

COMMENTARY

We must improve schools from the bottom up

Special to Sentinel-Voice

The Black community is one of the most loyal voting constituencies in the Democratic Party. Democrats get 80 percent to 90 percent of the Black vote in most elections. Or they have, until recently. Many Americans — black and white — are reevaluating their relationship to the two parties.

The Black community is coming to suspect that neither the Democrats nor the Republicans will put an end to racism and discrimination. Only the American people, only white and black coming together to recreate our country, will be able to do that.

For the moment, however, the majority of Black America votes Democratic. But now — and this is a very new development — a rather substantial rift is growing between ordinary Black folks and Black elected officials, 99.9 percent of whom are part of the Democratic Party.

Where do we see this rift? One of the most glaring places we see it is in the area of education. Here's what's happening.

The public school system in our inner cities is in a shambles. Kids aren't learning. The physical plant is deteriorating. The conditions are demoralizing for staff and student alike. The curriculum is old. The textbooks are old. The furniture is old.

Parents are profoundly concerned. Many have been fighting for years to improve the quality of education — first through integration, then through community control, then through multicultural curriculum. These approaches have achieved only limited progress.

In the midst of this set of circumstances, some new proposals and education movements have arisen. They include the charter schools movement and the voucher movement.

The first, charter schools, permits communities, parents and teachers to set up their own public schools, which receive the "per child" tax allotment that would otherwise have gone to their neighborhood public school. These charter schools are free to develop their own curriculum, their own teaching methods and their own systems of teacher accountability.

The voucher movement is a step in the direction of

*This Way
For Black
Empowerment*
By Dr. Lenora Fulani



privatization. Here parents receive a voucher — equivalent to the tax allotment that would be spent on their child in the public school system — and may use it to send their child to a private school.

The Democratic Party and most Black elected officials have vocally opposed these two measures.

Why? The answer is complicated.

The public school system in the inner cities has been a source of jobs for minority professionals, most of whom are politically linked to the Democratic Party. They don't want to introduce any measures that might impact on their jobs. That's understandable, but still a problem, since it puts them at odds with the educational needs of our children.

The same is true for the teachers' unions — who want to control the terms of public education to benefit their members first. They are a powerful political and financial force inside the Democratic Party.

But the parents of kids who are trapped in deteriorated and substandard inner city schools simply want to get their kids out of that situation and into a better one.

That's why between 70 percent and 80 percent of black and Hispanic parents — according to a recent poll — support voucher programs and want access to them. This week the *New York Times* reported a similar trend with respect to charter

schools.

Former Congressman Floyd Flake, a Black Democrat from New York who recently retired from Congress and who has always been something of a political maverick, wrote an editorial recently on the voucher issue.

He had just attended an education conference where vouchers were discussed and he reported that there was a virtual hailstorm of attacks on voucher programs from politicians and union bureaucrats, who charged that they were racist and discriminatory because they would undercut the public school system.

Flake, in this very strong editorial, implored the public — and the Black community — not to get caught up in some kind of notion of "political correctness" which simply covered over the basic fact that the public schools are in bad shape and the parents want more options for their kids.

The voucher and charter schools are spurring new coalitions between Black, Hispanic and white parents. They all want their kids to get a good education. They feel they are entitled to use their tax dollars to get it. And all are unhappy with the quality of their kids' education.

This is a new and significant turn in American politics. These kinds of bottom-up, anti-establishment, liberal and conservative coalitions are coming together more frequently. Take term limits, for instance. This was the issue that the professional politicians hated, but ordinary people made it happen from the bottom up.

I think the same will happen with the issues of vouchers and charter schools. Many people from diverse communities want to take on the professional politicians, the constraints of political correctness, and the corruption of policy making.

Part of that involves the Black community being willing to challenge Black elected officials with the following question: Are you loyal to us or the Democratic Party?

Lenora B. Fulani is a Reform Party activist and chairs the Committee for a Unified Independent Party. She can be reached at www.Fulani.org.

Short sabbatical leaves activist recharged, refueled, re-energized

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When I was young, three months seemed like a lifetime.

The three months of summer seemed to just float slowly by, allowing me to visit my

grandmother, play with my dolls and do all the reading I wanted to.

The three months before Christmas just dragged along.

But, now I remember my mother saying time moved faster as you got older and it wasn't that I didn't believe her, I just didn't understand what she meant. Now I do. Three months ago I left to go on sabbatical and it seems like, well, maybe three weeks. It was truly a time of rest, of unloading all the responsibilities, all the pain and all the frustrations of being on the front-line of the struggle for justice.

