

THE COSTCO CONNECTION

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Gift Guide*
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Founder,
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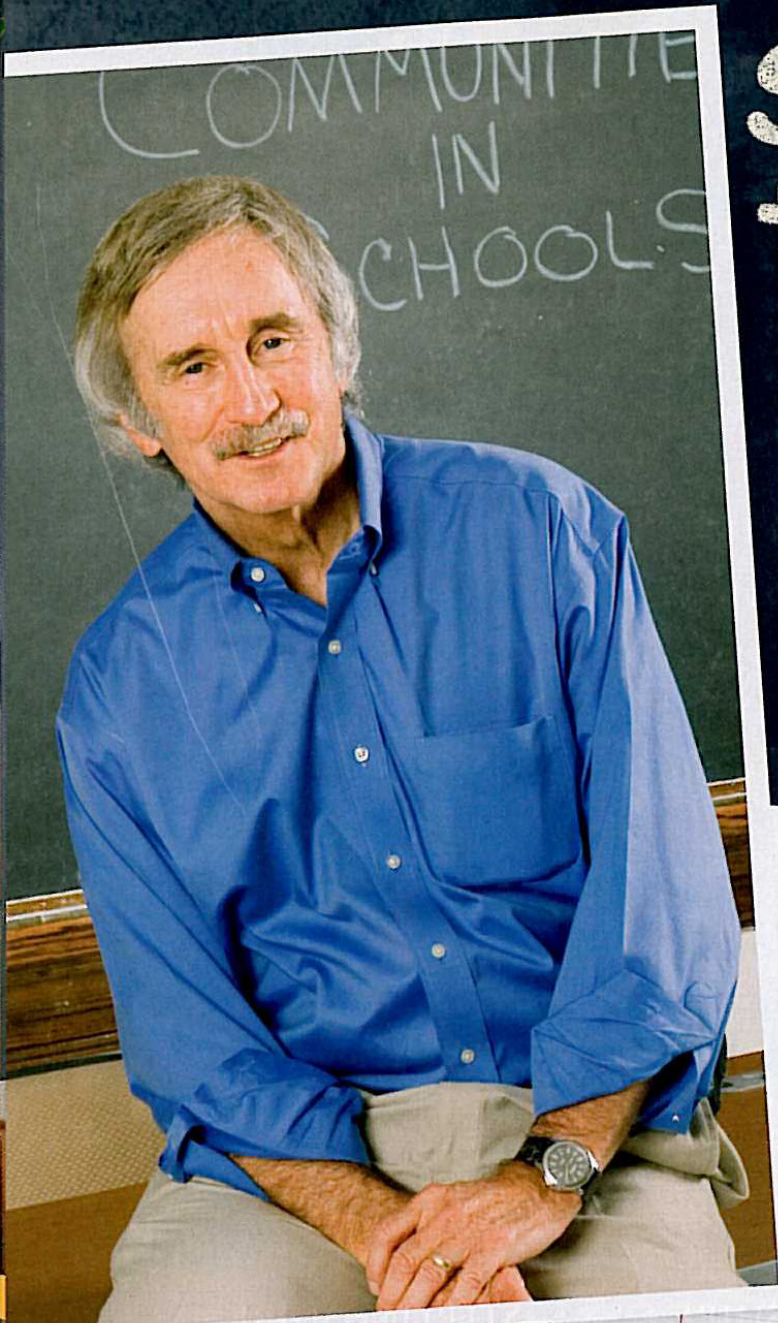
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Bill Milliken: We all have a stake in the dropout epidemic—and we can all play a role in solving it.

