

Superman can't fix our problems alone

Published: 07:08 p.m., Tuesday, November 9, 2010

The film "Waiting for Superman" has ignited debate on the charter school movement and the idea that given new schools, with new-and-improved administrators and teachers to lead them, our nation can answer much of its public education "problem."

There is so much more to it than that.

We've got to move beyond the current thinking. The United States indeed is providing insufficient education for millions of its children and becoming a nation at risk of failure. But we need a much larger fix than many people realize.

Consider the data. By some measures, the U.S. ranks 15th internationally in literacy, math and science skills for adolescents. Our country is 35th out of 40 industrial nations in the drop-out rate, with approximately 6,000 students choosing to drop out of school every day. Across racial and ethnic demographics, approximately 30 percent of our K-12 students are not succeeding.

But disaggregate the data by race and ethnicity, and it gets uglier: On average, 55 percent of black and brown Americans graduate from high school, while the graduation rate for white Americans is approximately 78 percent.

Sadly, many of those students who drop out end up going to prison. Nearly two-thirds of America's inmates are people of color.

With all due respect to "Waiting for Superman," no one school model or academic magic bullet is going to solve this problem. Taking successful schools to scale for the benefit of all students requires a partnership between home and school, student, teacher, parent and community. In the 5,000 schools U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has identified as being in need of "restructuring," as well as schools throughout our country with inconsistent academic success across racial, ethnic and socio-economic levels, a number of social factors have been given the short shrift.

One is the persistent evidence of racial discrimination against brown and black citizens in the areas of employment, housing, education, health care and the criminal justice system. This presents a huge challenge for our country.

The discrimination is especially blatant in employment, for example. Research by Alfred and Ruth Blumrosen found that "... nearly 600,000 blacks, more than 275,000 Latinos and roughly 150,000 Asian Americans each year are subjected to job discrimination, and for 90 percent of these, the evidence of discrimination is so blatant that the odds of these outcomes being the result of any factor other than racial bias are only about 1 percent." An acclaimed MIT and University of Chicago study

Tax-free growth

Roth IRA earnings and distributions are tax free provided certain requirements are met.

Fidelity Brokerage Services LLC, Member NYSE, SIPC. © 2009 FMR LLC. All rights reserved. 533008.1.0

Turn here™



found that, in 2004, applicants with "white-sounding" names were about 50 percent more likely to be called for a job interview than applicants with "black-sounding" names, even when their professional qualifications were indistinguishable.

In schools, notions of race can restrain achievement before the student even walks through the front door for the first time. The identifying characteristics students use to describe themselves -- white, black, brown, Asian, recent immigrant, wealthy, poor, tall, short, thin, overweight, etc. -- can become what Claude Steele has called "stereotype threats." Social science research poignantly suggests these labels can cause students to perform poorly on exams and other intellectual assessments. They already believe they are doomed to fail due to a widely held belief about their "aptitude."

The identities students bring to school can become stereotype threats for children of all races if not recognized and carefully controlled.

Recognizing these effects, some teachers are trading the notion of "aptitude" for flexibility, or "plasticity," of the brain and its influence on ability and performance. They focus on the effort required in learning, not capacity. Achievement becomes a function of how well the student learns to persevere in the face of academic challenge.

Tim Wise's "ColorBlind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics And the Retreat From Racial Equity" tells the story of a Colorado math teacher who helped provoke substantial improvements in grades by telling his black students "... in no uncertain terms the system is an unjust racist one, and there are people prepared to make you statistics. You can either collaborate with your own destruction or blow up the statistics and prove everyone wrong." The teacher's honesty, coupled with his belief in his students, enabled the black students' scores to soar and "... inspired the creation of a mentoring group, set up by the black students themselves, to encourage one another to strive for excellence...." Wise wrote.

The Journal of Marriage and Family has reported that three of four white parents never, or very rarely, discuss race with their children. New research, yet to be published by Patricia Warren, has found that nearly half of Caucasians reported that most within their group simply "don't care" whether or not blacks move forward in society.

That might or might not be true. But we as a nation have not done a sufficient job of engaging communities in a discussion of stereotypes and what really causes people to achieve -- in the classroom and in life. Structural interventions such as ability tracking have further exacerbated the challenge by creating a self-fulfilling prophecy: The tracks lead to a dead end for students who underperform and ironically fail to deliver the benefits promised for those at the top of the academic spectrum, research published in Science Daily suggests.

I am an optimist. I think this recent spate of attention on education reform suggests that we might be awakening to the fact that success in education and in life is in the collective self-interest of every citizen in our country. Secretary Duncan has called education the "civil rights challenge of our time." If people accept that, then maybe we are finally coming to understand how attitudes about race and class have given rise to beliefs that are sufficiently widespread and enduring to become stereotypical -

- and ultimately, destructive.

The American community is challenged once again to fill its promise: All children, all of its citizens, are capable of high levels of achievement, and must be treated as future members and leaders of our national community. May it be a call to action that brings a better life for all.

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

Refinance Now 3.4% FIXED

\$160,000 Mortgage: \$547/mo. No Hidden Fees. No SSN Req.
Lendgo.com

1 Tip To Lose Stomach Fat

Follow This 1 Simple Diet Tip And Lose 9 Lbs A Week
CDKitchen.com

Ads by Yahoo!

CT POST

- Home
- News
- Sports
- Business
- Entertainment
- Living
- Opinion
- Blogs
- Obituaries
- Classifieds
- Jobs

Cars

- Homes
- Rentals

SERVICES & INFO

- Customer Care
- Mobile
- Contact Us
- Advertise With Us
- Privacy Policy
- Terms of Service
- Hearst Corporation

HOW TO

- Get More Hair
- Volume
- Virtual Makeover
- Try Virtual
- Hairstyles
- Find Haircut
- Ideas
- Get Wavy Hair
- Get Rid of Blackheads
- Teen Hairstyles
- Beauty Tips
- Going Green Tips
- How to Stop Hair Loss
- Get Longer Lashes

BEST

- Hair Color
- Soup Recipes
- Best Eye Cream
- iPod Docking
- Stations
- Twilight Trivia
- Twilight Quizzes
- Best Haircuts
- Ever
- New Beauty Products
- Fragrances for Women
- Best Toning Exercises
- Paint Colors

BEAUTY

- Get Celebrity
- Hairstyles
- Best Beauty Trends
- Medium Length Hair
- Cover Under Eye
- Circles
- Treat Damaged Hair
- Best Anti-Aging Cream
- Half-Up Hairstyle
- Best Beauty Products
- Fast & Easy
- Hairstyles
- Best Health Secrets
- Eye Makeup Tips

FOOD & HEALTH

- Pasta Salad
- Recipes
- Amazing Soup Diet
- Low Calorie Recipes
- Best Diet Plan
- Mixed Drinks
- Recipes
- Best Sandwiches
- Rachael Ray Recipes
- Coupons for Groceries
- Chicken Breast Recipes
- Cake Recipes
- Grilled Chicken Recipes

© 2010 Hearst Communications Inc.

HEARST newspapers