

The Nation.

School Colors

The Racial Politics of Public Education



WWW.THENATION.COM



RECEIVED
HARVARD UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
60069AHGUT92 34451525 TM
MAY 22 2000
GUTMAN LIBRARY
6 APPAN L MAY 22 2000
CAMBRIDGE MA 02138-3704
USPA #0072
EDNOV2700

ISSUE

Caucasians. Also, you gotta be careful that you do not lose the upper-class African-American population. What you've really got to do is project that you want to elevate the standards for all. I think people understand that. I hope they do."

James Gaither, who has three children in the public system, sees the participation of children from all racial and ethnic backgrounds as essential to the tutorial program's success, even though it was initially conceived as a response to low black scores. "I think we will lose a lot of support if we say we are targeting a specific ethnic group," he says.

Educator, activist, father and Montclair native son Kabir Baber does his own share of bringing children together, but he also credits Superintendent Osnato for uniting parties interested in tackling the gap. Baber, 47, will help with the new program's parent outreach, but also runs a highly regarded mentoring and tutoring program called Project Success (initially targeted at black children but now open to all). He says that while the inequities

of education are formidable, this town has the best chances of remedying them. "If you can't do it in Montclair," Baber says, "you won't be able to do it anywhere." Even though the population is diverse, they're "hungry and eager to make sure all children learn," he explains. Indeed, middle-class black parents aren't the only ones involved in the effort to improve the schools—it's just that the recent data have provided a new, focused call to arms. "So that's why I don't have a problem sitting at the table with Dr. Osnato or anybody else," Baber says, "they all want to level the playing field."

The playing field has proven itself to be a minefield, but still one that many Montclair parents enthusiastically traverse. "We know it's not that our kids aren't smart," says Evelyn Gay. "We have kids come out of our schools who go to the best schools in the nation, and they may not be the children of parents with economic means or educational backgrounds. So there's got to be a way to address this." ■

CAUSES OF THE RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP ALL DERIVE FROM UNEQUAL TREATMENT.

Disparities Demystified

PEDRO A. NOGUERA AND ANTWI AKOM

Once again national attention is focused on the racial gap in academic achievement, thanks in part to the high-stakes tests now in vogue across the nation. The appearance of this racial gap is by no means a new development. For years, African-American, Latino and Native American students have lagged far behind their white and Asian peers on most standardized tests. The gap is also present in graduation and dropout rates, grades and most other measures of student performance. The consistency of such patterns in almost every school and district in the country has the effect of reinforcing well-established assumptions regarding the relationship between race, academic ability and intelligence.

More often than not, explanations for the achievement gap focus on deficiencies among parents and students. Dysfunctional families, lazy and unmotivated students, and the "culture of poverty" in inner-city neighborhoods are all frequently cited as causes of the gap. Left overlooked and unaddressed are the conditions under which children are educated and the quality of schools they attend. Since popular explanations often determine the types of remedies that are pursued, it is not surprising that the renewed attention directed toward the racial gap in academic achievement has not led to calls to address the real problem: inequality in education.

Pedro A. Noguera is a professor in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. Antwi Akom is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Both have been active in educational reform work in the San Francisco Bay Area.



CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

First, it's important to recognize that achievement test results reflect more than just racial disparities. An analysis of test scores also reveals a close correspondence between the scores children obtain and broader patterns of social inequality. With few exceptions, children of the affluent outperform children of the poor. Explaining why poor children of color perform comparatively less well in school is relatively easy: Consistently, such children are educated in schools that are woefully inadequate on most measures of quality and funding. This is particularly true in economically depressed urban areas, where bad schools are just one of many obstacles with which poor people must contend. Parents often perceive inner-city public schools as hopeless and unresponsive to their needs, prompting those who can to opt for private schools. Many have also actively sought alternatives through vouchers and various privatization schemes.

Yet what makes the racial gap uniquely paradoxical is the fact that the benefits typically associated with middle-class status don't accrue to African-American and, in many cases, Latino students. In many school districts, children of color from middle-class, college-educated families lag significantly behind white students in most achievement measures. The performance of these relatively privileged students has brought renewed attention to the relationship between race and educational performance. This is the issue that has prompted fifteen racially integrated, affluent school districts [including Montclair, New Jersey, whose experience Lise Funderburg describes on page 26] to form a consortium called the Minority Student Achievement Network.

