

SOUND IDEAS FROM BRIGHT FUTURES

Community of confidence

Look across the breadth of America's cities — whether rich state or poor state, “red” state or “blue” state — and in community after community, you can find social problems of often staggering proportion.

In some cities, the problems of alienation, poverty and urban blight are so massive that those communities — Newark, Philadelphia, St. Louis and Baltimore are among the examples — have become synonymous with the image of a community weighed down by intractable social woes, due in part to the city's inadequate efforts to address its problems.

Omaha faces many of those same challenges. And the city's need to embrace long-term strategies to address them is undeniable.

It is particularly commendable and encouraging, then, to see the substantial and well-thought-out approaches being put in place in the Omaha area by two organizations:

— *Building Bright Futures*. This effort focuses on early childhood needs, health services, mentoring and boosting school attendance.

— *Bright Futures Foundation*. It helps low-income high school students reach their full potential and prepare themselves for college or community college through the new Avenue Scholars program.

These two efforts — begun through the farsighted support of local donors and their generous contributions — are structured in smart, efficient ways.

Since even these multimillion-dollar donations cannot meet all the needs, the programs are geared to maximize the benefits from each dollar spent. Existing efforts are not duplicated. Communication and collaboration among organizations will be used to create new opportunities for helping young people.

These smartly designed efforts are intended to achieve progress incrementally. Building Bright Futures will identify the most effective methods and collaborative models, then build on them to reach even more students. Practical success thus can encourage more success.

The Avenue Scholars program features a variety of well-designed approaches, including the methods for identifying students' needs; the structure of the daily mentoring by an adult counselor; and the use of peer-to-peer tutoring and mentoring.

Of particular importance: The Avenue Scholars themselves will interact with local high school students. As a result, these scholars will serve as role models, demonstrating that reaching for educational excellence and personal growth is achievable and, in fact, inspiring.

These efforts are only just beginning, but they offer great hope for the future of this area. Once they see the ideals and practicality of Bright Futures, outsiders will rightly conclude that Omaha is a community of confidence, ready to take charge of its own destiny.