



How can he build self-image and character when everything around him says, **“Nobody cares.”**

The fact of the matter is: **we do care.** But, in many of our schools and areas of our community — where children live in desperate poverty — **we’d be hard-pressed to find evidence of our concern.**

At Jefferson Elementary School, students can't use most equipment on the playground because it's unsafe. In many of Grand Rapids Public Schools' high school and middle school classes, students have to share books. And many school library books — held together by masking tape — were printed before students' parents were born.

Maybe that helps to explain:

37%



**In Grand Rapids
Public Schools
37% of the class of
1999 dropped out**

However, it doesn't help to explain why the youth in a community of abundance are schooled in buildings that are, quite literally, falling apart. Or why more and more children in a city of caring and hope go to school hungry and sleep-deprived.

This simply can't be Grand Rapids. We care about our children, about our community, about our future. If, in fact, that's true, we must do something about the plight of our youth and we must do it now.



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Drive by a city elementary school any morning before 7 a.m., and chances are you'll see a child or two, **waiting in the dark and cold for the doors to open**. These kids have to get to school early, because their parents work early and drop them off or because they get themselves ready for school and don't have a strong handle on time. They find someplace near the building to feel safe and warm until the school doors open.



Dear Citizens,

January 24, 2004

Our most precious community asset is our children. When we look into their faces we are, quite literally, looking at our future. If we are to be the vibrant, prosperous, equitable city that we imagine ourselves becoming, it is these children who will make us so.

What is the state of our city's children? Are we investing in this community asset as we should?

This data book paints a picture of the state of our city's children in 2004. Many of the statistics you will read here are disturbing. The health, educational achievement and general well-being of our children are at risk. Investing in children today will pay dividends for a lifetime. If we squander this, our most valuable asset, then we have no future to speak of.

It is not in our nature as a people to ignore the crying needs of children. Grand Rapids is a caring community. We also are boundlessly creative when it comes to solving intractable problems. As you read through this data book you will conclude, as have I, that the times are urgent and demand our best.

This publication serves as a call to action for us all. There is not a moment to waste. Join me today in marshaling our community's resources and combining our individual efforts in supporting our children...our future.

Sincerely,

George K. Heartwell
Mayor, City of Grand Rapids



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Five years ago, leaders of the City of Grand Rapids and of Grand Rapids Public Schools created the Office of Children, Youth and Families to find and maximize resources to improve the lives and education of our youth and families. It was the first office of its kind in the nation. I was honored to be appointed its first administrator.

After five years, I am pleased to report on the successes of this office, many of which were accomplished through community partnerships. For example, the city has invested in early childhood programs through Healthy Start; families can access parenting resources in their schools; children are safer in their homes and neighborhoods as a result of the award-winning "Safe Homes, Safe Kids" campaign; young people, such as the Mayor's Youth Council, are involved in government and community decision-making. Our city and school staff projects have doubled and we're working together on student internships, tutoring and shared use of facilities and parks for recreation and youth programs. That's the good news.

Unfortunately, there is bad news, too. Children are failing in school at alarming rates. Their living conditions are deteriorating. Their health concerns — obesity, diabetes, depression and lead poisoning, to name a few — are mounting. The impact of poverty is tremendous and there is little a child can do about it. But we can. And together, I know we will.

