

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

*By Kara Mathis*

I was 20 or 21 when I got my very own credit card, a perk of living in the right zip code and having parents with great credit. Despite their words of wisdom and warning, just-out-of-college me felt rich. I was *not* rich. A teacher's salary in rural Georgia is not as lucrative as you might think. By the time I turned 30, I didn't just owe a little; I was drowning in debt. It's taken over a decade to swim to the shore, and I'm still catching my breath.

My story isn't unique. Falling into debt — then scrambling to crawl out of it — is a rite of passage for many young Americans. You wouldn't hand someone a car without teaching them how to drive. That's why financial literacy should be part of the high school curriculum. We owe it to students to provide a working foundation before sending them into the world to sink or swim.

After graduation, students typically go one of two routes, college or career, and both require real financial knowledge *and skills* to avoid pitfalls. Those headed to college often face student loans, and with national student loan debt now in the trillions, the impact is massive. The ethics of offering an 18-year-old tens of thousands in loans is a topic for another day, but here's the immediate problem: most freshmen have no idea what they're signing up for.

Meanwhile, students entering the workforce are thrust into full financial independence, where budgeting isn't optional — it's a survival skill. And yet few know how to create a realistic budget. With housing costs rising, many young adults spend 40-60% of their income on rent alone. The old 30% rule may be outdated, but teens should still be taught how to weigh needs vs. wants and plan accordingly.

They also need to know how to read a paystub: what's withheld, what goes where, and why it matters. They need to know about taxes — why we have them, how brackets and deductions work, and how those deductions affect their take-home pay. But it doesn't stop there. Decisions today, such as how much to save and how to invest, impact retirement down the road. Lessons in 401(k)s, Roth IRAs, and compound interest not only create better planners, they create more informed citizens. Financial literacy isn't just about money; it's about empowerment.

And let's not forget the scams and traps. Teens and young adults are often targets for predatory lenders and online fraud. Financial education is another level of defense that helps them avoid payday loans, rent-to-own schemes, and maxed-out credit cards. They need to know that an emergency fund is not a luxury but a necessity, and that starting one early is often what keeps people from financial hardship later.

Some argue that it's the parents' job to teach these lessons, and in an ideal world, that would be the case. But it's not an ideal world, and many parents assume the schools will handle it or are financially illiterate themselves. The average American household carries nearly \$9,000 in credit card debt, and 40% of Americans couldn't cover an \$1,000 emergency. More than two out of five have no emergency savings at all.

If schools exist to prepare students for life, then financial literacy can no longer be an elective. Including it in the curriculum serves as a safety net for students who won't get this information anywhere else. And in states like Florida, Georgia, and Ohio, where personal finance classes are now required, early results show encouraging outcomes with better saving habits and debt awareness.

My plea to you, dear reader, is to reach out to your local school board and your state representatives and let them know *this matters*. Financial literacy benefits individuals, communities, and the economy. The more prepared our children are, the stronger our society will be. These kids will grow up to make legislation, balance budgets, and shape policy. Let's give them the tools they need to do it well.