

High school dropouts: Silent epidemic

By George Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

If you listen carefully, you still can't hear it. It's the sound of a third of high school students dropping out before receiving their diploma. For people of color, the figure is almost 50 percent, and that has profound implications not only for the students, but for the society that failed them.

"The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts" is an important report on the dropout problem told from the viewpoints of true experts — the students themselves. The study, which focuses on polling and focus groups, is a joint project by the Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

In 2003, about 3.5 million youth 16 to 25 did not have a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school.

The report begins with "An Open Letter to the American People" that gets directly to the point:

"There is a high school dropout epidemic in America. Each year, almost one-third of all public high school students — and nearly one half of all Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans — fail to graduate from public high school with their class. Many of these students abandon school with less than two years to complete their high school education."

And society has plenty of reasons to care.

"The decision to drop out is a dangerous one for the student," the report continued. "Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced and single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves."

The report on this silent epidemic allows us to listen to what those who quit say about their predicament.

"The central message of this report is that while some students drop out because of significant academic challenges, most dropouts are students who could have, and believe they could have, succeeded in school," the study said.

"This survey of young people who left high school without graduating suggests that, despite career aspirations that require education beyond high school and a majority having grades of C or better, circumstances in students' lives and an inadequate response to those circumstances from the schools led to dropping out."

We tend to think of high school dropouts as being incapable of handling the academic workload and there is some evidence that supports that view. For example, 35 percent of those polled said "failing in school" was a



GEORGE E. CURRY

major factor in the decision to drop out. And 32 percent had repeated a grade before dropping out.

Nearly half of the former students — 47 percent — quit not because of the academic challenge, but because they found classes uninteresting.

"These young people reported being bored and disengaged from high school," the report said. "Almost as many (42 percent) spent time with people who were not interested in school. These were among the top reasons selected by those with high GPAs and by those who said they were motivated to work hard."

An even larger number of students — 69 percent — said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard. In fact, two-thirds said they would have worked harder had it been required of them.

Naturally, there were other real life factors that caused some students to drop out. Approximately a third said they had to get a job and make more money, 26 percent said they became a parent, and 22 percent said they had to care for a family member. It became clear that the decision to quit school was not a spur of the moment choice. Rather, it was a culmination of growing disengagement and frequent absences from classes.

There was also a significant number of stu-

dents who fell behind in the early years and never felt they caught up — or could catch up — with their classmates.

Among the recommendations made in the report:

- Provide a more supportive academic environment at school and at home that would improve the student's chances of remaining in school.
- Improve the teaching and curricular to make school more relevant and engaging.
- Offering tutoring and summer school for struggling students.
- Operate a more disciplined classroom.
- Make sure that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school.
- Improve communication between parents and schools.

And parents need to improve their communication with their children.

"The majority of parents were 'not aware' or just 'somewhat aware' of their child's grades or that they were about to leave school," the report said.

"Nearly half of the respondents said their parents' work schedules kept them from knowing more about what was happening at school and 68 percent said their parents got more involved when they became aware their child was on the verge of dropping out."

Clearly, we all need to be more involved.

George E. Curry is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service.

Hollywood traffics in negative Black stereotypes

By Ron Walters
Special to Sentinel-Voice

I know, some will think I'm shoveling some of that outdated Black pride, race integrity stuff when I note that Black people have given in to the Hollywood racism factory.

Think back: Frederick Douglass took his freedom from his slave master, and Sojourner Truth asked, "Ain't I a Woman." Malcolm X, too, posited freedom "by any means necessary," and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. declared, "We shall overcome."

Hollywood has been a different story. That's why I was proud of Sidney Poitier, Will Smith and Denzel Washington who reportedly went to Terrence Howard to ask him not to get on stage at the Academy Awards singing about a pimp, his hit song from the movie, "Hustle and Flow."

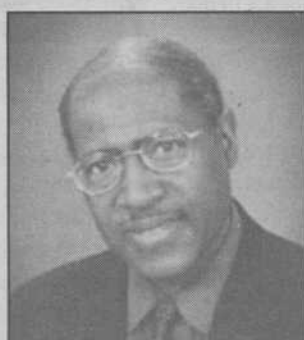
They invoked the long struggle in Hollywood and New York, all too often missing now, to instill a sense of integrity to the image of Black people into cultural presentations in the arts.

