

Daily News

Los Angeles

Alan Bonsteel and Larry Sand: Public education system a Titanic problem

By Alan Bonsteel and Larry Sand

Posted: 04/12/2012

Without enough education lifeboats, millions of school kids are drowning.

One hundred years ago Sunday, the Titanic sank with a loss of 1,517 souls, with almost all of the lives lost attributable to a lack of lifeboats.

What equally shocked the world, though, was not just the avoidable loss of life, but who died. Of children sailing in first class, 5 of 6 survived, and, in second class, all 24 survived. But of 79 children sailing in third-class steerage, 52 drowned, sinking under the frigid waves of the North Atlantic, their eyes wide in terror, for lack of a place in a lifeboat.

Today our American public education system is sinking under the waves, with the lifeboats of quality schools of choice such as charter schools and private voucher schools in desperate short supply. And, just as with the Titanic passengers, it is the children of the most disadvantaged families who are drowning.

Upscale families can ride out the crisis by writing checks for a private school, or by buying an expensive house near a "good" private or public school. But the children of our poor minorities are being dumped into rusting, leaky hulks that pass as schools. Thousands of lives are being lost as their children drop out, subsequently falling into a life of crime and incarceration.

In late 2010, Americans were shocked by the revelations in "Waiting for Superman," a film about the epidemic failure of our public schools, and moved by the scenes of the lotteries that must be held to determine who gets a place in a lifeboat.

The film focused on five children, four of them from poor families, who took their chances in the lottery.

All five were wonderful, lovable children who richly deserved a chance at a better life. One who stood out in the hearts of moviegoers was East Los Angeles resident Daisy Esparza, the daughter of Spanish-speaking day laborers.

With a maturity and determination far beyond a typical fifth-grader, she shared her aspiration to become a doctor so she could serve her community. Many moviegoers seemed to have the same heartfelt wish: "Please, please nudge a few winning lottery balls in the direction of Daisy."

But it was not to be, and the unblinking camera showed her family in tears as they drove home.

Daisy and the others ultimately met with President Obama. But, in the Land of the Free, even a meeting with the president of the United States did not translate into a place in a lifeboat for Daisy.

There is truly nothing more crucial to the future of our great but troubled nation than to commit to providing a world class education to every one of America's children.

All of us -- even if our kids are in private school, even if our kids are done with school, even if we are childless -- must take an interest in the quality of education in America. Imagine a wealthy family on the Titanic. They may have had the snazziest stateroom on the ship, but when it hit the iceberg, the quality of their stateroom didn't matter a whit; they were in deep trouble like everyone else. Public education - Titanic II -- is heading for the iceberg. As such, we must have lifeboats ready for all those who are on board.

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