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## ARTICLE

### **Educational Malpractice in Our Schools: Shortchanging African American and Other Disenfranchised Students**

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#### **Introduction**

Without a doubt, the world is changing at an incredible rate. America's immigration rate is twice that of a century ago and has resulted in dramatic demographic shifts. The difference in the mean income between the wealthiest and the poorest continues to grow. Home schooling and charter schools are increasingly being chosen as alternatives for students, and cries for accountability in schools are deafening. Advances in technology and science are mind-boggling; the burgeoning Internet has placed a tremendous amount of knowledge literally at our fingertips. Huge companies are merging with others, creating mergers that will undoubtedly have far-reaching implications for the workplace of the future. Advances in knowledge and an increasingly complex society call for an even more educated population than we have today. These kinds of changes are leading to a revolutionary transformation in education. Such a transformation has been taking place from the district to the global level. Nonetheless, social injustice and diversity issues in the public school systems are not getting the attention warranted by these changes.

By most accounts, the American education system is not working as well as it could. Children appear to be learning less in public schools today than they did a generation ago. Some 25% of high school students drop out before graduating. This figure corresponds to the 25% of "throwaways" that were part of the original structure designed more than 150 years ago. Many of those who do graduate are not adequately prepared for post-secondary activities, a pattern replete with alarming implications for America's ability to compete in the rapidly expanding world economy (Williams, 2003).

Many indicators tell us that too many students are getting too little education. The need to recognize the severity of the denial about education is greater than ever before. Our schools are failing far too many children, especially those not of the majority culture (Hilliard, 1991). Even those students who appear to be succeeding are not fulfilling their potential. The fundamental issue is not that our schools are no longer as good as they once were: they are precisely as they have always been (Urbanski, 1993). Current schools must be drastically improved, but more importantly, we must invent schools that have never existed to meet our current needs.

Our education system has developed over a long period of time and is very complex. We have not proceeded with an eye toward the real and future world of our youth. Without such vision, we have gone from one "innovation" to another with few results to show for the multitude of programs embarked upon and the millions of dollars spent on such efforts.

There is no comprehensive plan of action that leads to improvement; a systemic approach is non-existent; social policy falls short of providing sustainable change; high-stakes testing has become the indicator for education reform in this state (Washington) and other states; and there is no collaboration or meaningful communications taking place between the various delivery systems. The K-12 system is the foundation outside of the home, yet that system does not communicate or collaborate with families. New laws are being passed and additional burdens are being placed on the system with minimal new resources to find answers to the chronic problem of academic underachievement.

At a time when our nation is focusing on low-performing schools, the achievement gap, and the need for quality teachers, the issue of diversity must be central to the discussion. If we are going to do right by all of them, we must ensure that our teaching force is truly well prepared to teach all children (Delpit, 1995). No “one” thing is the answer. Multiple strategies and initiatives must be incorporated if we are to reverse trends away from equity in public schooling. Collaboration among all levels of schooling is essential. A “womb-to-tomb” or “birth-to-death” approach is necessary, if we are to fully embrace life-long learning. Research tells us that unborn babies are learning in the womb and senior citizens are returning to school to become technologically literate, making it necessary to consider an expanded scope of learning. Every aspect of the community must be part of the solution, including groups whose mission focuses on children, their families, and the communities from which they come.

Reconceptualizing schools and learning is a new and different way of re-thinking the concepts of education (as we have come to know it) and shifts the paradigm that maintains the status quo (Barker, 1992). It is time to stop debating whether or not our current system of public education needs changing. A paradigm shift in the state of Washington (and across the nation) is necessary for creating an inclusive and quality approach to K-12 public education that is determined to leave no child behind, academically or otherwise. Yet, the need for such a shift creates a controversy about education that is deeply racial and political; the need can no longer be ignored.

