

COMMENTARY

Parents, role models key to reclaiming our sons

Special to Sentinel-Voice

There's something deeply wrong in America. Hate and anger and pain and alienation so deep that our sons are killing other children. Our sons are killing themselves.

Our sons are killing their parents. Our sons are burning down our churches and burning crosses on people's yards and killing and beating up gay and lesbian people and people of color. Our sons are joining white supremacist groups and satanic cults and gangs. We are losing our sons to the violence, to the hate, to the streets. And we don't seem to have the will to do anything about it.

It doesn't matter whether you are European American and in suburban Littleton, CO or rural Pearl, MS or African American or Latino in South Central LA or Asian in New York City or native American and on a reservation. There is no place to hide, no place to run. There are no guarantees or protections.

There is no easy answer, no quick fix. One community cannot do it alone. Pastors cannot do it alone. Teachers cannot do it alone. Parents cannot do it alone. Police cannot do it alone. But we all can and must put aside the differences of race, of language, of religion, of

geographical location, of economic situations. We must reclaim our sons.

First, we've got to get rid of the guns. Our communities are full of guns. Handguns, shotguns, assault weapons, rifles. Guns which our children get from legal and illegal gun dealers. Guns which our children get from each other. Guns which our children get from our bedrooms and basements.

I'll never forget the picture of the mother of one of the victims of the Paducah, KY school killings confronting those gun enthusiasts on the statehouse steps and challenging them to stop the killings instead of protecting the guns.

We've got to make our politicians understand that we will no longer allow our children to be a market for assault weapons, for handguns and guns without trigger locks.

And until we do so, they will continue to take the money from the gun lobbies and our children will continue to die. Some big city mayors are realizing the truth, but until more of our politicians join forces with the mothers and fathers who have lost children, nothing will change.

We've got to get rid of the violence on television and in the movies and in the music

Civil Rights Journal

By Bernice Powell Jackson



and in the video games.

Until the movie and record and video industries understand that we will no longer give our children money to buy the records and see the movies and play the video games which teach them violence, nothing will change.

It won't be easy because our children are violence addicts and they will have to go through withdrawal symptoms that all addicts experience.

We've got to get rid of the violence in our homes. Too many of our sons experience violence every day at home. They are victims themselves or watch their mothers being beaten.

Too many children do not feel safe even at home. And too many children are neglected in their homes. They are left to fend for themselves by parents who are too addicted, or by parents who are too caught up in their own worlds and their own

lives.

We've got to make sure our sons know there is a Supreme power, a Creator and that they can choose to be an agent for good or for evil in this world. Too many of our sons don't know the mystery of God and don't respect their Creator or themselves.

We've got to find positive alternatives and caring adults for our sons. The young men in Littleton were part of a clique or gang called the Trenchcoat Mafia. The young men in our cities are part of the Bloods or Crips or Latin Kings or some other gang.

We know why our sons join gangs for approbation, for a sense of community, for peer group approval, for love. If every son in America had a positive male role model who they knew by name, who they saw every week, who showed them love and hope and a different way, how many of them would continue to

choose the path of hate and anger? Every man in America must stop waiting for someone else to do something about it and do it yourself.

We've got to name the pain and fear that so many of our sons are experiencing. It's the pain and the fear that causes more and more young white men to join white supremacist groups and satanic cults.

Fear that someone who is black or Asian or gay is taking something away from them. In 1998, according to the National Coalition for Burned Churches, there were 130 fires set in churches in this nation. Most were in European American churches, but 41 were in churches of color. Most of these fires were set by young men, mostly European American young men.

Pain and fear so deep that these young men would set fire to a house of God.

We've got to name the pain and stop pretending that these are just drunken teenage pranksters if we want the fires to stop.

Pain and fear so deep that more and more of our sons are committing suicide. Sons who think they are gay and face the scorn of their families or their peers.

Sons who come from middle-class African

American families and who are overwhelmed at the racism and fearful that they cannot compete. European American and African American and Asian American and native American sons who may on the outside seem to be doing fine, but who turn the pain inward and on themselves.

Pain and fear so deep that sons in the inner city see gangs as their only way of getting respect out of a world which has turned its back on them and written them off as expendable. So they turn to the gangs for approval, for survival, for jobs.

