

COMMENTARY

# Democracy, choice and development in education

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

As Congress takes up the \$269 billion appropriations bill for the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS) and Education this fall, the debate over the failure of America's educational system is becoming an arena for partisan conflict.

But, the debate also offers an opportunity for a broader national dialogue on educational policy and educational approaches.

Some of the national debate will be focused on the so-called Gorton Amendment. Sen. Slade Gorton (R-Wash) succeeded in adding an amendment to the HHS appropriations bill which would convert approximately \$12 billion in federal aid to elementary and secondary schools into two block grants to the states. One block grant, totaling about \$7 billion, would include the existing Title I program which provides remedial education for low-income students.

The second grant worth about \$5 billion, would be destined to cover a wide range of existing programs, including bilingual education, education technology, the Goals 2000 program to improve state standards, safe and drug-free schools, professional development, and half of the funding for vocational and adult education.

Many conservatives are hailing this amendment as a big cost-saver; by their estimates, states will save about 15 percent in the administrative

costs incurred in complying with federal regulations on the use of federal money. For many liberals, it is just such a devolution of power to the states that is the problem; what will keep the states from spending the money on tennis courts?

On the surface, the amendment is an attack on the bloated federal bureaucracy. But is this the best way to reduce the arrogance and wastefulness of federal government?

The overarching problem that the Gorton amendment purports to address—the failure of our education system—cannot be solved by merely taking a hatchet to the federal education budget, or entrusting these funds to the state governments. It cannot be solved by denying that federal involvement in education has secured important guarantees of equality and access, nor by insisting that the federal education bureaucracy and its powerful political allies—like the teachers unions—remain entrenched.

Unfortunately, the debate over the major educational policy questions of the day, such as over national testing, school vouchers, the role of the federal government and the role of the local community, has been polarized along partisan and hardened ideological lines, and the American people are left out of the debate.

## Michigan congressman fights for reparations

*By Linn Washington, Jr.  
Special to Sentinel-Voice*

Those who think that racism is no longer a problem for blacks in America "are either naive or they're charlatans," according to a long-time equal rights advocate.

Congressman John Conyers, D-Mich., has fought since 1989 for the establishment of a national commission to study the feasibility of paying reparations to blacks as a remedy for slavery and post-slavery segregation. Each year, the bill gets bottled up in committee.

President Clinton has established a commission to study racism in America, and some white members of Congress are advocating the issuance of an apology to Blacks for slavery.

Conyers said the new initiatives are steps in the right direction. But, standing alone, these well-meaning efforts will fall short of what is needed to really attack racism, he said.

"The president is honest enough to say we have a problem," he said. "There is a problem with racism in this country. Just look at the FBI hate crimes statistics which are on the rise.

Look at the burnings of Black churches," Conyers said during a recent telephone interview.

He curtailed praise for the new initiatives.

"You can't remedy racism without programs," he said. "Individuals are insulated by federal laws barring discrimination in areas like housing and education...but we still have the problem. We still have ghettos in every major city and many small cities, and we've had these for a long time.

"The conditions in these ghettos create crime and the need for welfare," he said. "We all end up paying for the problems created by these conditions."

Conyers condemned House Speaker Newt Gingrich for opposing the budding bipartisan effort to apologize for slavery. The Georgia republican supports an effort by congressional republicans to eliminate all federal affirmative action programs.

"The president has asked for a dialogue. He wants a lowering of voices on the race issue," Conyers said. "Newt Gingrich laughs at this. He is working night and day to

Our country must be free to explore the benefits of a more open and competitive education marketplace in which diverse approaches emanating from our communities—some traditional, some experimental, others vocationally oriented, still others specialty oriented—can have the chance to demonstrate their strength and vitality.

However, even these competitive approaches won't succeed unless we examine some of the premises of most educational approaches.

The dominant focus in education today is the same as it has been for 100 years—learning acquisition or "knowing" information about the world, about biology, or even contemporary topics like computer science. Information acquisition as an educational approach may have been effective in the past, but the world has changed dramatically in our lifetimes.

