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## March 9, 2009: Attorney General Eric Holders Comments on Race and Poverty Spark Hope for Poor Children of Color, By Dr. Eric J. Cooper, President of The National Urban Alliance for Effective Education

### All Children Can Achieve, Even if They're Poor

Many people see Nature's hand in low test scores of African-American children and poor children of color. They believe that, with rare exceptions, there are intrinsic limits to what these students can learn and achieve. They find their confirmation in low performance, on standardized tests and on the job, of America's "minorities"—people of color and those who struggle with poverty. But even though these analysts misidentify the cause, the gap that exists between student achievement and life potential is often very real.

This gap is more of a dividing line, if you will, caused by society's unwillingness to confront discrimination and the forms of institutional and structural racism that continue to plague our nation. Our schools are Exhibit One, with disproportionate numbers of African and Hispanic Americans in special education and in lower academic-tracked classrooms, separated by perceived differences in intelligence. These beliefs lead later in life to disproportionate numbers of African and Hispanic Americans in prisons and substandard housing, out of work and out of hope. But they gain social acceptance in our classrooms and school cafeterias, where the races are divided and a self-selection process has blacks sitting with blacks, whites with whites and brown students with brown. Sadly, rather than implementing programs that bring students together, all too often adults turn a blind eye to this form of in-school segregation.

Now the nation's highest legal authority is challenging us. Attorney General Eric Holder charged during a recent presentation at the Department of Justice that America has been "cowardly" in confronting race as a factor in American life. Placing himself on the moral high ground gained by the rule of law, Holder, in a provocative statement, seems to want to push a long-overdue conversation about race in America.

The experience of the National Urban Alliance (NUA), driven and deepened by district-led partnerships among superintendents, educators, union leaders, community stakeholders, parents, students, business and faith-based leaders, is that, to be successful, those who are truly interested in "courageous conversations" to address discrimination must embrace a comprehensive and coordinated effort. First, the many parts of a school must be engaged, then the school district and, finally, by extension, the surrounding community. For education reform to take hold, besides the technical interventions which affect teacher quality, a reform program needs to address the political and cultural aspects of the community.

Jean Anyon of New York University has written that "educators are in an excellent position to build a constituency for [sustained social], economic and education improvement in urban, [suburban and rural communities]." NUA continues to witness in urban districts with which it has partnered the power of engaging racism and low expectations in curricula, classrooms and school policies, and this has been extended in some circumstances to the preparation of suburban teachers who receive children of color from inner-city schools.

The benefits affect both academic learning and social development. For example, with the West Metro Education program, a desegregation program where students are bused from Minneapolis to 11 surrounding school districts, students who participated in the integration initiative tripled the achievement gains of eligible students who did not choose the suburban schools that were supported by NUA professional development. Teachers and administrators have also reported improved social interaction in the schools, where schoolchildren and youth seek to bridge the racial divide in lunchrooms, through classroom projects and through community service. When teachers are trained to provide the learning context for using respect of cultural and racial

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difference as student strengths, they improve student self worth and motivation as well. Implemented correctly, the school experience becomes a win for the publics within and outside of schools.

With school district leadership focused laser-like on improving teacher quality, we have learned that education improvement does not have to precede one school building at a time as many reform efforts are presently staged. The most significant resource available to school communities is the adults who have been hired as administrators, principals and teachers. System-wide professional development provides the glue, if you will, helping a district take successful programs to scale. In districts such as Prince George's County, Maryland, where we partnered for 10 years, we have seen in schools showing high fidelity to the NUA program achievement of three standard deviations in a year (which equates to gains of approximately three grade levels). With professional development as a focus, Seattle Public Schools have gone from 60 percent of the students meeting state standards to 81 percent. Statewide data also suggests significant K-12 gains are occurring in Albany, New York, Birmingham, Alabama, Newark, New Jersey, Indianapolis, Indiana, Bridgeport, Connecticut and the twelve-district integration program with Minneapolis, Minnesota noted earlier. The question of going to scale is answered when commitments are made to nurture and guide teachers, rather than punishing and criticizing them for lack of student progress. Professional development becomes a preferred theory of change and encouragement, rather than the teacher resistance caused when educators fear being blamed for systemic failures.

School and social improvement begins with a new belief in the potential of all of America's students to achieve at levels that will advance them to the next school grade, and prepare them to tackle post-secondary education or a job that will require post-secondary literacy and thinking in diverse workplaces. This belief should apply to students whether they desire to be an auto mechanic or a technology engineer. Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, Harvard economists, have written in a 2008 publication, "The Race Between Education And Technology," that "workers now have to read complicated documents, master blueprints, work computers, solve formulas, and use the Internet, among other tasks. Simple literacy and numeracy are no longer sufficient. To be a full-fledged member of the global economy requires higher levels of education for most workers (p.14)." Good schooling can lift students above the limits of physical poverty, above a social environment that is indifferent to striving and success in school and above the dreams dashed by inadvertent policies that continue the sting and separation caused by unintended racism.

Change begins with belief and renewed hope.

Belief drives successful learning and instruction by good teachers who demonstrate with underperforming students that all students are capable of mastering difficult concepts and subject matter.

Educators must come to believe in their ability to engage and educate students in a manner that leads to lifelong learning, and in their ability to gain the professional knowledge and skills to do so. Successful change initiatives demonstrate for teachers, with and through their students, that all schoolchildren can master difficult concepts, when guided through instruction shaped by cognitive and neuroscience research. Schools must prove themselves to the community through improved performance. Communities also must come to believe in the ability and willingness of their schools to engage and educate all students. And society must come to believe that with high-performing schools come successful communities.

By identifying race and poverty as primary obstacles to improving the lives of students, our communities, led by district education leadership, can work successfully to engage their citizens and address the lingering effects of racism so that human capital is advanced rather than diminished.

America doesn't give up on its people. That is a common ground where all can firmly stand.

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Viewpoints in this section solely represent the authors' opinions and not the opinions of "Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity."

