

Alignment of Policy and Politics: Doing What Is Right for Our Adolescents

Representative Susan Fisher

For approximately one day per month between May 2008 and September 2009, it was my privilege to serve on the North Carolina Institute of Medicine Task Force on Adolescent Health. The charge was to examine the health of North Carolina's 1.4 million adolescents aged 10-20 years. By the time we completed our work, the Task Force had heard from a wide array of experts in the field of adolescent health, and, on the basis of the information presented, we suggested a list of recommended, evidence-based policies geared toward investing in youth. One overarching goal of the Task Force was to develop a framework that gives North Carolina's young people the opportunity to engage in favorable social behaviors that, in turn, result in good health and a promising future.

As a member of the North Carolina General Assembly, one of the most difficult lessons I have learned is that not everyone agrees with my view of the state, much less of the world. The challenges of introducing new potential legislation are as many and varied as there are members of the North Carolina House and Senate. What form do these challenges take?

Know Your Constituency, and Be Willing to Listen to All Stakeholders—Even the Not-So-Obvious Ones

One example that I look back to is one I encountered during the 1990s as a school board member in my home district. Our school system was presented with the opportunity to receive national foundation funding to open student health centers on the campuses of the local middle and high school. This was a great approach to keeping students healthy, in school, and ready to learn. The centers were implemented and have been quite successful—but not before having undergone a great deal of community scrutiny and questioning from some unlikely sources. A public hearing held at the

middle school early in the process yielded good questions and support. Objections to the health center came from persons living outside the school district who had no children enrolled in either middle or high school. The open meetings gave school officials the opportunity to observe support for

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the center from families living in the district of the school where the center would be located and to address the misunderstandings and fears expressed by individuals who lived outside of the school district and were not in favor of the center.

Ask Your Clients What They Want, and Involve Them in the Planning and Decision-Making Process to the Extent Possible

If we hope to see successful passage of evidence-based policy that addressing the health of our adolescents, then we must engage young people in the process. This has proven to be effective with seat belt use, tobacco-use prevention, and teen-pregnancy prevention legislation, among many other initiatives.

Involve Parents and Other Adult Caregivers

Although adolescence is a period during which persons begin to make more decisions on their behalf, adolescents walk a fine line between childhood and adulthood. Parents and other adult caregivers need to be available for those

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moments—sometimes brief—when adolescents are ready to talk about areas of concern, although it must be kept in mind that such moments may consist of being ready to listen without making a snap judgment. Adults need to be informed about and encouraged to pursue the ways in which they can model healthy decision-making and be given the resources to do so through sound policy-making. These same adults, given opportunities and effective methods of engaging with adolescents, will be our best advocates for passage of evidence-based policy in the legislature. The good news is that parents want to know more about how to engage with adolescents.

What Will It Cost?

In economic times such as these, cost continues to be one of the biggest challenges to the passage of new and worthwhile legislation. However, the question that must be asked is, what is the cost of doing nothing? In many instances, there will be an increased cost. For example, North Carolinians pay on average \$312 million dollars each year to cover the costs associated with teen pregnancy, yet up to now we have invested only \$2.5 million dollars annually for programs to prevent teenage pregnancy.¹ Although this investment is a step in the right direction, it is not nearly enough to fully address this increasing concern.

According to a report by the National Teen Pregnancy Campaign, North Carolina spends, on average, \$3,868 annually for *each child* born to a mother younger than 18 years of age.¹ Between 1991 and 2004, there were more than 212,900 teen births, with an associated cost of \$5.2 billion. This is a hefty price that taxpaying North Carolinians had to bear. Inclusion of the cost associated with dropping out of school—an event that is often due to accumulated absences—sheds light on the views of Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia and current president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, who reminds us that “the best economic stimulus is a high school diploma.”²

There Is No Need to Work in a Vacuum

As a legislator working with 169 other elected individuals in the General Assembly, my experience so far, albeit brief, has told me that it is of some comfort to know that I don't have to enact policy on my own. In fact, it is better that, as a policy maker, I obtain the assistance of coalitions and advocates on the issues of importance to the health and well-being of adolescents.

In 2001, Alan Rosenthal³ suggested that we may need to replace the well-known metaphor, attributed to the Prussian/German statesman Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), that characterizes the legislature as a sausage factory. Two interesting metaphors about the legislature were offered by John A. Straayer.⁴ One metaphor describes the legislature as an arena in which, “a score of basketball games are progressing, all at one time, on the same floor, with games at different stages, with participants playing on several teams at once, switching at will, opposing each other in some instances and acting as teammates in others.”⁴ The second metaphor characterizes the legislature as a casino: although there are lots of tables and games, high stakes, and winners and losers, the outcome is never final because there is always a new game ahead.

The stakes are undoubtedly high. We all have different philosophies and opinions about, and ways of approaching, society's issues, but if I keep my focus on the bottom line—the health, well-being, and future of our state, as well as the young people who will be making new policy for us after we are no longer in the legislature—I cannot but stay on the path toward providing adolescents with the best opportunities for becoming healthy, productive adults. This is both the challenge and the opportunity that awaits us in the General Assembly. When we meet that challenge, we are all winners. **NCMJ**

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