### **The Persistent Miseducation of African American Students**

One of the many controversies in education is the academic condition of African American students in our schools. The system of education as we know it was not designed with minority groups in mind. Don't forget that it was against the law for Blacks to read or be educated. James Comer talks about the devastating shocks of the Black experience of slavery, the effects of which are even now not fully understood (Comer, 1998). The first shock was the disruption of a close-knit African kinship structure that was at the core of all political, economic, and social functioning. The second was the Middle Passage and the brutality of the slave trade. The third was two-and-a-half centuries of slavery with its imposed dependency, inferior status, and no opportunity for improvement. The fourth was the release of slaves into a hostile environment in both the North and the South that stripped African Americans of what paltry protection slave masters provided them as valued property, leaving them neither slaves nor citizens, but outcasts in a land not of their own choosing.

Since effective civil rights legislation was not enacted until the mid-1960's, it has been necessary for African Americans to move from a status of uneducated and unskilled to a status of highly skilled in just one generation. This is in sharp contrast to the three generations of educational acceleration available to other immigrant groups who came voluntarily to the US. The argument that these many complex structural forces could be overcome by school integration and other civil rights legislation in 30 years – with no significant economic power – was patently unrealistic and painfully naive. It was simply an effort to avoid taking responsibility for the illegal, irresponsible, and immoral acts imposed on African Americans in the past and their currently lingering effects. Many institutions such as colleges, universities, banks, insurance companies, etc., are beginning to research and acknowledge their role in the practice of slavery and offer apologies and restitution. The reparation movement has been activated the past few years with very limited success. Our school systems continue to be riddled with prejudice, racism, inequities, unfairness, and an overwhelming belief that most African Americans cannot learn at high levels.

The unique needs of other ethnic groups are part of the equation for program improvements but not for African American students. How can this problem be such a challenging issue, but little to no state or federal focus is brought to bear on it? The data are compelling and the societal impact of neglecting such evidence is beyond measure. We proceed with conversations and discussions about needed

changes in our education system, but often minimize the *chronic* nature of the educational circumstance that African American students face. Because there is such a long, extensive, and painful history contributing to the problems, we have a very difficult time dealing with the present-day manifestations of the historical reality of the mis-education of African Americans in this state and the nation at large (Irvine, 1990).

Of all the ethnic groups in this country, African Americans are the only ones who came involuntarily. We are descendents of people who were kidnapped from our native Africa and enslaved in this country for more than 350 years under the worst possible human conditions. Our people were stripped of everything: language, dignity, religion, family units, wealth, customs, culture, history, and other measures of humankind. The United States Constitution made slavery a legal practice until being repealed by the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment, which was ratified December 6, 1865. Our plight cannot be compared to any other group who have since come to these shores, regardless of the criteria used. Even in light of the great experiment of desegregation, African American students suffered the greatest burden and losses of this failed reform and again find themselves the target of educational politics as to their location and the schools they attend.

Once again state standards have been imposed without attention to the particular educational inequities that surround African American students, leading to a new generation of equity lawsuits. African American children are, again, held accountable for not learning while the system is not accountable for not teaching. The phrase “educational malpractice” was the label given to an earlier 1976 San Francisco court case wherein a student had spent 12 years in public schools and had graduated with only a 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level (Standler, 2000).

In the face of educational reforms, backed by state and federal monitoring, the miseducation of African American students remains statistically conspicuous and substantively persistent. This persistent miseducation is evidenced by

#### Over-representation in

- special education programs
- juvenile justice system as offenders
- incarceration rates
- poverty rates
- unemployment during times of economic boom
- discipline referrals, resulting in suspensions and expulsions

#### Under-representation in

- programs for the gifted and other advanced courses

- school activities other than sports
- teaching; as counselors and administrators in P-12 system and of African American faculty and administrators in post-secondary institutions
- graduation rates
- science and technology classes; higher level mathematics.

All the indicators point to the fact that African American children are in dire academic difficulty. While many of them are doing very well in school, the majority of our children are not. The systemic neglect and structural inequalities have led to social and economic injustice for too many of our people. Why the focus on just African American children when many others also underachieve? The Honorable Augustus F. Hawkins, Founder of the National Council on Educating Black Children (NCEBC) and a former congressman, stated it very well when he said, "Black children are the proxy for what ails American education in general. And so, as we fashion solutions which help Black children, we fashion solutions which help all children" (NCEBC, 1986, p. 35).

