

Education Week

June 4, 2008

Commentary

## **It's About the Schools**

### **An Emerging Consensus on the Black-White Achievement Gap**

By Michael Holzman

It's about schools.

For most children in this country, achievement in school, and therefore the quality and the sheer length of life that they and their children will have, can be predicted from their race, language spoken at home, and family income. Almost everywhere, this means that African-American children—those who are or are perceived to be the descendants of American slaves—will not be taught as much or as well as white, non-Hispanic children. In a few areas, this unenviable distinction is held by Hispanic children who speak Spanish at home. In two or three places, this lowest rung of the educational and economic ladder is occupied by American Indians. But in most places, when we look at "the achievement gap," we are looking at the gap between African-American children, particularly African-American males, and children who are non-Hispanic whites or Asian-Americans. And in most of those places, it remains stubbornly large.

And yet, interest in the failure of educational institutions to meet their responsibilities, particularly in regard to black students, seems to be ebbing. The hatred that dare not speak its name—racism—is advancing under the guise of—of all things—equity. The perverse twisting of the intent of civil rights law in regard to college and law school admissions, now extending to any program that might alleviate the disadvantages of African-Americans, has had a chilling effect on schools, postsecondary education, government, and foundations. And so we hear less about the failure of the schools in regard to black students, and more about "disadvantaged groups," "people of color," and so forth: all expressions that take the focus away from those who have, for 400 years, been specifically selected for disadvantage.

More than half—53 percent—of African-American males did not receive diplomas with their cohort in the 2005-06 school year, according to estimates in a forthcoming Schott Foundation report on black male students and public education. The million black male students enrolled in the New York state, Florida, and Georgia public schools are twice as likely not to graduate with their classes as to do so. Nevada and Florida graduate fewer than a third of their black male students on schedule. Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana,

Michigan, South Carolina, and Wisconsin graduate fewer African-American males with their peers than the national average. This is particularly troubling in the case of New York state, with its higher-than-average graduation rate for white male students. Illinois and Wisconsin also have gaps of around the 40-point level between how "efficiently" they educate their black and white male students.

Why is this?

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Researchers seem to be moving away from the "acting white" urban legend, and other ways in which responsible public institutions can be seen as not responsible for their actions, to a consensus about differences in school quality. A few years ago, Robert Balfanz and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University pointed to high school "dropout factories" as the locus of the problem. This year, a study sponsored by America's Promise Alliance and prepared by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center found that many urban districts have results less desirable than those of neighboring suburban districts. Russell W. Rumberger, an education professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has shown that schools attended by children whose families are in the top quartile of incomes have very good results for children who are poorer. And most recently, Harvard University doctoral student Lindsay C. Page has shown that the achievement gap between black and white students can, for the most part, be attributed to school quality.

My own studies have shown that African-American male students do much better in schools where most of the students are white non-Hispanics, and that white, non-Hispanic students and Asian students do poorly in schools where most of the students are African-American. It also appears that a much higher proportion of white non-Hispanic and Asian-American students in each state are enrolled in the schools with the best graduation rates than are black, Hispanic, and American Indian students.

The tragically few American Indian students in the public schools are the major group condemned to the worst schools in two or three states. Hispanics occupy that position in four or five states. Elsewhere, that is, in most states, the stratification of school quality works to minimize educational opportunities specifically for black students. Indeed, the argument could be made that the stratification of school quality exists in order to minimize educational opportunities for black students. Others (with the exception of American Indians in two or three states) are collateral damage.

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If black students did poorly in all schools, we would plausibly seek solutions to the problem of their achievement among those students themselves. The same would be the case if, in schools with majority-black enrollments, black students did poorly and the other students did well. But in the real world, black students in good schools—those in

the upper quartile—do well, and white, non-Hispanic students, in schools where most of the students are black and graduation rates are low, do poorly.

It's about schools.

The difference between the top quarter of schools in a given state and the bottom quarter is not difficult to discern or surprising. Good schools are fully resourced—talented, caring teachers; well-trained and numerous support-staff members; protective and supportive administrators—and poor schools are not. Good schools have challenging curricula, high expectations for all students, an expectation of success. Poor schools do not. No prizes for the correct answer on this quiz.

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The issue is about how it happens that there are schools that are not fully resourced; why there are schools that do not have challenging curricula and high expectations for all students. The issue is about how it happens that most black students are in those poor schools. And why, knowing that there are these dropout factories in their districts, boards of education and school administrators do not replicate the characteristics of the good schools in those serving their least-advantaged students.

There are, in fact, districts that do exactly that. The Montgomery County, Md., school system is, in that tired phrase, a national model for rational, data-driven efforts to improve educational outcomes for those children whose education is, elsewhere, not a high priority. Analyzing results, identifying success at every level, from the individual pupil-teacher interaction to districtwide curricular initiatives, Montgomery County administrators and teachers are ensuring that the nationally common resource stratification either does not occur there or is reversed. In Montgomery County schools, the achievement gap between black and white students is closing. (See ["When 'Unequal' Is Fair Treatment,"](#) Feb. 20, 2008.)

There is a cost to refusing to follow the path set out by districts that will not accept a resource allocation that reverses rational priorities. The cost has been calculated by Teachers College's Henry M. Levin and others. It runs to hundreds of thousands of dollars for each student we fail to educate. It is, in a way, the price of a luxury, the luxury of racism. And that is a luxury we may wish, finally, to forgo

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