modeling selfless giving, and other children find a friend in an adult.

Many states, including my home state of Illinois, are struggling to fund education. Ironically this can have a positive impact, since many taxpayers are now aware that their school districts are in perilous financial straits. Moving to an area with "a good school system" is no longer a dependable option. If more parents were invested in their local schools, society at large would benefit. Christians should be leading this seemingly daunting effort.

Our church is exploring how we can better relate to and support our neighbors. Some of our

actions include offering midweek meals and activities throughout the year; welcoming neighborhood children and youth to many activities—concerts, gym and youth group events, vacation Bible school, and Sunday school; inviting the neighborhood to the annual block party; hosting a festival featuring local artists; sponsoring a cooperative preschool; tutoring local public schoolchildren; and hosting neighborhood meetings. When we play and learn with each other we invest in each other. Attending school with our neighbors builds these relationships. Entire neighborhoods are strengthened when people live, work, play, and learn together.

What can you do if you do not have school-aged children? You can offer to serve on the local school council (or other governing body). You can tutor school children. You can offer to share your professional skills at a school Career Day. Ask, find a need, pray, and you will discover opportunities for service.

Our concerns for public education need to be expressed to our politicians. They need to know we insist upon quality education for tomorrow's adults. Decisions need to be made with our neighbors' good in mind. As we "think globally and act locally," we recognize that all people are loved by God—regardless of faith or geographic location. Christians should embrace the opportunity for interaction that public education offers. Strangers become friends. Love for our children ties us together with other families. Children become well-adjusted adults when their place of worship, their school, and their family all intersect. Isn't this what we all want?

Public school is about much more than curriculum. Learning occurs outside the classroom as well as within it. Our children learn how to get along with people they don't agree with—and so can we. As Christians we do not claim self-righteously that we need to have more input in public schools. Rather, we become humble listeners and learners, fueled by our faith. This is justice.

We do not enter the education arena to convert others. We participate in public education as a common-sense approach to being salt and light—in our neighborhoods, and in our public schools. ■

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