### **African American Miseducation as Educational *Malpractice***

It is reasonable to claim that the persistent miseducation of African American students should be conceived as a form of educational *malpractice*. Many teachers view African American students more negatively than other minorities due to the devaluation and denigration of "blackness" in the culture at large (Ladson-Billings & King, 1990). Many of African American students, and males especially, are the most feared, least likely to be identified with, and least likely to be effectively taught (Hare & Castenell, 1985). Expulsions and suspensions are used much more readily as discipline measures for African American students than other groups and this is true for elementary grade children as well.

Educational malpractice has been and continues to be perpetrated on African Americans by the fact that *the longer they stay in the system the worse they perform academically*. For Washington State, the results for the first WASL (Washington Assessment of Student Learning) test scores released in 1997, illustrate this dynamic. It was found that 73% of African American students could not meet the standard in reading; 95% could not meet the standard in mathematics, 69% could not meet the standard in writing; and, 55% could not meet the standard in listening. When the test was given the following year, these numbers showed a slight increase, according to OSPI (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction). Then 7<sup>th</sup> graders were added to the list of those assessed. Now, after having been in school seven years, results remained virtually unchanged for mathematics, but worsened for reading and writing: 82% of African American students could not meet the standard in reading; and 83% could not meet the standard in writing. Immediately the results were explained by many as a consequence of the new test, but further examination showed that for tests going back the last twenty years, the results had been the same: new name, same results.

The most recent WASL scores further illustrate this dynamic:

- Only 37.7% of 4<sup>th</sup> grade African American students statewide met the standard in Math for the 2004-05 school year, which is a moderate increase from 13.0% in 1997-98. Still, more than 63% do not meet the standard.

- At the 7<sup>th</sup> grade level, only 25.3% of African American students statewide met the standard in Math in 2004-05. This reflects an increase from 4.9% in 1997-98. Dismally, 74.7% (almost  $\frac{3}{4}$ ) did not meet the standard and must be able to pass the WASL as a 10<sup>th</sup> grader in 3 years in order to graduate. This is the lowest score of all groups.
- For 8<sup>th</sup> grade Science, only 14.0% of African American students met the standard in 2004-05, again the lowest of all groups. By the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Science will be part of the WASL and must be passed. With 86% not currently meeting the standard, the future is bleak for these students.
- For 10<sup>th</sup> graders in 2004-05, a little more than 50% (53.3) of African American students met the standard in Reading. Only 20.2% met the standard in Math and only 12.5% met the standard in Science.

For many African American students, educational malpractice is a chronic and debilitating *systemic* condition. As such, language is an especially convenient target, and excuse for educational malpractice. In most schools, teachers aren't sympathetic to the primary language used by many of our children and treat it (sometimes referred to as "Ebonics") as gibberish or just mistaken English. In some cases, teachers regard students who use such language as uneducable. This factor becomes an enormous obstacle to their learning to read to the extent that the dropout rates among many African Americans are so much higher than those among other groups. There is a disconnect between the academic language of our schools and the language of many African American children. I estimate that such numbers are in the range of the 30-40% of our K-12 population and often wonder how many African American students would fail the English proficiency test and qualify for Language Assistance programs? How many of these children could improve their performance with the removal of their language barrier (Perry & Delpit, 1998)?

### **Ending Educational Malpractice: Culturally Responsive Education**

In *I Won't Learn From You*, Herbert Kohl chronicles how many children have decided they are not going to learn from some teachers because of a lack of trust, respect and a meaningful relationship (Kohl, 1994). Culturally and linguistically diverse students can excel in academic endeavors when their culture, language, heritage, and experiences are valued and used to facilitate their learning and development, and when they are provided access to high quality culturally-competent teachers, programs, and resources (cf. Gay, 2000; Nieto, 1999). Why then is it not a policy decision to require culturally competent teachers for our schools? Valuing and rewarding the link between subject competence and cultural competence is the foundation to a culturally responsive education.