The industrial economy for which our educational system was designed no longer exists. In a highly

eliminate any programs to help heal the wounds of racism."

Contending the proposed apology will not solve problems, Gingrich called it "emotional symbolism." He said he would rather see efforts to improve education.

"They (republicans) say they want to help individuals and not groups," Conyers said. "They want to help individuals go to medical school, for example. But if you're discriminated against in a medical school admission, you need to get a lawyer. Gingrich and the Republicans make sure we underfund the federal agencies that provide lawyers to fight discrimination cases."

Conyers said the incarceration rate of blacks is one of slavery's residual effects. The National Criminal Justice Commission's 1996 report stated "racial discrimination...penalizes African Americans at almost every juncture in the criminal justice system."

The report cited racism in arrests, bail decisions, severity of charges, prosecutions, sentencing, rates of imprisonment and the imposition of the death penalty.

This Way  
For Black  
Empowerment

By Lenora Fulani



computerized and technologized society where information can be acquired, stored and transferred at the touch of a button, it makes no sense to have an educational approach based on acquiring information. Nor is it developmental to simply educate our children to press those buttons.

We must find a way to shift from an educational model based on knowledge acquisition to a new model based on development, that will not only equip our young people to compete in today's fast-changing post-industrial global economy, but will make America a visionary world leader in the field of education. We must attend to the social, human, creative, civic and intellectual development of our young people. The breakthroughs in technology

make this both necessary and possible. The failure of our school systems to develop our children and to teach them self-development skills is leaving them dangerously undereducated, unprepared and out of sync with the state of the world.

We are a nation of tremendous creativity, ingenuity and human development potential. But much of that is stifled by what has become a top-down, bureaucratized educational system and a top-down curriculum-oriented debate on how to improve it.

The crisis in our education system is not unlike the crisis in our political system. If our education system has floundered because it has become overly focused on the acquisition of information rather than on the development of our young people, our political system has floundered in no small part because the two parties are interested only in the acquisition of power, not the development of the country.

## Carl Rowan's Commentary

### America must combat violence against children

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

- An 11-year-old boy in New Jersey, who was selling candy door-to-door to raise money for his school, is sexually assaulted and murdered.
- A couple in Kentucky is accused of letting their children starve after taking out insurance policies on them.
- Prosecutors in Illinois have asked a grand jury to indict for murder a woman whose five babies all died before learning to walk—deaths she blamed on SIDS, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.
- A baby-sitter in Oregon is accused of murdering the child in his care.
- A man in Washington, D.C. who claims his girlfriend's baby died in a bathtub accident is accused of beating the infant to death.
- Residents of two nearby counties in Virginia still live in fear after three schoolgirls were abducted and murdered.
- Police arrest a teacher in suburban Maryland on charges that he was having sex with some of his pupils.



CARL ROWAN

None of these stories got anywhere near the publicity given to the murder of child beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey in Boulder, Colo., but they are all part of a terrible American plague of wanton assaults on children. These stories tell us that a child may face a terrible attack, a rape or death at home, at school, on the playground, in a daycare facility—well, just about anywhere.

I don't recall any generation before this when American young people were so imperiled by savage violence. So the question arises: What has happened in this society?

Some of the cases of child murders suggest that the pervasive use of illicit drugs is a big factor. Since there are now signs that we can never end the American curse of drug abuse, we probably will have to live—or die—with this consequence.

Sexual madness also seems to be a factor in a colossal amount of the abuse and murders of children. Why is this so commonplace now when it was relatively rare 60 years ago?

I have friends who say that this is the price we pay for making sex the prime ingredient in our movies, television shows and advertisements of almost everything from soap to sunglasses. They say that not just imbalanced "copycats" but everyone is adversely affected when we make sex and violence the entertainment commodities for which we spend billions of dollars annually.

I don't pretend to know all the other reasons why this society has become so flagrantly violent, especially against children. I do know that there isn't a community in America that has enough social services and people working to protect and rescue children from the worst dangers. We ought to do something about it.

SPEAK OUT!

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