

Education

"THE EDUCATION CRISIS AND BLACK AMERICA"

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Black Americans face an enormous challenge. Education is the single most important factor in creating a better life for our people. Yet our education system is destroying the future of many young blacks. It is endangering the future of our race and threatening the economic standing of our country. Strong words. I know. But look at the facts.

In America today, about 23 million adults are functionally illiterate — reading below the fifth grade — and another 35 million read below the ninth grade level. Only 16 percent of 17-year-old black students perform at the "adept" reading level — the level needed for college work. For white students the number is 45 percent.

Nationwide, in the 1985-86 school year alone, almost 700,000 teenagers dropped out of school. Too many of them are black. This perpetuates the unemployment, family break-up, drugs and crime that already plague the lives of too many young black people. The system is so distressing that business spends an estimated \$200 billion educating many of its employees: almost as much money as our country spends on education.

The proportion of black students going on to college generally has not increased. In fact, it's been decreasing. According to the census

bureau, only 26 percent of black high school graduates in 1985 were enrolled in college. Down from 29 percent in 1971 and down even more from 33.5 percent in 1976. By contrast, the percentage of whites going on to college went up a fraction of a percent from 1976-to 1985, to one-third, where they were in 1976.

Five years ago the U.S. Department of Education published a study called "A Nation At Risk." It detailed the appalling, really miserable decline of our education system. The report said that system was sinking in a "rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people."

For many black Americans the picture is, if possible, even bleaker. They are the unlucky ones who aren't asked or expected to excel: who aren't held to high standards; who aren't taught the basics of good moral character and hard work; who aren't always given enough meaningful homework; who too often don't always get good teachers; and whose school principals and administrators often aren't held accountable for their poor performance. However, although there are many good teachers and principals in schools in disadvantaged areas, there are not nearly enough.

This is a crisis not only for

the black community—it affects the whole country and its future, for trends show that by 1995 minorities may comprise as much as 40 percent of our college-age population, but the majority of these young people will not be prepared to go on to college. Who will be the scientists, technicians and professions of tomorrow? Kids who can't read beyond the fifth grade? Who will teach the kids of the 21st century? Children of today who can't do much more than count numbers?

What a waste! It's not that we can't do well. In the last 20 years black people have become more and more part of the mainstream—in business, science, law, the arts and much more. Many blacks are succeeding. We can be proud of what we're accomplishing in our lives. We're living what is called the American dream.

And we're showing again and again how black and other minority children from the inner cities can do well if they're challenged and held up to high standards and expectations. The A. Philip Randolph Campus High School in Harlem and Garfield High School in the East Los Angeles barrio are only two of many outstanding inner city schools graduating students into bright futures.

The education crisis is very serious. But we can overcome it. We can and we must, for ourselves and our children. Despite other problems of ghetto life, such as family breakdown and drugs, the schools I have cited—and many others—have demonstrated that all children

can learn.

I know first-hand because we did overcome it at an elementary school in the South Bronx. When I took over as principal, it was a mess—students running through the halls, garbage piled up to your ankles in the cafeteria, nobody learning. But we turned that school around.

We recognized that no child is doomed to failure simply because he is born into poverty; that disadvantaged students learn best when they are offered clear standards of behavior, a rich and challenging curriculum, and vigorous teaching. And we recognized that stressing basics, measurable goals and homework do produce results.

Schools are doing far too little of these things. They're expecting failure and getting it.

What should be done? First, there is the role of parents. Parents are their children's most important teachers. I say this as a parent myself for 21 years — two boys — and an educator for 22 years. Moral values, respect for elders, self-confidence, commitment to learning, a desire to excel and be successful, all have to come from a child's home life. The example set by parents in the home builds the foundation for achievement in school and in life.

Parents also have to ensure that their children are in the best possible schools. They must not allow their children to be miseducated by incompetents. They have the responsibility to visit their children's schools, to

meet with the principal and teachers, and see if they offer strong leadership and commitment; to observe the physical and learning environments, to know the grade level in reading and math, and where their children's classes rank, to know how the school ranks in comparison with other schools, and more.

The school's teaching should stress moral character and be rich in content; students should learn substantive knowledge from a basic curriculum, and be held to high standards.

Sadly, many parents aren't involved in their children's education. Those less well off especially, tend to be intimidated by school officials, who often do little or nothing to encourage their interest. Educated blacks can help. Many poorer parents are dissatisfied with the schools but don't know what to do. With community workshops and other events organized by educated blacks, these parents can learn what makes a good school. How they can become active with the school board and PTA, and what actions they can take to improve the school.

Parental involvement is the best way to make schools accountable. Accountability is a critical principle stressed by Secretary of Education Bennett. We believe that to make schools better, there must be a closer connection between what goes in — mainly money — and what comes out in the form of the children's education. Until recently, for a long time the focus was on inputs — increasing government support — rather than outputs. But during this period our schools' performance dropped sharply even though, from 1949 to 1985, expenditures per pupil in constant dollars more than tripled.

So teachers, principals, superintendents, school boards, and public officials have to be held to account for the results: how well — or poorly — our children are educated. And the best way to make them accountable is for parents to have a choice in where to send their children to school. The idea is to apply competition to the education marketplace to free it from the grip of a bureaucratic monopoly. Schools

should have to compete by offering a good education.

A major example of the promise of choice—or open enrollment—is in District 4, in Spanish Harlem in New York. In 1972, the district ranked last of 32 districts in the city in reading and math. It then began a system where parents could choose any school in the district. By 1985, the district ranked 18th in reading and 22nd in math. Acceptances of its students into New York's prestigious, specialized high schools soared from 15 in 1973 to 356 in 1985. Now parents from other districts send their kids into District 4. And all this has happened as the number of low-income families in the district increased.


The nation's first state-wide public school choice or open enrollment plan will begin in Minnesota next year, under a law recently passed by the state legislature. By 1991, students can attend any public school — anywhere in the state. The only restriction is if the transfer would interfere with a court-ordered desegregation plan, or if the school is full. The state's funding, averaging \$3600, will follow each student to the school he attends.

Another feature of free choice in selecting schools is that principals and teachers gain more authority, and the authority of central school bureaucracies, which often stifle innovation, is reduced. Other ways to expand teacher authority are the main features of an important reform program in Rochester, New York. A master teacher plan and merit pay based on teacher performance are the basis for accountability; recognition of the best teachers is the mainstay of this program.

Parent power through free choice is the kind of open enrollment that ensures accountability of the system and achieves results. We see this as the most promising reform to win a better education for America's children. We're not the only country. In Great Britain, Prime Minister Thatcher's government is also pushing through far-reaching reforms.

Education has bettered the

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