Schools that successfully make a positive difference in the lives and learning of culturally and linguistically diverse students do so by working closely with families and communities as valued, respected partners. There is minimal involvement and participation of African American parents in most of our schools, for a number of different reasons. Without such partnerships, schools struggle to provide a high caliber education for our children. We recognize that effective strategies for parent involvement differ from community to community due to cultural differences and behaviors. Parent Centers could be developed and focus on providing parents the information and training they need to be proactively involved in their children's academic success. Such Centers are vital in helping parents to develop effective strategies that welcome them and encourage them to: (a) stay informed, (b) get involved in their children's education, (c) raise pertinent questions, (d) voice their concerns appropriately, and, (e) learn how to access the system. All aspects of the African American community, particularly faith-based institutions, must be mobilized in order to meet this huge challenge.

We need a clear, concise and intentional plan of action by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Such an action plan must include goals and performance indicators to ensure that all African American students are grade-level proficient by 2014. In addition, it should include, but not be limited to, the following components:

- Parent Centers in our communities to help empower our parents and guardians to become stronger advocates for their children and better partners with their schools to provide an equitable education for our children. Special training for community advocates to help parents and other community members to better understand and utilize existing resources.
- Resources targeted specifically to the unique learning needs of African American children. As with other ethnic groups, there is no funding stream or targeted source of funds to meet the needs of this group, and we want the inequity to be corrected.
- Change policies and program directions that acknowledge the impact of the language spoken by many African American children on their academic achievement due to the lack of understanding by teachers and schools as to its origin and legitimacy. In other words, mode of speech does not make a child uneducable.
- Culturally relevant and inclusive curriculum and instruction for our children, including a factual depiction of the history and contributions of African Americans in this country and the world.
- More African American staff at all levels of the educational system, particularly teachers and counselors.

So far, things have been done in isolation. Mid-course corrections to standards-based reforms are needed to develop more productive systems of accountability for student learning. Standards & Assessments have been adopted by most states by now. High Stakes Testing has become the epitome of education reform without ensuring that the system has provided ample opportunity for all students to learn. The Certificate of Mastery that will soon be a requirement for graduation will result in an increase in dropouts if drastic changes are not made in the system. School Boards are the overlooked, untrained policy-makers who have terrific impact on public education, yet they don't figure into conversations on education reform. This group of elected officials maintains local control of our schools and must provide the needed leadership to reform public education. Eliminating the social injustices of our schooling system will require the support of policymakers, higher education, administrators, teachers, parents/families, and all others concerned about excellence and equity in our schools.

Leadership in education must undergo changes. We must be able to shift from Servant leadership to Transformational leadership, which is the capacity to translate intention into reality and sustain it. Leaders must be able to think, act, plan, set priorities, manage time, and make decisions effectively. They must possess all of the specific skills, attitudes, and habits that separate effective leaders from run-of-the-mill managers. Courage is needed. Change is not for the faint-hearted (Jackson, 2002).

## **In Summary**

Systemic transformation can provide the needed changes and must become integral to our system of education. Traditional school reform leaves the basic educational system intact while "tinkering" inside the box. "Tinkering" and add-on programs will not meet the demands of students, parents, communities, and businesses for fundamental change and significant improvement in schools. Systemic reform is a philosophy advocating reflecting, rethinking, and restructuring. It pervades

almost every aspect of schooling and calls for education to be reconceptualized from the ground up, beginning with the nature of teaching and learning, educational relationships, school structures and organizations, and school-community relations. First order changes are easy and cause little disruption. Second order change takes us to the level of beliefs, attitudes, and principles. Such changes cause us to truly consider what we do and how we do it. Being led by our shared beliefs and principles brings about more complex and sustainable levels of change, which are much more difficult. Many of these second order changes require difficult conversations that we are unwilling to tackle for the most part. Such conversations are uncomfortable, messy, political, sensitive, and challenge the status quo.

The public school system must be ready to own up to the fact that educational malpractice has been perpetrated upon many of the students who attend public schools. While many of the students themselves, along with their parents and communities, contribute to the deplorable condition of academic low achievement; our system of education contributes greatly to the crisis. We must join in partnership to remedy the situation that has developed. While we cannot change history, we can impact the present and design for a different outcome. All of our students must be fully equipped to be contributing citizens and global competitors. Our schools must rise to the challenge. It can best be summed up in the words of Ron Edmonds, “we can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far” (Edmonds, 1979, p. 21). Together, we can do this. Our hearts and souls must be dedicated to nothing less.

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