

America is becoming the dropout nation. Every year more than 1 million teenagers leave school without graduating. That's one student every 29 seconds or roughly 30 percent of all high school students.

It's even bleaker for students of color, who experience a 50 percent dropout rate.

In the "land of opportunity," we cannot sit back while millions of our children are doomed to failure. Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, receive public assistance and have children who dropout of school themselves.

For those students who stay in school, many are not receiving all the resources they need to succeed, and many of them do not believe they'll be able to realize their goals.

Fontana knows that children need a system of supports to help them succeed. We also know that no one teacher, parent, mentor or elected official can provide those supports alone. If children and young people are to succeed in life, it means we must all work together, starting in our own backyard.

That's why America's Promise Alliance and Capital One chose Fontana as one of the country's 100 Best Communities for Young People. In Fontana, we think big, act together and work hard to ensure a brighter future for our children and youth.

The 100 Best Communities for Young People is a competition that recognizes those communities large and small, rural and urban that are doing right by their young people and going the extra mile to address the challenges they face to ensure that they find the path to success.

Our community joins a prestigious list of winners. Each winning community has different challenges to tackle, but each is making progress and improving the lives of its young people. Most importantly, the 100 Best winners are models for innovative programs and serve as inspirations to other communities that may be struggling to reach their young people.

Our community was chosen in part because of Fontana's Smart Kids program - a partnership between private business, the public sector and nonprofits, including San Bernardino County, San Antonio Community Hospital, Kaiser Permanente, Lewis Operating Cos., Young Homes, Curves, 24-Hour Fitness, the city of Fontana, Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, Think Together and the Fontana Unified School District.

In this program, nearly 3,000 Fontana public school students stay after school for homework assistance, activities, sports and a healthy snack. The program targets at-risk and latchkey children and helps them with their educational, social and emotional needs during after-school hours, the time most unsupervised children are getting into trouble.

The healthy snack and physical exercise also helps to fight childhood obesity - a significant threat for all youth today.

America's Promise and Capital One share our desire to see children succeed.

The Alliance identified a series of research-based resources that all communities can use to determine how to best support their children: caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, an effective education, and to help others. These resources are known as the Five Promises.

Fontana should be extremely proud of its efforts to help our young people reach their full potential. We applaud the 100 Best recognition and vow to not lose sight of the challenges that lie ahead, both for us as a community and a nation.

In this new year, let us all recommit to making our "land of opportunity" something all young people first experience in their own backyards.

*Terrie Schneider is the Executive Director of Boys and Girls Club of Fontana, member of the Inland Empire United Way KidSmart Advisory Board, and a member of the Executive Planning Committee of the Fontana Library Foundation.*