Stopping the dropout epidemic

How we can keep kids in schools and build a better future

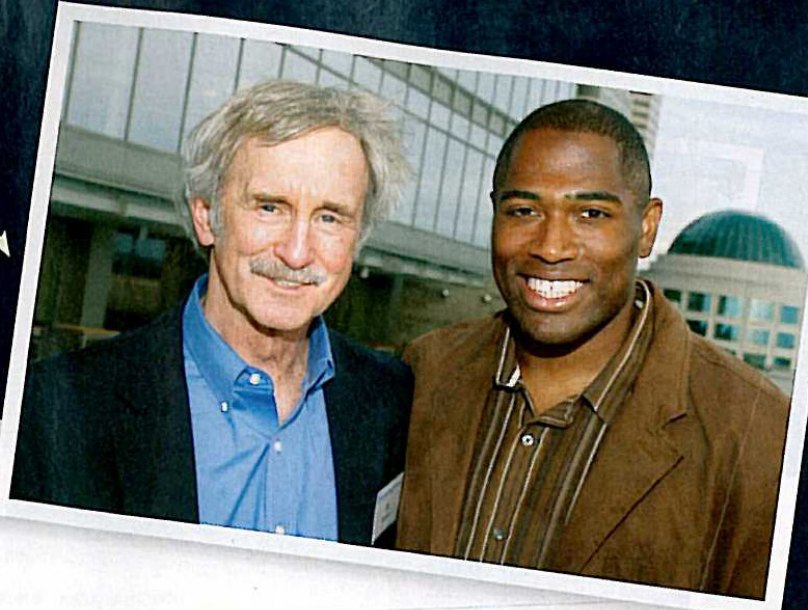
By Tim Talevich

See those kids hanging out on the corner, dropouts with idle time and without a job, in Anytown, USA? Somebody else's kids, somebody else's problem, right?

Not so, argues Bill Milliken. There's a dropout epidemic in America—a relatively ignored issue that actually affects us all. Each year in this country, almost a third of public high school students fail to graduate with their class. A report issued in 2006 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation indicated that there are 3.5 million dropouts between 16 and 25 years old, and statistically they're more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, experience poor health, depend on social services and end up in jail than their graduating classmates. In fact, on any given day, more young male dropouts are in prison than on a job.

The effects are staggering. Youths who aren't working are costing the country billions in lost wages and increased social support. The combined income and tax loss from a single year's

Supporting CIS:
NFL football star
Shaun Alexander
is the organiza-
tion's national
spokesman.



KEVIN RAY SMITH

dropouts is about \$192 billion. Each young person who drops out and moves into a life of drugs and crime costs the nation between \$1.7 million and \$2.3 million over his or her lifetime. And each dropout is one less candidate to meet a critical need in our workforce.

Milliken has worked tirelessly as an advocate for youths through Communities in Schools (CIS), a nonprofit organization he founded in 1977 to help kids stay in school and prepare for life. Now he is making a passionate pitch to bring the dropout problem to the national stage through a book, *The Last Dropout: Stop the Epidemic!* (Hay House Inc.). It details how the CIS model, which connects community resources with schools by bringing in adults to help, mentor and provide role models for students, can work across the country—and how we as a national community can and must play a role.

“We’re going to become a second-rate nation morally and economically if we don’t solve this issue,” he tells *The Connection*.

A failed safety net

Where have we gone wrong to allow the dropout rate to grow to such levels? Milliken asserts that it’s not just an educational issue—it’s a community one. He says that in the half century following World War II, the traditional safety net that helped raise children—the extended family and the faith community—slowly unraveled. The community that served as a model and met kids’ needs has failed, and the Herculean job of meeting those needs has fallen to the schools.

“We had a breakdown in the community, and the schools were being asked to be mother, father, sister, brother and social worker—and be great teachers,” says Milliken. “They can’t.”

More specifically, Milliken says kids drop out because they don’t have close relationships with a caring adult. He came to this realization when he first started working with street kids in Harlem in the 1960s. “What we experienced on the streets was that these kids weren’t dropping out of school because of education, they were dropping out because nobody knew their names, they felt worthless,” he says. “If a kid isn’t turned on to living, he’s not going to be turned on to learning.”

Also, students can’t be expected to be ready to

learn when their lives are in upheaval, whether it’s due to poverty, a lack of health care, homelessness, hunger or family problems. “They’re not ready to learn because they’re worried about the fact that their dad went to prison last night or they didn’t eat or their teeth are rotting,” Milliken says. “And the teacher is supposed to teach them?”

The solution, he says, is relatively simple. All kids need what CIS calls the Five Basics before they can succeed academically. They need a strong relationship with an adult, a safe place to learn where they can concentrate on education, access to health care, a marketable skill and a chance to give back to the community (see “What kids need,” next page).

From the ground up

Schools where CIS is active have extraordinarily high graduation rates: In all, 80 to 90 percent of students tracked by CIS stay in school. The Five Basics come from the years that Milliken and others spent working with street kids, so the model was created from the ground up.

Milliken was a high school student in a middle-class suburb of Pittsburgh who hated school and dropped out because he had trouble academically. He tried college, but dropped it, too. Through Young Life, a Christian group with programs to help kids in trouble, he started working with street kids in Harlem. The basic approach was to form personal relationships with them and encourage them to do something with their lives.

Over 11 years, Milliken and other Young Life volunteers opened a series of “storefront” schools in New York inner-city neighborhoods to give kids a safe place to learn. That led to four prep schools in New York, where adult volunteers helped extensively in a variety of ways, and eventually to the creation of CIS, which tapped successful practices from the street schools as its working model.