When this issue was raised before, the

comeback from Black actors has been that so few roles are available that they have to take them and make the best of a bad situation. And there has been an attempt to rehabilitate the traitor in the actor (see the new book on Lincoln Perry who played the role of "Step and Fetchit," for example) to make him a closet revolutionary. Really?

There are still apologists for actors who take racially demeaning roles. The other day, watching the documentary produced by Harvard Professor Skip Gates on racism in Hollywood was a revelation. When he interviewed Samuel Jackson, the Black actor seemed agitated by the fact that the NAACP often raised the issue of racism in Hollywood by criticizing the paucity of roles and the demeaning nature of the roles offered to Black actors.

Jackson's thing was that this is the structure of the movie industry and that the NAACP should "just leave us alone and let



RON WALTERS

us do our thing." Jackson, now part of the star system that promoted him to an action hero, is able to say that because he has a wide selection of roles. But what if we took that position all along and adjusted to racism.

Yet, the Gates documentary was also fascinating in portraying how race was configured in Hollywood, by in-

terviewing a producer who talked about the formula used to construct roles. In it, Black actors accounted for little unless they were the Denzel Washington's or Sam Jackson's of the world, actors that can command a foreign audience, a key factor in determining the box office gross. The formula is really tilted toward the supremacy of White males, who get all the women under all circumstances — Black males make tentative sexual partners, often appear alone, distorting the image of Black male-female relationships.

The bottom line here is that since the positioning of racial images is about money,

Hollywood thinks it must play to the racial stereotypes, making it the most powerful purveyor of global racism that exists.

Hollywood educates and reinforces the demeaning racial roles (images that are in the heads of both Americans and foreigners), through the economic power to commercialize these negative images through the distribution network of movies and advertising outlets. We should put more of a spotlight on the producers and financiers of these movies who keep alive the negative images of Black people before the world.

But that is hard to do if Black people themselves buy into the system. I think there is a sickness, a manifestation of the destruction of our image during slavery that makes Black actors accept the roles in the first place and, then, for everyone else to justify it afterward.

The sad thing is that they are probably right: If one Black actor refused a demeaning role, another Black actor, hungry to make it under any circumstances, would take it. The actors are not all to blame because a dependable segment of the cash that producers and

(See Walters, Page 12)

LaGrande

(Continued from Page 10)

just to turn around and bring in another we only provide a temporary solution. The only way to address corruption is not to change the individuals, but to change the system. Change the system in such a way that when you take away the politicians' power, you thereby take away the very currency of corruption.

Continuously, revamping campaign finance reform is not the answer because the campaign finance laws place restrictions on individuals, not politicians. Politicians will continue to tax and spend, punishing some

productive constituents while rewarding others with special favors.

There will always be a new cadre or it will be the same vested special interests groups that will never go away, and the same influence peddling will happen in every large and small municipality.

Part of the reason for this unethical behavior, I believe, is simple: When the government redistributes millions and trillions of dollars from some people to others, countless special interests will fight for the money. The rise in corruption simply mirrors the rise in local municipality and federal spending

thereby bringing you to the conclusion that the fundamental problem is not with campaigns or politicians primarily, but rather with the amount of money flowing through and around governmental agencies today. This is in addition to the fact that being an elected official provides you access to people and resources you can't access as a normal everyday Joe.

Money needs to be banned and taken out of government if we're ever to get back to a society where politicians are truly elected for the people, by the people, to serve the people.

It's time out for these scandalous, untouch-

able, bigger than life elected officials. It is apparent that as long as there are big money interests or the potential for elected officials to acquire wealth using their elected positions, we can't expect ethical behavior from the people we elect.

But at the very least we could scrutinize the candidates before they're elected to see if they've ever been involved with big money interests and to see if they have demonstrated good ethical conduct. This, in addition to coming up with another way to alleviate some of the power they possess, might be a good start.