The Nation.

Teachers and Professors!

Bringing national and global events to life in the classroom isn't easy. Textbooks are out of date. Mainstream periodicals supply only the conventional wisdom.

So how can you interest your students in current events and get them debating the topics of the day?

Use *The Nation* in your classroom.

Your students will read provocative, award-winning articles covering the latest in politics and the arts, and they'll be exposed to the kind of alternative news and opinion that will get them talking.

For more information, write:
Classroom Program, The Nation,
33 Irving Place,
New York, NY 10003
or call
Peggy Randall at
(212) 209-5428
grandall@thenation.com

Our Classroom Education Program offers semester-length bulk subscriptions at special student rates to help you use *The Nation* with your class.



It's important for you. And important for us that you consider making *The Nation* part of your legacy. By making a provision for *The Nation* now, you help ensure that both the principles we stand for, and the forum in which we fight for them, will be around for generations to come. Your legacy can take the form of a will, a trust, or various other means. It can go to *The Nation* or to *The Nation Institute*, a tax exempt charitable organization. And of course it can be - and will be appreciated - in whatever amount you can make it, large or small. It's spelled out in what we call our Legacy Group brochure. If you're at an estate-planning point in your life, or feel you'd like to know more about your options in general, call us for a copy.

THE NATION LEGACY GROUP

(212) 209-5428

The Nation, 33 IRVING PLACE, NEW YORK, NY 10003-2332

With the support of researchers assembled by the College Board, the network, comprising districts in such communities as White Plains, New York, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Berkeley, California, seeks to understand the causes of the racial achievement gap and to devise solutions for reversing it.

On the face of it, the potential for success in reducing the gap in these districts would seem high. All fifteen school districts in the network have a track record of sending large numbers of affluent white students to the best colleges and universities in the country. Additionally, unlike schools in high-poverty areas, funding is largely not a major obstacle to reform. Each district is located in an affluent community with a highly educated population known for its commitment to liberal political and social values. Yet in all fifteen districts there is a persistent, deeply ingrained sense that even this ambitious and well-intentioned effort will fail to alter student outcomes.

The pessimism in these districts, and in others that have launched efforts to overcome the racial achievement gap, must be understood in historical context. In many areas greater emphasis has been placed on how to achieve racial integration in schools than on how to serve the educational needs of a diverse student population. Even in the liberal districts in the *Minority Student Achievement Network*, some of which were among the first in the nation to voluntarily desegregate, the arrival of significant numbers of students of color in the late sixties and early seventies met with considerable opposition. From the very beginning, the presence of African-American children, especially those from low-income families, was perceived as an intrusion, and because the children were perceived as disadvantaged and deficient in comparison with their white schoolmates, educating them has always been regarded as a challenge. Since students of color were framed as "problems" and "challenges" from the very start, it is hardly surprising that they would continue to be treated as a problem requiring special intervention years later.

Moreover, educational practices often have the effect of favoring white students and hindering the educational opportunities of African-Americans and Latinos. This is particularly true when it comes to tracking and sorting students on the basis of ability. A large body of research has shown that students of color are more likely to be excluded from classes for those deemed gifted in primary school, and from honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school. The Education Trust has shown, through its research on science and math education, that even students of color who meet the criteria for access to advanced courses are more likely to be turned away based on the recommendation of a counselor or teacher. They are also more likely to be placed in remedial and special-education classes, and to be subject to varying forms of school discipline.

A close examination of access to AP courses in California reveals how certain educational practices contribute to the maintenance of the racial achievement gap. Since the mid-eighties, the number of AP courses available to students at high schools in California has tripled. This increase has been attributed to a 1984 decision by the University of California to give greater weight to the grades earned by students who enroll in AP courses. However, AP courses are not uniformly available to students. At some inner-city and rural schools, few if any such courses are offered, while at private and affluent suburban schools,

it is not uncommon for students to have access to fifteen or more AP courses [see Alan Jenkins, "Leveling the Playing Field," March 6]. Moreover, our own research at Berkeley High School has shown that even when minority students are enrolled at schools that do offer a large number of AP courses, they are more likely to be actively discouraged from taking them by teachers and counselors.