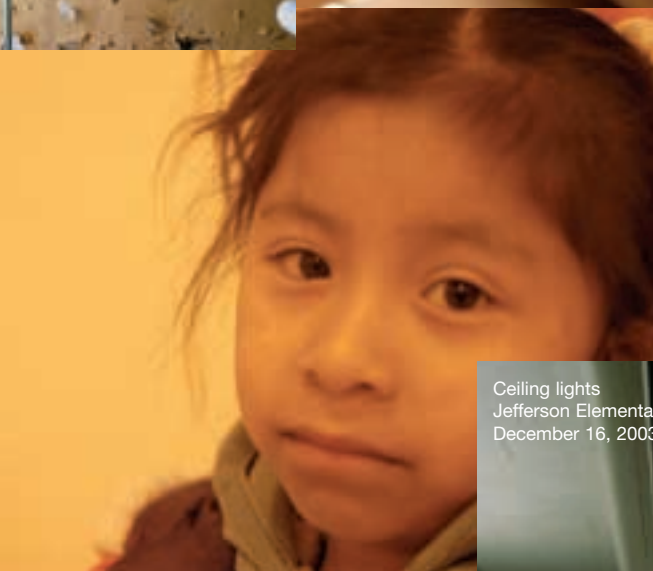
Lynn Heemstra
Administrator, Office of Children, Youth and Families

The purpose of this report is to illustrate the collective need of the youth in our community; to give the caring people of Grand Rapids an honest portrayal of a plight that can only be called troubling in a community as rich and compassionate as ours. Children who are malnourished, ailing, dropping out of school and failing at alarming rates, left to fend for themselves and siblings with little or no help — these are just a few snapshots in the daily lives of too many of our youth.

While we intend to sound alarms, **we also intend to provide hope by establishing our commitment to our children, by lining up the tools and resources we need to make a positive change and by showing what you can do to help.** This is the most serious business of our city today. If we don't meet the desperate needs of our youth, we are certain to face mounting social, health and welfare problems that no budget can address. **We need your ear, your compassion and your help.**

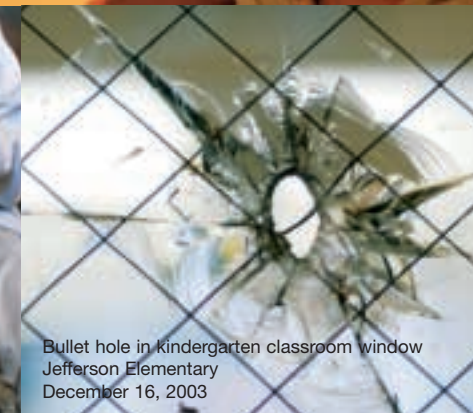


Henry Elementary
December 17, 2003

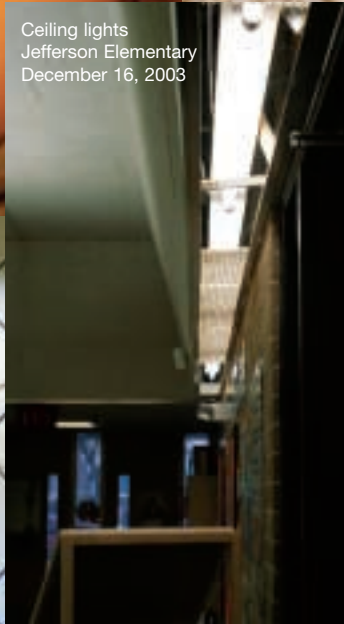


Ceiling lights
Jefferson Elementary
December 16, 2003

Music practice in boiler room Henry Elementary
December 17, 2003



Bullet hole in kindergarten classroom window
Jefferson Elementary
December 16, 2003





