



OUR MISSION IS TO SUBSTANTIATE
IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF URBAN
AMERICA AN IRREFUTABLE BELIEF
IN THE CAPACITY OF ALL CHILDREN
TO REACH THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF
LEARNING & THINKING DEMANDED
BY OUR EVER-CHANGING GLOBAL
COMMUNITY.

It is well documented that children of color are overrepresented in special education compared to their percentage of school enrollment or compared to special education classification of White students. Forty years of reports and remonstrance's have not stemmed this tide which takes many students of color out to an educational and social sea on which they float with determined support but too seldom ever enter the port of educational or career success. Apparently the accumulated and widely distributed data documenting this "disproportionality" are not driving changes in policy or practices, at least not enough to shift the tide that carries so many students toward diminished lives.

It was 1968 when Lloyd Dunn addressed the special education community in his widely-cited article crystallizing the argument that minority and low income students were being classified as mildly mentally retarded more than was justified by their potential for learning or for their success that could be achieved with appropriate teaching in regular classrooms. Try as he did in a long and distinguished career, with many others pressing for reforms of general and special education, the chances of a Black student being classified as mentally retarded dropped 29% from 1974-1998, while surprisingly their chances of being classified learning disabled rose more than 500%.

Suggesting the intractability of extant belief systems regarding African-American schoolchildren, the 2002 National Academies of Science Report, "Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education" reported that 1998 data showed the "risk" of a Black student being classified as mentally retarded was twice that of a White student and almost three times that of a Hispanic student. The same study, by Donovan and Chris Cross, showed that at the national level, African American students account for 33% of students classified as mentally retarded compared to being 17% of the school-age population. In 2006 Wanda Blanchett of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, reinforced a point made earlier in the decade in various terms by Losen and Orfield, the Civil Rights Project and even the U.S. Department of Education, that for African Americans special education had become not a temporary program service to repair or retool, but a place of virtual isolation from the general education program and their age group.

How America's students are received in schools, prepared and grouped for learning, are emblematic of the way society wants its children to contend with challenges they encounter during their educational journey. In this context, research has found teachers and schools feel unprepared to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged students, most of whom are children of color. Classroom behavior is an especially challenging issue for many teachers, and cultural gaps and misunderstandings intensify behavioral challenges. Many teachers perceive special education as the only resource available for helping students who are not succeeding in their classroom.



There is also a surprising reticence among many teachers and administrators to discuss race as an issue for them in terms of stereotyped expectations about some schoolchildren. As a result, 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. And, in what Pedro Noguera calls "normalization of failure," whereas, the higher than normal rates of classifying African American students into special education categories often becomes the accepted norm.

Good schooling however, 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 continue the sting of separation caused by unintended but 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, 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 which includes the important work of education reform and its eventual impact on improved housing and job opportunities. NUA continues to witness in urban districts with which it has partnered the power of exposing what President George Bush called "the bigotry of low expectations" 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. When teachers are trained to provide the learning context for using respect of culture and racial differences as student strengths, they improve student self worth and motivation as well.

The benefits affect both academic learning and social development. For example, with the West Metro Education program (WMEP), a desegregation initiative 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. Additionally, WMEP teachers have reported positive effects of culturally responsive pedagogies where schoolchildren and youth seek to bridge the racial divide in lunchrooms, through classroom projects and through community service. Implemented correctly, the school experience becomes a win for the publics within and outside of schools. These improvements can happen in urban, suburban or rural schools. Experience has suggested that the broad principles employed in the



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WMEP/NUA initiative work as well in other districts, as they do in the desegregation initiative.

Many teachers set expectations upward for their students and themselves. They act as though they are accountable for the success of every student in their class and for keeping every student in that class for the whole year to the extent that is good for each student and for the others. They seek, craft and sharpen instructional strategies for reaching and teaching everyone. At the same time, the school and district personnel work toward common goals. Just as it's a good principle of teaching to start where the learner is intellectually and emotionally, it's a good principle for administrators to support teachers by enabling peer coaching where the neuroscience of practice is modeled and demonstrated in classrooms while teachers observe. When teachers see strategies at work with their students, it may stem the tide of unnecessary student referrals that remove students from their broader community by bringing help to the teachers' field of service. When kids aren't playing the academic game well enough to stay with the team, help them get into the game by reaching down to affirm the struggle they might be having with learning. Affirm through modeling, through acknowledgment and engagement of student voices into a change process that successful learning requires serious effort and passion.

The late sociologist John Ogbu advanced his provocative thesis about differences in ambition and organization for success between voluntary and involuntary immigrant groups with reference to the "effort optimism" of the voluntary group. We should work to have all students embarking on their educational journey to express their own "effort optimism" and to be stirred and supported in doing so. When the ground is soft or shifting for students, let's firm up where they are rather than relegating them to the basement of a school, where children of color in special education classes are often found in many of the nation's schools -- out of site and out of mind -- while the seeds of student resentment simmers just below the surface.

The 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. Teaching is that center of the combination of policies, programs, practices, and beliefs that lifts and accelerates student achievement. Let's help teachers succeed by taking to scale the programs, the mentoring and peer coaching which can elevate the expectations for every student they serve. Let's narrow the outlets and widen the opportunities inside their classroom. America doesn't give up on its people. That is common ground where all can firmly stand.

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