Educators and principals are responsible for ensuring that all of their students are achieving at the highest possible level. But what about the 6 million school-age children in the United States who aren’t attending any sort of public, private, or home school? They, too, are the responsibility of the nation’s educators, who must increase their efforts to locate these children, get them into school, and ensure that they can complete an education and have the best chance at success in life.

Where Are the Children?
It’s a daunting task to identify and locate 6 million missing students. Imagine this country’s future when our collective lack of awareness, initiative, and resources have enabled so many students to slip through the cracks. It’s a future we can’t let happen.

Every year, the American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau collects data on the level of education completed by individuals, including various age groups of school-age children. The 3–17 age group has the highest numbers of unenrolled students. For example, in Florida alone, 316,000 students aged 3–17 aren’t attending any school.

Why Aren’t They in School?
Any number of reasons might explain why so many children are going without an education, yet each is something the education community can find a way to overcome. Some commonly cited reasons are hunger; lack of clean clothing or family support; the need to care for younger siblings; language issues; attention issues; different values, customs, and cultural challenges; mental health issues; families in crisis; poverty; and cyberbullying.

Not having the opportunity to attend school leads to many long-lasting challenges. For one thing, the Alliance for Excellent Education says, dropout students negatively affect the economic, social, and civic health of a community. Lack of education and illiteracy result in unemployment and poverty, leading to serious effects on the health, living conditions, and social situations of children and adults alike. Outcomes such as teen pregnancy, gang violence, theft, and...
drug use happen more frequently among noneducated populations.

If the U.S. addressed the issue of uneducated students, other reputable sources say, cost savings and improvements in the workforce would result. If annual male graduation rates increased by 5 percent, for example, there would be 60,000 fewer assaults, 3,000 fewer rapes, and 1,300 fewer murders in that same year. For context on economic impact, the average cost to educate a student for a year is $12,643, and the cost to maintain a jailed inmate is $28,323.

**What Can We Do?**
The adverse effects of not addressing an uneducated citizenry are significant not only for individual youths and their families, but also for their communities, states, and the nation. Programs such as the World Education Forum–USA (WEF–USA), a program developed by NAESP past presidents Mary Kay Sommers, Darrell Rud, and Rich Barbacane, are creating networks in each state to address the problem.

Currently, 31 states have volunteer WEF–USA ambassadors coordinating efforts. Here’s how you can help:

- **If your state is one of the 31 with a WEF–USA ambassador, reach out to hear their ideas and lend support. If your state doesn’t yet have an ambassador, consider volunteering to be one.**
- **Write an op-ed at the local or state level including relevant data to highlight the scale of this issue. Access data by state, county, and school district at wefusa.net.**
- **Share the issue with school districts and community resources, and work with them to identify ways to find missing kids.**
- **Ask kids where they go to school. Find out more if they say they are not attending any school. Offer support and encouragement.**
- **Identify community leaders such as health care workers, religious leaders, community agencies, and school families who can ask children where they go to school. Make sure each of these leaders knows how and to whom they can communicate if they meet a school-age child who isn’t attending school.**

Imagine how different our communities and the world would be if we mobilized to help every child become an educated citizen. Let’s each find just one child today in our own community who needs our support to be educated. Failing to locate and educate 6 million children is a disservice that could have a lifelong negative impact—not just on them, but also on our country.

Mary Kay Sommers, Darrell Rud, Rich Barbacane, and Robyn Hansen are retired school principals and past presidents of NAESP.

Prepare your students for the next level.

Great things happen when students are engaged, and they thrive when their achievements are acknowledged.

Become an affiliate of the National Elementary Honor Society and bring a tradition of excellence to your students and school.

Visit nehs.org/start-a-chapter to take your first step.

NEHS Members receive exclusive access to the Watson Anthology, a read-along publication with corresponding English Language Arts-aligned lesson plans to promote near-peer learning and leadership.

NEHS is a program of NASSP in partnership with the NAESP Foundation.