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By Jon Sapper  
Public Education

In a few weeks, another school year is going to start for over 17,000 children in Humboldt County. I've given very few community comments about education over the last several years, and in some circles, the discussion around the purpose of public education becomes a passionate debate of competing values.

There are some who say just make sure students can read, write and do math. If you do that, the community can do the rest. Others say, all you need to do is teach our children job skills so they can get a job, earn a living and put food on the table. That's the most important thing and we don't need to waste time with all that other stuff they'll never use. Still others say, don't waste time teaching job skills and vocational education; they can get hands on experience when they become employed. And others say, students have to go to college if they're going to have any chance at being successful in life and your only job is to prepare them to be successful in a four year college by making them take the right high school classes.

When you get into these kinds of topics, be ready for debate. It would be like walking into a room full of strangers, talk only about politics and religion and not expect heated discussion. But I'd like to be a little bold here and propose that the purpose of public education has changed somewhat over the last 30 years. Thirty years ago public education across this country could fulfill its' mission by being less than completely on top of its' game. This country could afford having students not be successful in school. Public education didn't have to deliver high quality programs. Public education didn't have to make sure every student got the skills and experiences to be successful after their schooling. Public education didn't have to give extra attention to those children in our community who face daily challenges from living in extremely dysfunctional families. But, I will argue public education has to do those things now.

Thirty years ago, students could drop out of school and get a good job, even if they had limited skills. Not anymore. Those days and those jobs for the most part are gone. Today, public education has to deliver, by providing quality instruction in reading, writing, and math; teaching job skills in partnership with the business

community and preparing students to be successful in college. Public education needs to do all of it well, and yes, even for those children who come from the most dysfunctional families among us.

The future of our country depends on it. The future of our area depends on it. And most importantly, the future of each and every child in our community is depending on it. Is public education up for the challenge? I trust that it is.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.