Boys bathroom Hall Elementary December 17, 2003





Jefferson Elementary
Playground
December 16, 2003



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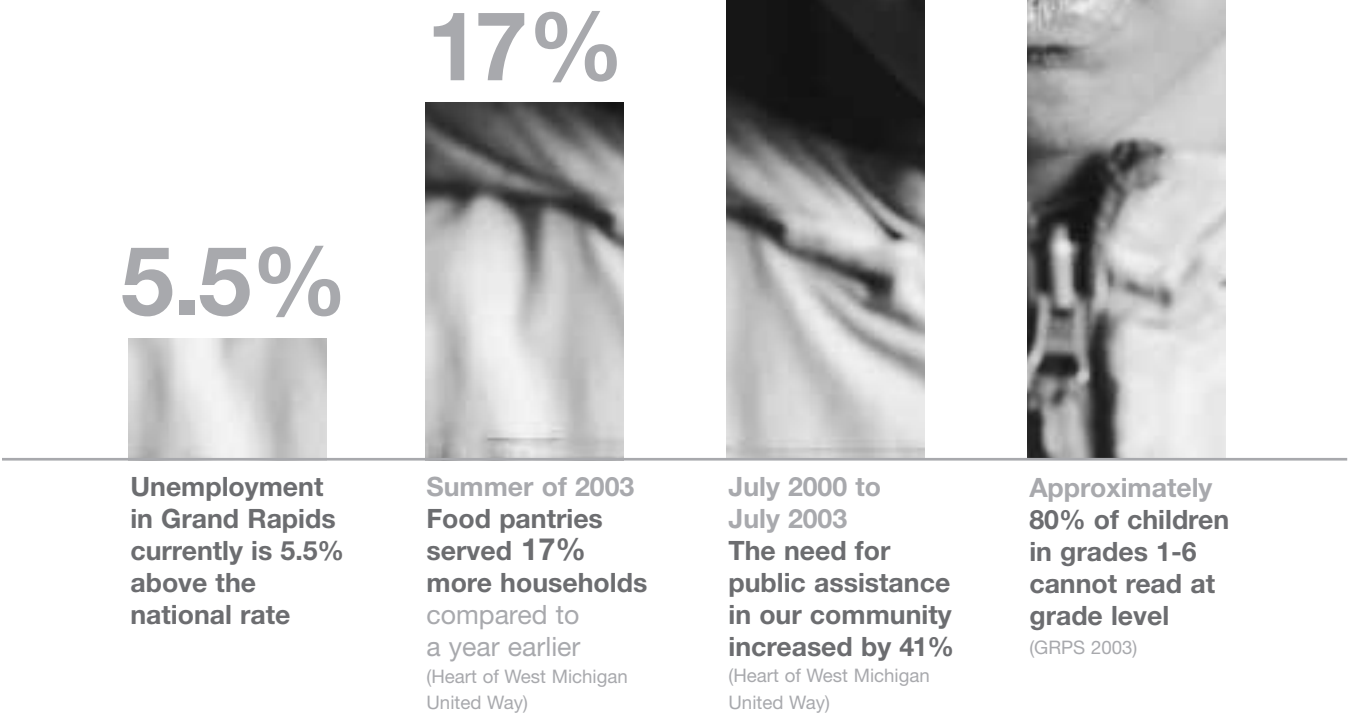


80%

The Impact of Poverty

The laid-off skilled worker in line for utility assistance because, for the first time in his life, he can't pay his bills. Ramshackle housing with crumbling lead paint that's poisoning the children who live there, causing permanent brain damage. Children taking care of children because their parents are working and there's no available, affordable childcare — or worse, because their mother is severely clinically depressed and can't function, yet no one has reached out to help. A family of five living in a car because they've been evicted and chose to pay for clothes over rent.

The pictures of poverty are dire; the effects, worse. Unfortunately for too many of our youth, poverty is a constant companion. The numbers provide a prelude to a disturbing story:



More and more people — including families — are using emergency shelters because of unemployment, increased evictions and substance abuse, to name a few. Too many of our city's children worry more about where they'll sleep and if they'll eat, than about whether they'll pass a quiz. In fact, many of these kids don't even make it to school.