They turn to the gangs because they are shown no other way. And they kill each other and innocent babies and children.

And they spend their whole lifetime incarcerated, graduating into prison gangs. Generations of African American and Latino men lost to the prison system.

Generations of anger and fear leading to an unbroken cycle of violence.

We've got to decide as a nation that investment in young men is more important than incarceration of them. We've got to put our dollars where our mouths are.

There is something wrong in America and only we can do something about it.

Black leaders should consider backing school vouchers

Earl Ofari Hutchinson

Special to Sentinel-Voice

The instant it appeared that Florida Governor Jeb Bush would succeed in pushing a school voucher program through the state legislature this term, the NAACP announced that it would file suit to stop it.

The civil rights organization repeated the standard arguments that vouchers are a scheme by conservatives to obliterate public education, will leave the poorest of poor students behind in even poorer and more racially isolated schools and will perpetuate the cycle of educational neglect.

Yet in a national survey the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a Black Washington D.C. think tank, found that a majority of Black parents want vouchers. And a near whopping 90 percent of Blacks, aged 26 to 35, who are most likely to have children attending public schools, want them the

most.

The gaping gulf among Blacks on education is yet another example of how mainstream African-American leaders often march to a far different tune than poor and working class Blacks. These leaders are mostly liberal, middle-class professionals. Their kids are safely nestled in private schools and escape the ravages of bad public schools. Poor and working class Blacks have no such luxury.

So, in 1990 when the mostly Black Milwaukee public schools became the first school district in the nation to authorize vouchers for private schools, the stampede by Black parents to grab the money and dash their children into private or parochial schools was so great that officials had to have a lottery to decide who received a voucher.

To the shock of Black leaders many activists, instead of denouncing

vouchers as a right-wing threat to public schools denounced them for opposing vouchers.

The activists saw vouchers as a weapon against an insensitive, stagnant, often racist educational bureaucracy that systematically victimizes Black children, and as a steppingstone toward community empowerment.

The pro-voucher sentiment among many African Americans is so strong that several Black Congressional Democrats have broken ranks with the NAACP, Urban League and their own Congressional Black Caucus to publicly support the Republican-backed national school voucher program.

But, Black parents don't snatch at vouchers because of the racially and politically stacked agendas of politicians and Black militants. They do so because they are fed up with decaying, crime-ridden schools, terrible teachers, and

indifferent administrators.

They are desperate to put their children into schools that teach them how to read, write, spell, add and subtract. They want their sons and daughters to have a decent chance at a career and not become prison fodder or candidates for early graves. The only thing they ask is whether vouchers will improve their children's education.

That answer is still pretty fuzzy. Conservatives and Black leaders trot out a handful of studies and experts to prove that vouchers are a smashing success or abject failure. But neither side has mustered a convincing case for or against them.

This is because voucher programs are still not widespread enough in school districts nationally, and there aren't enough children in the programs that do exist to tell whether they work or not.

Even in Milwaukee, limited funds, accessibility and classroom space enable

only a tiny percentage of the school district's low-income students to use vouchers to attend private schools. The best that the voucher combatants can do is fall back on such anecdotal homilies as "the parents love them" or "the schools are getting better."

Even the doomsday predictions that vouchers bankrupt public schools, and further squash achievement standards have so far been false fears. Milwaukee public schools actually got a spending boost this year and reading scores increased. Ironically that improvement almost certainly can be traced to the pressure, competition, and the attention from the voucher controversy that forced teachers and administrators to do a better job in the classroom.

While the arguments of Black leaders against vouchers seem sound on paper, many parents will ignore them until public

schools perform better. This means they must have more funds, better texts, equipment, teacher training programs, huge increases in cultural diversity programs, an expansion of charter and magnet schools, far greater parental involvement in decision-making on curriculum, texts, and staffing.

And most importantly, local school districts must institute an equitable system that permits them to get rid of bad teachers and administrators.

It also means that many Black leaders must face the hard fact that as long as many inner-city public schools disgracefully under perform, Black parents must have the right to pick and choose the schools that offer the best deal in education for their children. And for now that choice for many means vouchers.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black."