

Opinion: Where is the empathy in children?

By Arlie Hochschild

Are the ideas on offer to reform America's schools really the best we can come up with?

Texas has embraced reforms, for example, that call for increasing the number of charter schools and eliminating some of the exams required to graduate from high school, including one in world history. Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad just signed an education reform bill allowing parents who home school their kids to teach driver's education. And 30 state legislatures have introduced bills authorizing some K-12 teachers to carry loaded guns to school.

But nobody seems to be talking about reforms addressing what President Obama, in a 2006 speech, called an "empathy deficit."

Research suggests that there is such a deficit and that it is rising. In a review of 72 studies of American college students, University of Michigan psychologist Sara Konrath and her co-researchers compared students enrolled in the years from 1979 to 2009. The 2009 students, they discovered, were 40% less likely to agree with the statements "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective" and "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me." Over the same three decades, other researchers have found a growing proportion of college students who agree with the statement, "I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve," and who feel they show "leadership ability."

Arlie Hochschild is the author of, among many other books, "The Outsourced Self: Intimate Life in Market Times" and "So

How's the Family? and Other Essays."

Read the whole story