Snapshot: Alarming Trends

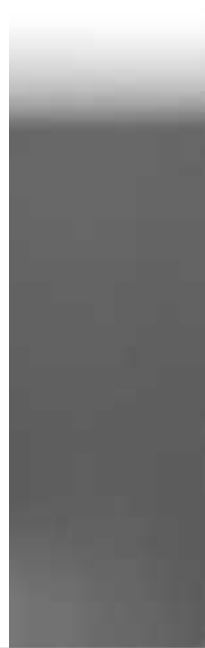
10.4%



Infant mortality rate:
Grand Rapids 10.4%
State of Michigan 8.2%

African-American infant mortality is nearly three times that of Caucasian infant mortality
(State of Michigan)

37%



20,000 children (under 18 yrs.) accessed food pantries last year

This represents 37% of the total population under 18, a 10% increase over 2002
(A.C.C.E.S.S. Food Pantries)

31.2%



In 2003, there were 7,011 families waiting for subsidized housing

That's an increase of 31.2% over 2002
(Grand Rapids Housing Commission)

23%



Unmet requests for help with electric bills were up 23% and unmet requests for heating assistance were up 55% in that same time period
(Heart of West Michigan United Way)

55%



72%



50%



The percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced-priced lunches in 2002:

GRPS	69.4%
Kentwood	27.8%
Forest Hills	3.5%
State of Michigan	32.2%

In October 2003 GRPS 72%

(Grand Rapids Public Schools, Michigan Dept. of Education)

The City of Grand Rapids estimates that 50% of its housing stock is at potential risk of lead hazards

Grand Rapids is second only to Detroit in the number of identified lead-poisoned children in the state

Adrianna Jones, who lives on Grand Rapids' southeast side, didn't know that her home was contaminated by lead. She had no idea that her seven grandchildren, whom she baby-sits, all had elevated levels of lead in their blood — until one of her granddaughters was admitted to the hospital and was found to have severe lead poisoning. Thanks to help from the Health Department and the CLEARCorps program, Adrianna was able to make changes that minimize the effects of lead and that minimize the lead in her home. Unfortunately, it's too late for three of her grandchildren; they suffer from learning disabilities as a result of lead poisoning.

Adrianna's grandchildren are among the 846 youth identified with lead poisoning in 2003 (that equals 12.8% of the children tested). Childhood lead poisoning has a negative impact on a child's ability to learn and on his or her socialization. Lower IQ and performance on standardized testing, social impairments, increased juvenile delinquency and adult incarceration, lower wage earning capacity and health problems later in life are some of the effects of even low doses of lead. While we are making inroads in decreasing lead in homes and children's exposure to it, we still have a long way to go.

Education and Our Youth

Given the social, environmental and economic challenges facing the children in our urban areas, the Grand Rapids Public School district — like so many urban districts — is considered much more than a provider of knowledge and education. It also is the place where many of our children get their only balanced meal, where they find a mentor or advisor, or where they experience positive activity and safety. It's a huge role to fill, and our district is doing a commendable job. But, here, too, we have a long way to go. Our educators face seemingly insurmountable odds. For example, in the 2001-02 school year, 55% of GRPS high school students, 59% of middle school students, and 34% of elementary school students had at least 13 absences during the year.

Even more alarming:



27% of high school, 28% of middle school and 8% of elementary school **students had 30 absences or more**

It's difficult to teach — or to nurture or follow progress — when attendance is abysmal. It's even more difficult when one learns the reasons for the absences: homelessness, parental indifference, children who have to stay home to baby-sit siblings and the like.

Research has linked poverty to higher risks for many negative outcomes, which is supported by school data. GRPS has both the lowest median income (66.5% of GRPS students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches in 2001) and the lowest Michigan Educational Assessment scores (a 39.2% passing rate). That compares with Wyoming Public Schools where, in 2001, 32.1% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches and the MEAP passing rate was 58.6%, and East Grand Rapids Public Schools, where 3.9% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches and the 2001 MEAP passing rate was 81.8%.

What's more, the socio/economic picture of our city doesn't provide many bright spots. The poverty rate for children in Grand Rapids is almost double that for children in Kent County as a whole and it's rising.

