

The Jonathan Effect: Helping Kids and Schools Win the Battle Against Poverty

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“With this book, Mike Tenbusch dismantles a current crisis with an age-old approach – begin with caring, trust your beliefs, get out to where the problem is, and never give up on children. I’ve seen it work, as I’ve seen Mike work. The world is a better place as a result.”

– Mitch Albom, author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*

Helping Kids and Schools Win the Battle Against Poverty

The day Kymoni challenged me to a fight, I took him out to lunch. We drove a mile south to Warren Road, the dividing line between Detroit and Dearborn, Henry Ford’s enclave and the home of Ford Motor Company. The suburb is now home to one of the largest Arabic-speaking populations outside of the Middle East.

In short order, I found myself sitting down to eat a shawarma sandwich with a young man who seemed to hate the world and everyone in it, starting with me. But just sitting down to break bread together changed the dynamics pretty quickly.

When I tried to tell Kymoni that God had a plan for his life, he cut that conversation off immediately, blaspheming God and ridiculing Christians for talking a good game but not backing it up with their walk. I changed course, asking about school and life. I could see that he was funny and smart and hurting.

On the ride back to school, I told him that I would like to stay in relationship with him. I told him that I know he knows a lot more about how to be successful on the streets than I do, but that I know a lot more about how to succeed in school and work than he does. I had this unfounded fear that he would see this as a chance to just get money from me, so I made it clear that this is not about money. I just saw something in him and wanted to help him succeed in life. He agreed to stay in relationship with me.

I visited his school every couple of weeks and found him about half the time I was there, bumping into him in the hallways or seeking him out in class to see how he was doing. We connected as long as he was in the places I was, but I had this insistent voice telling me that I could and should be doing more.

During Christmas break of Kymoni’s sophomore year, my wife and I read *The Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever* to our children. It’s about the Herdman kids, six painfully poor and unruly kids with a mischievous, cruel streak in them. Their father left them when they were young, and their mother worked two jobs, leaving them to fend for themselves.

When the Herdmans decide to audition for the school’s Christmas pageant, they threaten to beat up anybody who tried out for their parts. As a result, the six siblings got all the best parts as Mary, Joseph, the angel and the three wise men.

The thing is, they had never heard the Nativity story – and they wanted to play the roles the way they would if the same things had happened to them. To the Herdmans the gifts of the

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three wise men – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – seemed like an insult. That just wouldn't do. Instead, Claude, Leroy, and Ollie Herdman give baby Jesus a ham. Not just any ham – it was the ham that a church had given them so they could have a decent Christmas dinner. They gave that gift away to a kid they had just heard of and barely knew.

Reading this scene to my kids overwhelmed me. My sense of wonder at such a selfless gift was matched by my own sense of shame for what a self-focused life I was leading.

My wife, kids, and I had just finished discussing and writing down our vision and hopes for the New Year. Mine were typical – to get in better shape and do things to help me be better at work and at home. At their core, they were all about me.

As I tried to read aloud the final scene in the story, all I could think about was Kymoni. He had been on my heart a lot since we met. Tears flowed as I read the story to my children and as the Holy Spirit showed me that I could be doing so much more. I had been too busy taking care of me and my own. I knew I could do better than that, so I changed my resolutions to focus on being a real friend and mentor to Kymoni that year. This was the beginning of my own Jonathan experience. . . .

For most of my adult life I have felt like David going into battles against defenders and propagators of the status quo. When you spend most of your life in the city often described as the most violent, most dangerous city in America, you would think that change would come easy. But in reality, many people are good at fighting to keep things just the way they are, regardless of how dysfunctional and destructive that may be. When I battled with them, David was my inspiration.

What I have come to see is that David had a heart for God, but he still needed a good friend to remind him of who he was in the Lord and to help him achieve his destiny. This is what my wife, my pastor, my closest friends and mentors have done repeatedly for me. This is what Jonathan, the son of King Saul, did for David. This is what you can do for a young person who needs you.