Beyond the policies and practices that contribute to the achievement gap, a number of complex cultural factors are also important. Missing from the research and policy debates is an understanding of the ways in which children come to perceive the relationship between their racial identity and what they believe they can do academically. For many children, schools play an important role in shaping their racial identities because they are one of the few social settings where kids interact with people from different backgrounds. To the extent that a school's sorting processes disproportionately relegate black and brown children to spaces within schools that are perceived as negative and marginal, it is likely that children of color will come to perceive certain activities and courses as either suitable or off-limits for them.

In schools where few minority students are enrolled in AP courses, even students who meet the criteria for enrollment may refuse to take such courses out of concern that they will become isolated from their peers. The same is true for the school band, newspaper, debating team or honor society. When these activities are seen as the domain of white students, nonwhite students are less likely to join. Peer groups play a large role in determining the academic orientation of students, not to mention their style of clothes, manner of speech and future career aspirations. For middle-class African-American and Latino students, this means that despite receiving encouragement from their parents to do well in school, the peer group with whom they identify may push them in a different direction.

There are also cultural factors related to the attitudes and behaviors of students and the childrearing practices of parents that influence student performance. Several studies, for example, have indicated that middle-class African-American and Latino students spend less time on homework and study in less effective ways than middle-class white and Asian students. Also, despite the visibility of African-American students in sports such as football and basketball, research shows that these students are less likely to be involved in other extracurricular activities (which are shown to positively influence achievement), and in their responses to surveys they are more likely to emphasize the importance of being popular among friends than doing well in school.

Finally, images rooted in racial stereotypes that permeate American society limit the aspirations of African-American and Latino students. Despite the daunting odds of success in professional sports and entertainment, many young people of color believe they have a greater chance of becoming a highly paid athlete or hip-hop artist than an engineer, doctor or software programmer. And with the rollback of affirmative action at colleges and universities, there is little doubt that students who possess

entertainment value to universities, who can slam-dunk or score touchdowns, will be admitted regardless of their academic performance, even as aspiring doctors and lawyers are turned away.

When placed within the broader context of race relations in American society, the causes of the racial achievement gap appear less complex and mysterious; the gap is merely another reflection of the disparities in experience and life chances for individuals from different racial groups. In fact, given the history of racism in the United States and the ongoing reality of racial discrimination, it would be more surprising if an achievement gap did not exist. If the children of those who are most likely to be incarcerated, denied housing and employment, passed over for promotions or harassed by the police did just as well in school as those whose lives are largely free of such encumbrances, that would truly be remarkable news.

Given the history of racism in the United States, it would actually be more surprising if a racial achievement gap did not exist.

Lest recognition of the racial achievement gap drive us into greater despair about the prospects for eliminating racial inequality in America, we must also recognize that to the extent change is possible, it is more likely to occur in education than in any other sector. This is because despite its faults, public education remains the most democratic and accessible institution in the country. In fact, in the post-welfare reform period, it is virtually all that remains of the social safety net for poor children.

Moreover, there are schools where no achievement gap exists, and there are students who achieve at high levels despite the incredible odds facing them. These bright spots of success reveal what might be possible if we lived in a society that truly valued children and was genuinely committed to equity and high-quality education for all.

Realizing such an ideal would require a comprehensive effort to reverse the effects of racial and economic inequality in the classroom, but it might begin with a few basic, though costly, measures: (1) significantly raising salaries so that teaching would be an attractive career for the best college graduates; (2) insuring that poor children have access to well-qualified teachers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and to schools with adequate resources; and (3) providing parents in low-income areas with the means to exert greater influence over the schools their children attend. These are not radical measures. Indeed, they are already features of schools in most middle-class suburban communities. But bringing them to low-income areas would require states to address the huge disparities in funding that arise from the way schools are financed throughout the country. Since the electoral defeat of former New Jersey Governor Jim Florio in 1993—the last major elected official to make a serious attempt to address such inequities—few have been willing to take on this critical issue.

Despite the defeats such measures have suffered in the courts and at the polls, politicians do recognize that the public is deeply concerned about improving the quality of education, and as they clamor to position themselves as friends and supporters of education we must demand that they address questions of equity. For those of us who believe that public education can serve as a source of hope and opportunity, the time is ripe for making our voices heard so this historic opportunity is not missed. ■