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GUEST COLUMN

Michael Johnson: Hold kids accountable, but don't derail their futures

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Michael Johnson
The Capital Times

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Two letters to the editor recently appeared in the State Journal about me, kids and violence. They expressed concerns about a comment I made during a press conference with Dane County Sheriff Dave Mahoney and Brat Fest organizer Tim Metcalfe after an incident at Brat Fest involving several kids during Memorial Day weekend.

In the aftermath of the event, I said, “Kids are going to be kids. Kids fight at school. Kids fight in after-school programs. They’re going to make mistakes. But we’ve done everything that we can to make sure that the public feels good about what’s going to take place at Brat Fest over the weekend.”

Some people took issue with my comment that “kids are going to be kids.” But that was just a portion of what I said. I’d like to provide some clarity and understanding.

We all know kids have been fighting since nearly the beginning of time. So I stand by my statement. This does not mean that I condone them fighting, nor should you.

Nor do I condone adults calling kids gangbangers and thugs, which was how some people on social media labeled these kids without any supporting facts to back up those claims. These are words usually placed on kids from marginalized communities, especially black kids.

During the same time as Brat Fest, a full-page story in the State Journal highlighted photos of all 167 Boys and Girls Club graduating seniors, mainly kids of color announcing their college plans. More than 75 percent of these young people are first-generation college students and from low-income communities. Not one person wrote a letter to the editor about them and their accomplishments. Yet when our local kids make mistakes, negative labels are thrown around, and we are quick to criminalize them.

I also believe parents have a responsibility to know where their kids are and with whom they associate. We have to do a better job monitoring our kids’ activities. I am seeing way too many kids doing things they should not be doing, and as a community we have an opportunity to address it before it becomes a larger problem.

When young people get in trouble, they should be held accountable for their actions. But let's not derail them from becoming future scholars, principals, teachers, chemists, nonprofit leaders, business owners and role models. They will make mistakes, as we did as children.

So let's be careful on the labels we place on our local kids. Let's invest more of our time, talent and financial resources to prevent them from becoming connected to the real problem — the people who terrorize and cause real harm to our community.

Johnson is president and CEO of the Boys and Girls Club on Dane County