The Five Basics, which are at the heart of CIS, were “born out of personal experience—my own, my colleagues’ and the thousands of kids we’ve known,” coupled with collective discussion within the CIS network that occurred over many years, says Milliken.

Today, CIS reaches 1 million young people and their families annually in more than 3,400 schools across the country. Local chapters organize volunteers to come to the schools during classroom hours and



Milliken says give kids the Five Basics and they will succeed.

after school, to help with homework, offer social services or just hang out.

The task ahead

Despite these and other efforts, dropout rates remain at epidemic levels, even as schools are the subject of intense reform efforts—state and federal—through legislation such as No Child Left Behind, curriculum overhauls and private and public efforts to inject innovation into school management.

These are desperately needed steps that address what's taught to kids and how schools are run, says Milliken. What's missing is what he calls the "third side of the triangle": the community component that meets kids' non-academic needs.

That's where the CIS model comes in, but first we all have to realize that the problem is a national one, and it's critical. "We can put our voice out there and talk about what we do [through CIS], but we have to wake up the country to the fact that we need to start moving the needle on the dropout rate," says Milliken, who served as CIS national president for 27 years and currently is vice chairman of the organization's board. "It's going to take more than CIS."

In the short term, he supports pursuing two immediate steps at the state and national levels. One is getting funding for a coordinator—a student advocate, of sorts—inside each high school to make sure students' needs are being met. The coordinator matches up students with available social agencies, from dental programs to gang-intervention services to volunteer networks. Georgia is using such a program, with great results, Milliken says.

The second step is working with Congress to change the way it finances programs to deal holistically with kids. "Money is now given away in a fragmented way," says Milliken. "The metaphor would be having 26 different key-boards in 26 different rooms with 26 different letters to create a letter. So you have all these agencies out there working and trying to help, but we say you have to integrate them. We're

hoping that states and Congress adopt legislation that says we're going to reward you to coordinate and integrate your resources around the schools."

The impetus must come from the community to create a new safety net, he notes. That includes the business community. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that more than half of adult dropouts are currently not employed.

"In many ways, this is a business deal," Milliken maintains. "If we fail, you fail, because where is your workforce going to come from? The bottom line for the business community is, where are we going to get our workforce if we're losing a third of our kids? Our banks, utilities, small stores, little businesses are in communities where we need employees. And if we're losing a third of our kids, where are they going to come from?"

The last dropout

Will today's first-graders be the last class to have a dropout? Probably not, acknowledges Milliken. "But we can say this," he insists. "Young people will stop dropping out when they receive the community support and resources they need to learn, stay in school and graduate prepared for life."

At the very least, the issue is gaining public awareness, and CIS has garnered support from a wide variety of political and financial corners. It has become the nation's fifth-largest youth-serving organization. In 2006, major corporations, including Capital One, MetLife, Time Inc. and Costco, donated \$9.2 million to CIS. The organization recently named football star Shaun Alexander of the Seattle Seahawks as its national spokesman.

Milliken hopes his book, which focuses on nine principles to keep kids in school, reaches a wide audience of people who can help. He declares, "I feel that we have a moral obligation to get this message out in places where CIS is never going to end up to show them a path on how they can do this." [E]

What kids need

DOZENS OF PROGRAMS are available to help kids succeed, from school programs to social services. But, overall, kids have five basic needs that must be met before they can learn and grow, according to CIS. Here's a look.

- **A one-on-one relationship with a caring adult.** This relationship can be with a parent, relative, coach, church representative or mentor. It all starts with relationships.
- **A safe place to learn and grow.** If kids are homeless, they can't learn. Likewise, school must be a safe place. The key is to bring enough responsible adults into school to instill a sense of security. Programs that make schools a true community center, with before- and after-school programs, are successful.
- **A healthy start and a healthy future.** Kids need to be drug and alcohol free to succeed in school. Other obstacles are less dramatic, such as poor eyesight, asthma, lack of proper nutrition and dental problems. Often, communities have resources that can help out. They have to be made available to kids.
- **A marketable skill to be used upon graduation.** Goals and a path to a career are critical to success in the classroom, because they give kids a reason to learn reading, writing and math. Getting kids to see that academics offer a way out of poverty is a huge motivating factor.
- **A chance to give back to peers and the community.** Giving kids a chance to give back through volunteering or mentoring is key to helping them find their own identity and self-worth. It's a huge boost for a youth to realize that he or she has a valuable gift to offer somebody else.—TT

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The Last Dropout: Stop the Epidemic!, by Bill Milliken, is available in all Costco warehouses and online at costco.com. To contact CIS, go to www.cisnet.org. Costco has supported CIS since 1993.