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Guest Column: New approach necessary in education

BY ROGER H. HULL For The Sunday Gazette

Roger H. Hull is president of the not-for-profit Help Yourself Foundation in Schenectady and is a former president of Union College.

To Einstein, insanity was doing the same thing over again and expecting a different result. Unfortunately, we are doing the same thing again in education.

During the 1980s, a number of college presidents, concerned about the small number of students of color on their campuses, worked with area high schools to broaden the pipeline to college for those students. I was one of them.

Those efforts failed because we were getting involved in the process too late. Somewhat surprisingly, colleges are once more putting their efforts into high schools in an attempt to diversify. So, too, are major funders.

Undeniably, some students will benefit; however, these efforts are too little, too late.

Since data show the “light begins to go out” within three years after the start of a child’s education, large numbers of children will be left by the wayside if we continue to embrace this model.

There is no quick fix. Still, if we want to “leave no child behind” and “race to the top,” we had better try new approaches. Getting to children before the light starts to go out is one of them.

There are programs that attempt to do so. I know; I started one of them, Help Yourself.

When I left Union College, I decided to take national the program I began at Beloit. Help Yourself academies now exist in Massachusetts, Wisconsin and Wyoming; they also exist here in the Capital District—at Albany Pharmacy, Sage and Saint Rose. The program, which begins in third grade, is STEM-based, uses college-student mentors, and is housed on the college’s campus.

Retention has averaged in the low-90 percent range. In-school performance, as measured by a range of criteria, has improved. Results on the New York state

fourth-grade science exam have ranged annually from a low of 87 percent passage to 100 percent, far better than school or district averages.

With colleges facing enormous financial pressures, why should they invest in a program like Help Yourself? For some, it is part of their mission; for others, it helps their community image. For all, it is the right thing to do.

At a cost of approximately \$600 per child per year, Help Yourself is a financial “rounding error.” After all, my son’s travel soccer bill used to be three times that amount.

Besides finances, challenges obviously exist: Keeping children in Help Yourself when they are, after elementary school, dispersed throughout the city (a problem in Albany); engaging funders; and convincing presidents to invest in a community initiative low on their list of priorities.

I have made a simple bet with presidents: If they ask a child where the student goes to school the day after the child’s first Help Yourself class, the student, with sights now raised, will name the college, not the elementary school. I have yet to lose a bet.

For those of us interested in changing the prospects for at-risk children, Einstein’s admonition is clear: It is insane to expect different results by doing the same thing again and again and again. Let’s try something different before the light goes out in a child.