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We must expect more from all students

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By Eric J. Cooper
Children of color are significantly more likely than white children to be inappropriately placed in special education classes. That's a fact. Some estimates have Hispanic and African-American students two to three times more likely than white students to be classified as special education students. Yet even though it is widely acknowledged and public school administrators admit that special education can become an academic dead-end for students of color, this disproportionality is not driving the sort of change in policy or practice necessary to save these children from marginalized futures and, ultimately, diminished lives.

It is as if special education is a catch basin for children society doesn't quite know what to do with.

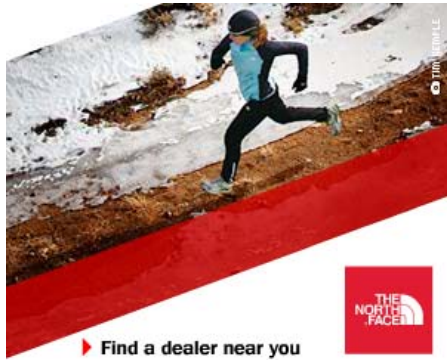
Many educators still perceive special education as the only alternative for students who are not succeeding in their classrooms. In reality, it's our education system that is failing. Teachers and schools may feel unprepared to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged students, most of whom are children of color. Classroom behavior is an especially confrontational issue for many teachers, and cultural gaps and misunderstandings can intensify these challenges.

There is also a surprising reticence among many teachers and administrators to discuss race and its role in stereotypical expectations about some schoolchildren. 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, and find confirmation in low performance on standardized tests and on the job. Urban sociologist Pedro Noguera calls this the "normalization of failure."

The stereotype might be as old as school itself, but what to do about it has been a key issue in education for more than 40 years, when Lloyd Dunn crystallized the argument that minority and low-income students were being classified as mildly mentally retarded more than was justified by their academic track record or potential for learning. That prompted change, but largely in semantics: The odds that a black student would be classified as mentally retarded dropped 29 percent from 1974-1998, but during the same time, the chance that these students would be classified as learning disabled rose more than 500 percent. In 2001, African-American students were 17 percent of the school-age population and accounted for 33 percent of students classified as mentally retarded. As Wanda Blanchett of the University of Wisconsin/Madison observed in 2006, special education had not become a temporary

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program to help African-American students repair or retool, but a place of virtual isolation from their peers and the American education system.

But as Dunn and others have found, good schooling is the antidote. It 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 but ingrained policies that perpetuate institutionalized racism.

The experience of the National Urban Alliance (NUA), driven and deepened by district-led partnerships among superintendents, educators, union leaders, community stakeholders, parents, students, and 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 to pursue education reform wherever it leads. NUA continues to witness in its urban-district partners the power of exposing what former President George W. Bush called "the soft bigotry of low expectations" as expressed in standards, curriculum, teaching and assessments.

This has been extended in some circumstances to the preparation of suburban teachers who receive children of color from inner-city schools.

The West Metro Education program (WMEP), a desegregation initiative where students are bused from Minneapolis to 11 surrounding school districts, is illustrative. Regular and special education students who participated in the integration initiative tripled the achievement gains of eligible students who did not choose the suburban schools, which were supported by NUA professional development. Additionally, WMEP teachers reported positive effects when students attempted to bridge the racial divide in lunchrooms, and through classroom projects and community service. Implemented correctly, the school experience succeeds within and outside of school.

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These teachers used respect of culture and racial differences as student strengths, rather than weaknesses, to improve student self-worth and motivation. They set high expectations for their students and themselves, embracing responsibility for the success of every student in their class. They were supported by district personnel who value peer coaching and strategies to reduce unnecessary referrals of students out of the classroom and away from the broader community. And they have learned to avoid what Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson of Stanford University identified as the "stereotype threat," where just reminding black students of their race before an exam can cause them to underperform.



When kids aren't playing well enough to stay with the team academically, teachers need to help them get into the game by acknowledging the struggle they might be having with learning. It's not always easy. Productive learning requires serious work and passion. Those efforts hopefully also will reach the children of color who so often are found in special education classes in the basements of many of the nation's schools. They are out of sight and out of mind, while the seeds of student resentment simmer just below the surface.

Our nation is blessed with many skilled and caring teachers who work tirelessly to help students succeed. Yet too many of the nation's students remain underserved. Let's help teachers succeed by embracing the beliefs, programs, mentoring and peer coaching that can elevate expectations for every student they support.

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

Stanford resident Eric J. Cooper is president of the National Urban Alliance. He can be reached at www.nuatc.org.

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