Community Investment in School Facilities and Infrastructure

Total Debt per Student:

\$30,777

\$21,127

\$7,848 \$8,452

\$497

Grand Rapids

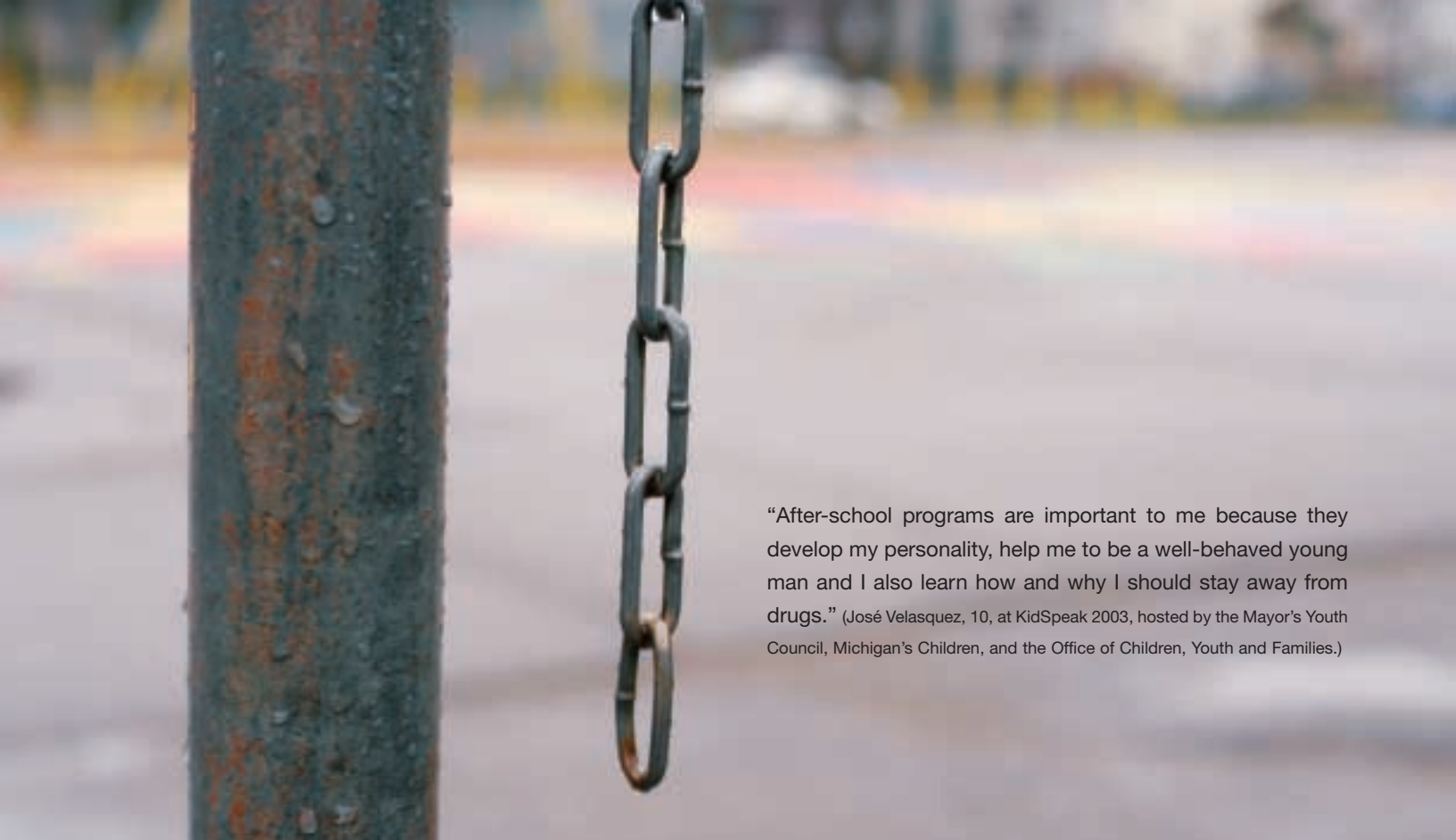
Northview

Wyoming

Forest Hills

Byron Center

(Michigan Municipal Advisory Council and Michigan Education Directory, 2002)



“After-school programs are important to me because they develop my personality, help me to be a well-behaved young man and I also learn how and why I should stay away from drugs.” (José Velasquez, 10, at KidSpeak 2003, hosted by the Mayor’s Youth Council, Michigan’s Children, and the Office of Children, Youth and Families.)



