

Early Childhood MILITARY Education?

■ BY ANN PELO

Does our national security rely on top-quality early childhood education?

Yes, say the military leaders of Mission: Readiness, an organization led by retired military commanders that promotes investment in education, child health, and parenting support. In March, Mission: Readiness released national and state-by-state education briefs, declaring that “high-quality early education is not only important for the children it benefits but also critical to ensuring our military’s long-term readiness. . . . Investing in high-quality early education is a matter of national security.”

Actually, the generals are right, but for all the wrong reasons.

They see early childhood education as military readiness training. Mission: Readiness argues that investment in early childhood education for at-risk and low-income children will pay off in higher graduation rates and lower incarceration rates—expanding the pool of potential military recruits. “Recruitment and retention challenges could return if America does not do a better job now of producing more young men and women qualified for service,” says the mission statement on the organization’s website. “We must ensure America’s national security by supporting interventions that will prepare young people for a life of military service and productive citizenship.”

Who are the young people for

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whom these military leaders are supposedly advocating? Low-income, at-risk children—the pool of children from which the military has traditionally recruited. What sort of education do the generals want for these children? Skill-and-drill, standards-driven, assessment-burdened curriculum that prepares children for skill-and-drill basic training, for standards-driven military discipline, for test-based military promotion. The generals’ aim is to prepare low-income children to be soldiers, trained from their youngest years to follow directions and to comply with the strictures issued by the ranking authority. That’s not high-quality education; that’s utilitarian education designed to serve military and economic needs.

This approach to education may prepare young people for a life of military service, but it certainly does not prepare them for citizenship. The Mission: Readiness statement of purpose unwittingly exposes a central co-

nundrum in the organization’s thinking: “The earliest months and years of life are a crucial time when we build the foundation of children’s character, how they relate to others and how they learn.”

Exactly. High-quality early childhood education teaches for citizenship, not for test taking and reductionist assessment. The goal is not compliance but creativity, critical thinking, and compassion. Children are invited to engage meaningful questions in collaboration with others, to embrace complexity, to strive for the well-being of others with generosity, to pay attention to issues of fairness, and to act with courage, conviction, and imagination. Top-flight early education fosters in children dispositions toward empathy, ecological consciousness, engaged inquiry, and collaboration. These are the dispositions of citizens.

Citizens care for their country and its security. They inhabit the commons and they act on behalf of the common good. They are emboldened by personal sovereignty and know themselves to be protagonists in the unfolding history of their country—not passive observers, not dull-minded consumers, not obedient followers of military or government direction, but patriots acting for the good of the commonwealth. Active citizens, thinking critically and compassionately, resist military action as the quick and easy answer to complex challenges. They point out the horrifying absurdity of the idea of “collateral damage.” They



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fight against imperialism and work for justice nationally and internationally.

This is the citizenship that our nation needs at this juncture in our evolution. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a gulf slicked with oil, pristine lands on the chopping block for drilling and

mining, health care out of reach for nearly a third of our people, unions under siege by state governments and by corporations—our nation needs citizens concerned with national security, with the well-being of our nation. There is much work to be done,

and it will take citizens, not soldiers, to do it.

So, yes, because high-quality early childhood education prepares children to be citizens, it is essential to national security. The investment should and must be a national priority. ■