Money Talks — So Why Don’t We Teach Kids to Listen?

I got my first credit card at 20 or 21, thanks to good credit and the right zip code. Despite my parents’ warnings, just-out-of-college me felt rich. I wasn’t. A rural Georgia teacher’s salary didn’t stretch far. By 30, I was drowning in debt. It’s taken over a decade to swim back—and I’m still catching my breath.

I’m not alone. For many young Americans, falling into debt is a rite of passage. We wouldn’t hand someone car keys without teaching them how to drive—so why do we send students into the world without teaching them how to manage money?

Financial literacy should be a required part of the high school curriculum. Whether students head to college or straight into the workforce, they face adult financial decisions with real, lasting consequences.

College students often sign up for massive student loans without fully understanding what they’re committing to. Meanwhile, working grads must quickly learn to survive on take-home pay—often while spending 40–60% of their income on rent alone. The old “30% rule” may be outdated, but that makes it even more urgent to teach teens how to budget, prioritize needs over wants, and plan accordingly.

They should know how to read a paystub, understand taxes and deductions, and grasp how today’s savings and investment decisions shape tomorrow’s retirement. Lessons in 401(k)s, Roth IRAs, and compound interest aren’t just practical—they’re empowering. Financial literacy creates more informed, capable citizens.

And let’s not forget the risks. Teens are prime targets for scams, predatory lenders, and credit traps. Knowing how to avoid payday loans, rent-to-own schemes, and maxed-out cards can protect them. So can starting an emergency fund early—something too often treated as a luxury rather than a necessity.

Some argue this is a parent’s responsibility. But in many households, financial knowledge is limited—or nonexistent. The average American family carries nearly $9,000 in credit card debt, and 40% can’t cover a $1,000 emergency. Over two in five have no emergency savings at all.

If schools are meant to prepare students for life, financial literacy shouldn’t be optional. It’s a crucial safety net—especially for those who won’t get this education at home. States like Florida, Georgia, and Ohio are starting to require personal finance classes, and early results show promising improvements in saving habits and debt awareness.

My plea: Contact your local school board and state representatives. Let them know this matters. Financial literacy strengthens individuals, families, and the broader economy. Today’s students are tomorrow’s policymakers. Let’s equip them with the tools they need to lead wisely.

—Kara Mathis