“It is a fact that high school students face a tremendous amount of peer pressure and temptation every day. It is much easier to resist these temptations when productive and fun alternatives are available.” (Tyler Accardi, 17, at KidSpeak 2003, hosted by the Mayor’s Youth Council, Michigan’s Children, and the Office of Children, Youth and Families.)



Snapshot: When School Doors Close

300%

26%



A recent evaluation of the GRPS playgrounds by a professional firm yielded the following grades:

- 14% **F**
- 26% **D**
- 36% **C**
- 22% **B**
- 2% **A**

While the report praised the district and maintenance staff for doing their best to maintain and improve the playgrounds, it **recommended more than \$5.6 million in repairs and improvements**

(GRPS, 2003)

37%



Of students who spend no time in out-of-school activities:
49% are more likely to use drugs
37% are more likely to become teen parents

than those who spend just one to four hours per week in out-of-school activities
(U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.)

49%



60%



Three out of five voters are willing to increase their taxes to pay for after-school programs
(Mott/JCPenny Afterschool Poll, June 2000)

On school days between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., the occurrence of violent juvenile crime triples
(Fight Crime, Invest in Kids, 2000)





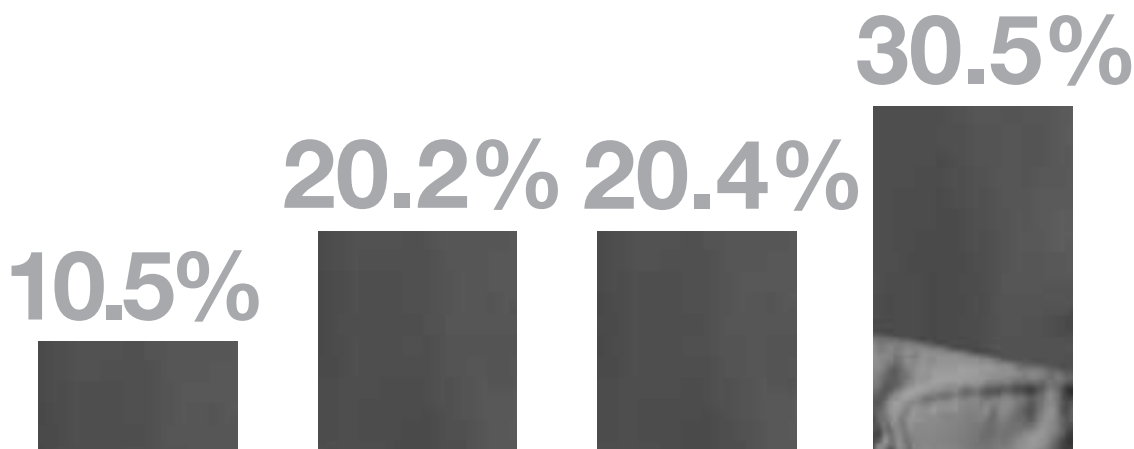
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132.3%

Our City's Children

If you've heard it once, you've heard it a thousand times: Grand Rapids is a great place to raise a family; it's a family-oriented town with lots for kids to do. That's true, of course, but it's not the experience for all of our youth. Why? Because so many of our children are poor, have parents who are busy trying to scrape together a living or who have given up and because so many city youth don't have access to the transportation or activities that youth have in other districts. Their problems compound: Low income often means substandard housing and, therefore, lead poisoning. It can mean substance abuse and homelessness. And it can lead to a life of crime. Because of environmental and economic factors, our city's kids also are facing increasing health challenges such as diabetes, asthma and obesity. Here is a statistical snapshot of our city's kids:

On average, **300** of our city's youth are living in an emergency shelter on **any one night**.