– Taken from “Making the Commitment” and chapter two, “The Jonathan Commitment”



Mike Tenbusch, author of *The Jonathan Effect: Helping Kids and Schools Win the Battle Against Poverty*

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“Christians are the missing ingredient for turning around our nation’s toughest schools.”

*Detroit native and longtime advocate for youth education Mike Tenbusch brings readers into the classrooms of the toughest schools in America through *The Jonathan Effect*, providing firsthand accounts of the hardships faced by children living in extreme poverty. Throughout his career, Tenbusch saw that something more than schools alone is needed for young people to break out of poverty, and this is where the church can help. Tenbusch calls people to make a “Jonathan Commitment.” Just as Saul’s son Jonathan was a faithful friend to David, helping him achieve greatness, so to the church needs to step in alongside schools to build relationships, meet needs, and love students, propelling them on to achieve their destiny.*

What motivated you to write this book?

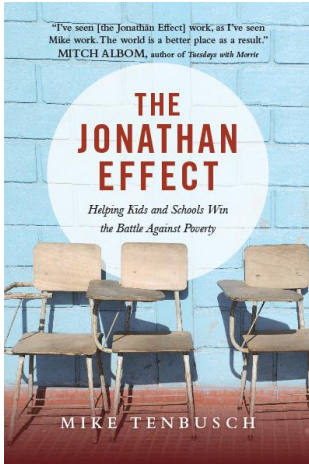
Mike Tenbusch: Ever since my childhood in Detroit, I have been committed to the challenge of how to make America’s cities better for children and families. While leading a high school turnaround effort in some of the nation’s toughest high schools, I learned that even the best school leaders and teachers were not enough to overcome the challenges kids face coming from high concentrations of poverty.

Part of my motivation came from a commitment I made in 2012 to help a troubled fifteen-year-old at Cody High School in Detroit be successful in life. His trials and triumphs through the course of our friendship convinced me that schools like his were filled with young people like him who needed a friend in their life to help them achieve their destiny, just as Jonathan did for David. I also discovered that churches around the country were beginning to partner with schools and could be a Jonathan-like friend to them as well. A movement of churches was beginning to infuse schools with people who wanted to love and serve them and their students.

This book was written to give churches the inspiration and practical steps needed to make a meaningful difference in the future of our nation’s most challenging high schools and in the lives of the students in them, as well as to give school leaders and teachers encouragement to embrace such partnerships.

What type of schools and students most need the church to come alongside them?

Tenbusch: The school-choice movement (which allows parents to select a magnet or application school for their child to attend instead of the local public school) has created a set of “neighborhood schools” filled with kids who don’t have the transportation or family



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support needed to apply for and succeed in application-based schools. These “neighborhood schools” need more support to address the challenges of generational poverty, and this is where the church is uniquely positioned to help the most – by entering into relationships with those schools and their students to help both achieve their true destiny.

What makes the message of your book, the church fighting poverty by partnering with schools, unique?

Tenbusch: This message is distinct because it encourages churches to embed themselves in schools, which have seemed increasingly averse to “religion” since mandatory prayer was ruled unconstitutional in 1962. It is also unique in that it argues that the battle against poverty can be won, but it will require people loving and serving others through sustained relationships, regardless of their color or religion. This approach runs contrary to prevalent mindsets of the day – that generational poverty is intractable, that religious people have no place in public schools, and that white people have nothing to offer kids of color.

Why should churches commit to Jonathan relationships? What will be the outcome?

Tenbusch: Churches and their members have a unique opportunity to serve schools and their students in a way that no other institution can – through loving, long-term friendships to help students achieve their destiny, while making members’ own lives more meaningful too. And this is a battle we can win. There are 300,000 churches and only 100,000 schools. There are 5.8 million Americans between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four who don’t go to school or work, but there are 173 million Christians in America who could help slash this number dramatically in the years to come by building relationships with these young people.