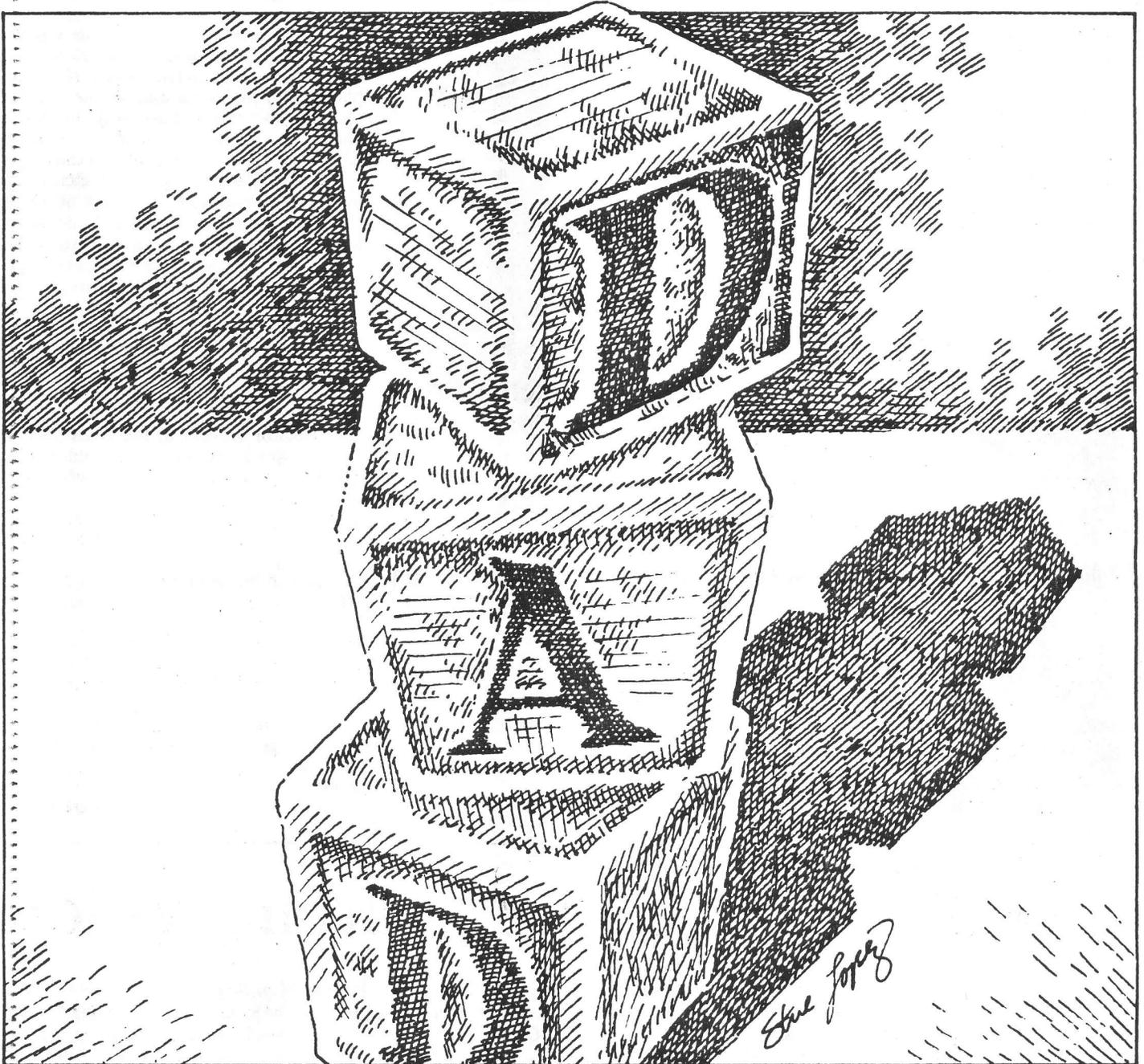


San Diego County Opinion

Commentary



Parents Hold Key to Child's Education

Parents Hold Key to Child's Education

■ **Schools:** Teacher discovers the importance of a student's mother and father after having his own son.

By RICHARD HALSEY

Until the birth of my first child nearly two years ago, I experienced children strictly through the eyes of a teacher, a friend, a confidant. Having only my own tempestuous high school years to draw upon in terms of experience with 16-year-olds, I related to my students as equals, co-combatants in the struggle to grow up. We grew up together.

Ignoring the risks inherent in crossing the line between professional detachment and emotional involvement, we grew close to each other. We spent long school nights preparing for exams and free weekends exploring the wilderness sharing all the tears and laughter that occurred along the way.

My school kids became my own kids. It is difficult to stay detached from people with whom you have invested so much. They satisfied for me the desire, the instinctual desire all of us share, for family. I provided them with a tenuous anchor by which they could explore their intellectual and physical limits without fear of personal failure or rejection.

But now I have my own son and have come to the realization that I've been teaching children in a vacuum. Our world together did not include their families. I did what I could to deliver inspiring lectures and assign creative lessons. I spent countless hours tutoring, counseling and guiding those who wanted to listen and even more hours with those who really didn't want advice. However, I never appreciated

how crucial a parent could be to a child's education until my own little boy began educating me.

I'll never forget the time he began imitating some of the bird calls we heard during our first expedition to the local park or the wonder in his eyes when he

True, there are many families whose parenting skills lead to more disaster than success, but the majority of them are trying to do the best they can and care very deeply for their children. Yet, I am struck by how few parents have taken the time to call me and ask how things are going with their son or daughter. Yes, I know we are all busy. But are we really that busy?

saw a butterfly. The pride both his mother and I feel when he learns a new word as we read to him each night goes beyond any accomplishment of our own. Such things, and his smile when we praise him for learning something new, demonstrate a fact many of us have taken for granted: The most important people in a child's life and education are his parents.

True, there are many families whose parenting skills lead to more disaster than success, but the majority of them are trying to do the best they can and care very deeply for their children. Yet, I am struck by how few parents have

taken the time to call me and ask how things are going with their son or daughter. Yes, I know we are all busy. But are we really that busy?

As a reformed teacher-basher, I once blamed the schools for the supposed souring of American education. If we could just get those schools to perform, I thought, then our nation's problems would be solved.

Ridiculous. How do I know? My son has told me so.

We all need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves, "What have I done today to help my child, or any child, learn?"

We can't expect teachers to take complete responsibility for our children's education. Taking a day off work once a year and sitting in our child's classroom would do more to improve our nation's so-called "education crisis" than all the hype about curriculum reform, choice and longer school days ever could.

For my part, I plan on inviting parents to do just that. I also plan on assigning homework that will require parents to assist their son or daughter.

The birth of my son has changed not only the way I teach, but the way I view my obligations at work.

Some of those extra hours I used to spend grading papers and climbing mountains with my students will be spent at home growing my own family. I have seen too many casualties of absentee parenting to do any less.

But I hope that having a child will help me see in my students' eyes the reflections of their own parents' smiles, hopes and dreams—reflections that will help me provide a classroom experience I would be proud to give my own son.

Richard Halsey teaches biology at Serra High School in San Diego.