Many of our city's youth live in households where unemployment is a factor

10.5% unemployment rate in the city in 2003

63% live in married-couple families

31% live in female-headed families

5% live in male-headed families

Today, more than **20.2%** of our city's youth live in poverty

For a family of four, that means living on a total annual income of **\$18,400 or less** (U.S. Census)

An increasing percentage of our city's kids are teenagers: **13.3%** age 10-14 **20.4%** age 15-17

Fewer kids are under age 10 (down about 9%) (U.S. Census)

Of the **197,800** Grand Rapids residents, **54,381** were under 18

Of that, (30.5%) 16,335 are under the age of 5 (U.S. Census)

Youth population from 1990 to 2000: **Hispanic up 132.3%** **African-American up 8.4%** **Asian up 16%** **Caucasian down 26%** **American Indian down 42.2%** (U.S. Census)

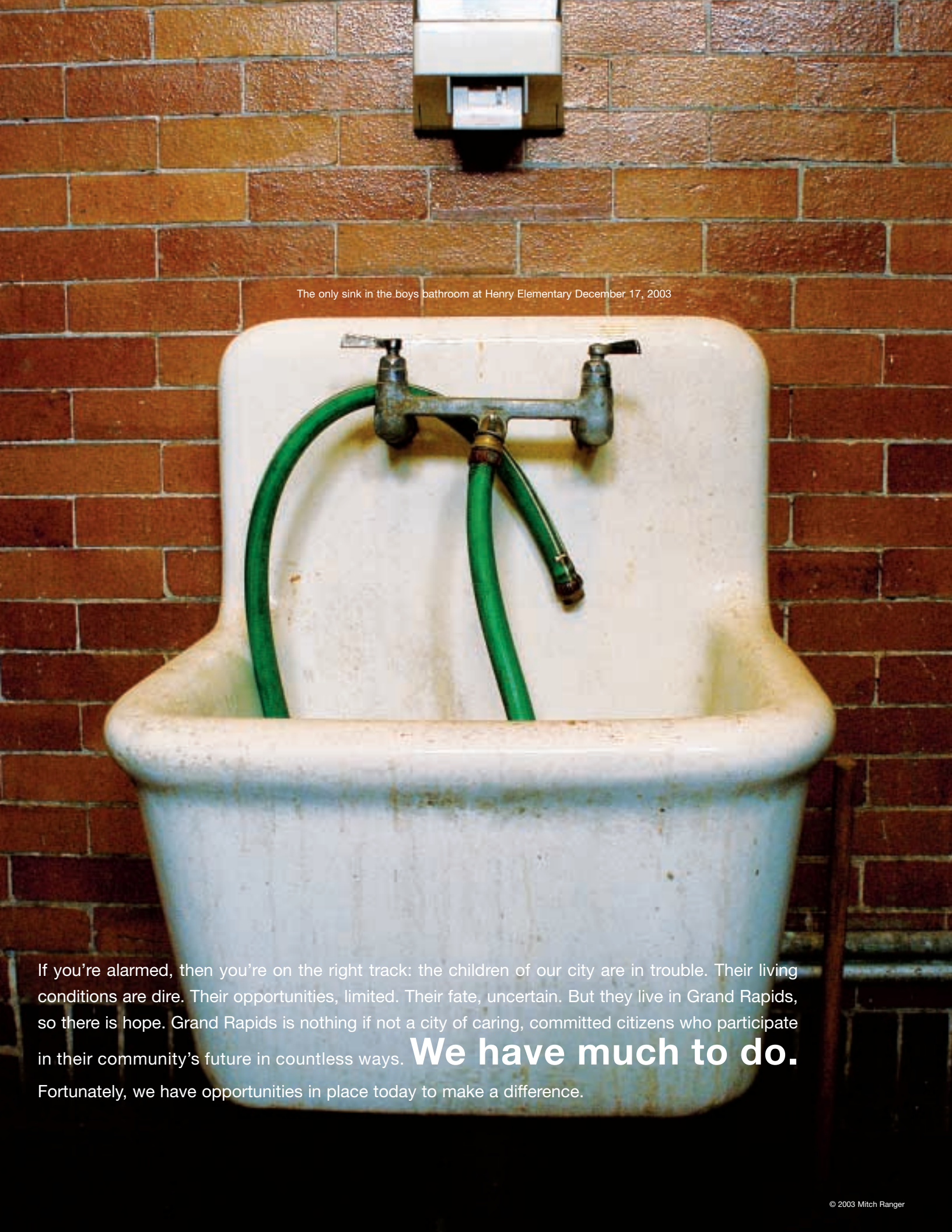






Classroom at Jefferson Elementary December 16, 2003





The only sink in the boys bathroom at Henry Elementary December 17, 2003

If you're alarmed, then you're on the right track: the children of our city are in trouble. Their living conditions are dire. Their opportunities, limited. Their fate, uncertain. But they live in Grand Rapids, so there is hope. Grand Rapids is nothing if not a city of caring, committed citizens who participate in their community's future in countless ways. **We have much to do.**

Fortunately, we have opportunities in place today to make a difference.

Here are some of the programs you can support or assist

Connections for Children: A federally-funded early childhood initiative aimed at raising educational awareness about the importance of the 0-5 years. It's expanding its resources to help parents raise their children to their fullest potential. Contact: Ron Apol, 616.752.8647.

Education Reform Initiative (E.R.I.): Convened by three local foundations (Frey Foundation, Grand Rapids Community Foundation and the Steelcase Foundation), this initiative has set forth a "Straight A" plan to improve education for our city's children. Areas of focus are legislative efforts, professional development, and community accountability and responsibility. Contact: Wendy Lewis-Jackson, 616.454.1751.

