

There is a master plan for saving our kids

It's the season for political wrangling over the Chicago Public Schools. The annual search is on for someone to blame over the fact that a lot of the kids read below grade level—if they read at all.

Republicans blame the Democrats for turning the schools into a patronage mill. Democrats blame the Republicans for not sending more state aid. The teachers blame the clock-watching bureaucrats on Pershing Road and the bureaucrats blame feather-bedding teachers.

Others blame ineffective or uninterested parents. Except for the sociologists. They blame "social conditions," whatever those are.

But just as we spectators settle back to enjoy the annual blame game, safe in the knowledge that it's all about somebody else's kids, along comes a Chicago businessman named Daniel Bassill with this very unsettling proposition:

"They are *our* children. Their education is *our* responsibility. And until each of us says to ourselves 'The buck stops with me' nothing is ever going to change."

How's that again?

Most people figure that's why they pay property taxes—so their elected officials and school boards will hire competent administrators and teachers to run the education system.

But Dan Bassill isn't like most people, and he doesn't want to let the rest of us off so easy. He's all for improving the schools, but he's also convinced that effective citizenship means more than voting and paying taxes.

A few years ago Bassill left his executive position at Montgomery Ward & Co. to pursue an idea: Make it easier for middle-class adults—especially adults who work in the city and live in the suburbs—to get directly involved in the education of inner-city kids.

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John McCarron

In some respects it's an old, time-tested idea. There's nothing new about volunteers spending a few hours after work helping inner-city schoolchildren with their homework. A handful of churches and corporations have been doing it for years, including the headquarters staff at Montgomery Wards, where Bassill helped run a program for kids from the nearby Cabrini-Green public housing complex.

In developing the Wards program, Bassill was taken by two things: 1) Tutoring works. Even the most disadvantaged kids—children from homes so dysfunctional there's never a moment's peace to read or do arithmetic—show marked improvement when an adult volunteer takes a personal interest in their future; and 2) There was a crying need for a citywide clearinghouse of tutoring programs, both to share expertise and to recruit additional churches and corporations to the effort.

So Bassill left his day job at Wards and helped start something called the Tutor | Mentor Connection, or T | MC.

The idea is to recruit enough companies, churches and individual volunteers so that, some day, every last child in the city's public elementary schools would have access to a personal tutor | mentor.

"There are about 11,600 kids now being tutored," Bassill said. "We figure there are about 200,000 kids who could use it, so we have about a 6 percent market penetration."

If Bassill sounds like a marketing exec, it's because he was national advertising director before leaving Wards. Being a tutor helped his career, he said, not because his bosses wanted to reward his volunteerism, but because he got to know hundreds of fellow tutor-volunteers throughout the company. That network gave him a leg-up on company work.



And there were other, unexpected pluses. The computer skills he gained compiling a tutor mailing list were later used to go "on-line" with Ward's \$250 million ad budget.

"For companies," Bassill said, "tutoring can be a staff development tool. It's a way to broaden an employee's scope within the organization. And to develop leadership skills."

No doubt that will be part of Bassill's pitch on May 19-20 at T | MC's 3rd Annual Leadership Conference. He and his advisory board, a mix of corporate executives and tutoring experts, are inviting prospective volunteers—both individuals as well as companies—to a two-day "how-to-get-involved" session at the Robert R. McCormick Boys and Girls Club at 4835 N. Sheridan Rd.

T | MC already has helped several area corporations with their tutor | mentor programs, including GATX, Morton International, Quaker

Oats, Amoco, Waste Management and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. Bassill is convinced many more will join, once they learn they can get help with pupil-recruitment, curriculum development, and, importantly, identification of safe, quiet meeting places in the neighborhoods where tutors and kids can pair off. Companies with branch facilities on the city's South and West Sides are particularly needed, Bassill said, though all are welcome at next Friday's conference.

Of course, with less than two weeks to go on the spring legislative calendar, some of us will be tempted to stay home and follow the action in the newspapers and on TV. The fur will be flying in Springfield over who's responsible for the public schools.

If, however, you agree with Dan Bassill that we're *all* responsible for the kids, you can arrange to attend the T | MC conference by calling 312-467-2889.