The entire first month I just rested my body and my mind, watching the birds at the bird feeder, listening to music and finding time to read whatever I wanted whenever I wanted to.

It was truly a time of personal healing, of time spent every day meditating and praying, of remembering close friends and colleagues who had passed away in 1997 and laying down the pain of their separation.

It was a time of attending to my own physical and psychological needs and spiritual nurturing. I took Tai chi chuan and felt the power of exercise and meditation together. I used several daily books of prayer and took time just to listen to God rather than always just talking to God.

It was a time of personal growth. For three or four years I had been thinking about making a

*Civil Rights
Journal*

By Bernice Powell Jackson



quilt commemorating the contributions of African-American women, even though I had never quilted a stitch before. I decided that this sabbatical

period would be a time when I would finally make such a quilt.

There's an old Chinese saying that when the pupil is ready, the teacher will come. When I mentioned my quilting project just a few days before my leave was to begin at a retreat at my local church, one of the women there came forward and said, "I want to help you."

She soon led me to a teacher and some of my sabbatical time was spent learning how to quilt. I found a new/old survival skill which our grandmothers must have known a hundred years ago. The process of using a needle and thread, of feeling the soft cotton next to your skin, the act of creating a useful and beautiful piece and the community developing by talking with other quilters is itself healing and nurturing.

My quilt is only partially completed, but I have a new skill and some new friends formed in my quilting class.

I also have a renewed sense of pride and inspiration found when I researched each of the 16 women in my quilt.

Each one is a woman who refused to color within the lines of the life that society had drawn for her as a black woman. So they became liberators, college presidents, millionaires, writers, politicians, pilots and preachers.

Each of them was or is a powerful woman
(See *Sabbatical*, Page 16)

Law to house young with adult offenders misguided

By Marian Wright Edelman
Special to Sentinel-Voice

A harsh Senate bill that would treat children as young as 14 like hardened adult criminals by tossing them in adult jails has a serious chance of becoming national law this year unless our community takes action.

Senate Bill 10 (S.10) threatens to wipe out more than two decades of progress in protecting children from adults in jail. The Children's Defense Fund's work in the early 1970s to expose the horrors faced by children locked in adult jails helped lead to passage of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Act, which guaranteed that children would be separated from adult prisoners.

Now politicians are poised to remove those safeguards. The House has already passed a companion bill to S.10, and election-year politics could put this misguided, mean-spirited law on a fast track.

Besides subjecting children as young as 14 to adult jails, the bill will treat nonviolent offenders, runaways and truants harshly by allowing them to be locked up for up to 14 days and held in adult jails for up to 24 hours.

Of all youths arrested, only one in 20 is arrested for a violent crime, yet the bill allows the juvenile justice system to be undermined based on a small fraction of cases. S.10 is based on fear, not facts. Most children are arrested for nonviolent offenses like vandalism and shoplifting.

"The current politically driven debate ignores not only the significant recent drops in crime, juvenile crime, and homicides, but ignores the lessons of the past decade on how to reduce crime," says CDF Assistant General Counsel Kim Wade.

There's clear evidence that S.10 poses a serious danger to our young people. Children

jailed with adults are eight times more likely to commit suicide, five times more likely to be sexually assaulted and twice as likely to be assaulted by prison staff.

This bill will make an already unfair system even tougher on Black children. Even though Black children represent only 15 percent of all children in the United States, they constitute more than half of all children transferred to adult courts. Even when prior records are similar, Black youths are more likely than White youths to be arrested, tried as adults, convicted, and imprisoned. This bill does nothing to address the higher rate of minority youth confinement.

It is particularly disturbing that S.10 also fails to break the deadly link between children and guns, although the availability of cheap guns lies at the root of the problem of youth violence. In 1995, 83 percent of murdered children over age 12 were killed with a gun.

S.10 would not spend a penny on programs that prevent crime. The city of Boston has lost only one child to gun violence since July 1995, a dramatic record made possible by church-led efforts to give children safe alternatives to the streets and to reduce children's access to guns.

We must give children opportunities to be nurtured and grow so they can become productive, law-abiding citizens ready to take their place in the world. New strategies are needed to address a violent crime problem that has left many neighborhoods unsafe and many young people in prison, injured or dead. But politicians shouldn't overlook proven preventive measures in favor of politically popular approaches that will surely make youth crime and violence worse.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.