Expanded Learning Opportunities (E.L.O.): This community initiative aims to ensure every child has access to quality after-school programs in the city. They've established a database of more than 330 programs in city neighborhoods, accessible through United Way's 211, and developed standards of care. They need parents and seniors to help launch a new advocacy committee. Contact: Office of Children, Youth and Families, Janay Jorgensen, 616.456.3102.



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Families and Communities Together for Students (F.A.C.T.S.): Hundreds of businesses loan employees for one-half hour per week to tutor a child in GRPS. They also have a need for homework tutors and aides in the after-school programs. Contact: United Way, 616.632.1002.

Get the Lead Out (G.T.L.O.): A community partnership to eliminate lead poisoning in kids throughout the county. Focus is on city neighborhoods and on remediating houses, educating parents and on advocacy for legislation. Contact: Paul Haan, 616.241.3300

Grand Rapids Reads!: A coalition of literacy providers who want to increase awareness of the importance of literacy, seek solutions and coordinate resources. Contact: United Way, Fritz Crabb, 616.632.1001.

Grand Rapids Student Advancement Foundation: The organization that links resources and financial contributions to the needs of the public schools. Priorities include after-school programming, literacy, the environment and the arts. Contact: Susan Heartwell, 616.632.1005.

Healthy Kent 2010 Infant Mortality Team: A team of community partners dedicated to reducing infant deaths and low-weight births through an educational campaign to at-risk mothers-to-be, particularly in the African-American community. Contact: Spectrum Health Healthier Communities, Julie Bonewell, 616.391.3959.

My administration is dedicated to educating children and protecting families; the strength of Michigan — and of our nation — depends on both. **I commend the citizens of Grand Rapids for taking a close look at the state of their children. I laud their determination to ensure that children of all backgrounds and socio-economic status have opportunity for success and happiness.** I know that their follow-through will be as determined as their study and focus have been. Our children, and our future, depend on it.

Governor Jennifer M. Granholm



Mural, GRPS Southeast Campus, December 16, 2003

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