

"Racism, Belief Systems and Student Achievement"

In the August 8, 2001 issue of *Education Week*, Julian Weissglass's commentary, "Racism and the Achievement Gap," makes a compelling case for communities in this country to face head-on how racism and class bias contribute to persistent "disparities" in achievement between poor or racial/ethnic minority children and those who do not share those characteristics.

Focusing on racism, Mr. Weissglass argues that it is learned and that it is reinforced by "institutionalized racism", "lack of information and misinformation", "tenacity of belief systems", "internalization and transfer of racism" and "lack of opportunities to heal from hurt." He then seizes on the last point to propose that to eradicate the achievement gap, the nation must move beyond celebration of diversity and declarations that "all" children will learn in order to create what he calls "healing communities" in which individuals have an honest dialogue about racism. Through this process of caring and commitment to change, the country is to begin to heal. And with emotional healing, racism will wither away and, freed from its burden, students will achieve more and more equitably.

We agree with Mr. Weissglass's concise diagnosis, but he does not go deeply enough into the structures and policies that allow racism to be active in the lives of children and the business of our schools. We have to change the facts, not just the feelings that nurture and are nurtured by deep and historic social engineering that divides races and economic classes in America. It will take honest dialogue and leadership, but also much more than that to put our society and our students on equitable footing.

Surely racial equality has come a long way since the turn of the nineteenth century. For example, according to some surveys, 70% of Whites now seem to be willing to vote for an African-American for president. Yet the fact remains that social policies, circumstances and economics continue to shape stereotypes about minorities, Hispanic and African-Americans in particular. Research by David Williams of the University of Michigan suggests that: all minorities are viewed negatively by Whites in terms of potential for violence; 45% of Whites think Blacks are lazy; 29% think Blacks are unintelligent; less than one in five think Blacks are hard working; and 56% of Whites feel that Blacks would rather live on welfare than work.

What has borne these beliefs that are sufficiently widespread and enduring to be stereotypical? Why do these misinterpretations persist about people of color, particularly the poor? As we alluded above, policies have shaped the economic and social factors that have led to persistence in stereotypical thinking by Whites about minorities, and have significantly affected the ability of people of color to succeed. Some argue along with Weissglass, that this atmosphere has been internalized to the extent that people of color other than Asians, lack self-confidence and drive to succeed. Yet we hold that pride and drive are present in all, but are too often thwarted by external pressures that, over time, can, admittedly, corrode internal strengths. For example, policies and planning that fostered suburban development led to decreases in the quality of education for urban (read increasingly poor and minority) students. This in turn led to decreases in the preparation of poor minorities for higher education, denied them access to jobs, perpetuated male joblessness, undercut functioning families to create single parent households and led to concentrated poverty and violent crimes. Out migration of Whites from the core city led to the isolation of many good jobs in suburbs accessible only by car -- unlike the 1900s when jobs grew in the cities, jobs in the last half of the century moved to areas of lower minority concentration -- intensifying the difficulties for these minorities to break out of the cycle of poverty.

Another example of social engineering that led to negative social policies for poor people of color is a perception about intelligence. To this day, many believe that the intelligence of Black and poor people of color is lower than that of White people. This point of view has been repeatedly reengineered, as captured by *The Bell Curve*. In this widely-read book, two researchers argued that funds spent on poor children of color is a waste of money because it results in hurting "those" people the money is intended to serve by steering them away from the lower-level aspirations and occupations that suit their abilities. Sadly, the authors, like

several who have argued to the same general effect before them, dismissed the plethora of research which suggests that intelligence is not fixed at birth, but is modifiable and is susceptible to good teaching and learning. As important, the authors of publications such as *The Bell Curve* seem to ignore the thousands of successful African, Hispanic Americans and other minorities who have become successful doctors, lawyers, businesspersons, scientists, producers, professors and teachers (to name a few). If they are perceived as the exception in minority communities, it is a result not of nature, but of seeing what one believes and of deep and enduring social engineering that has limited opportunity.

Despite so much investment (as Weissglass aptly notes) and real progress, for many people of color, the American dream remains a dream deferred. What can people in this country do to eradicate the achievement gap -- the educational divide that continues to deny opportunity for so many? Research suggests the following:

1. Create good preschool experiences for all students. Research indicates that for students to do well, they need between 3,000 - 4,000 hours of good preschool experience -- not the custodial care often provided by some preschool programs in urban areas.
2. Mandate all day kindergarten programs that build appropriate learning and social skills for all children, including poor children.
3. Increase community involvement in, and support for, the nation's urban schools through creative public engagement activities that provide clear, accurate and timely information about performance and practical ways of shrinking achievement gaps while raising the levels for all. As part of this there should be movie, radio and television spots that feature the voices of children that model tolerance, celebrate diversity and the successes of urban education. When the community begins to understand that diversity helps all children develop the values, problem-solving and decision-making skills so important to success in academics and the workplace, parents might begin to embrace diversified learning communities.
4. Eliminate the tracking system -- a common practice in which educators sort (particularly elementary) children by first impressions and assumed ability and then channel them into corresponding program levels. African and Hispanic American children are more likely than Whites to wind up on low tracks and in special education programs, and more likely to stay there through high school. It is not a kindness to children to decelerate their education because they had a slow start, or a start that wasn't conventional in school terms. Instead, educators must implement programs, strategies and models that intensify, enrich and accelerate student learning.
5. Establish increased accountability and evaluation for high student achievement. Avoid test-driven instruction that can result in creating artificial achievement ceilings for minority students by overemphasizing basic skills versus advanced thinking.
6. Develop school climates that nurture and reflect an irrefutable belief in the capacity and potential of all students.
7. Transform big urban district middle and high schools into several smaller learning communities that are developed in support of the learning needs of all students - avoid the pitfalls of an emphasis on structural change without concomitant improvements in instruction.
8. Treat every teacher and principal as a professional, including provisions for continuing professional development consistent with the instructional needs of all students. Facilitate teacher understanding of the theories of knowledge that can guide the teaching of their disciplines. Expert teachers understand both content and pedagogy, thus guiding students through a curriculum enriched by deep knowledge of language, culture and cognition.
9. Create high standards and curricula based on teaching all students the advanced thinking skills necessary for high levels of performance in school, the university, the workplace and the community. Teach these skills in a

manner that models how the learning can be applied in the community and the workplace.

10. Create partnerships between a child's first teachers (parents) and those who follow in pre-school and K-12. Institute programs that bridge the gap between home and school. Create school-based teams of parents, teachers, social workers and administrators who visit the homes of students at-risk to extend classroom instruction through guided modeling which teaches the parents how to support school instruction.
11. Establish after-school and summer programs that do not repeat what has failed for the student during the regular school year. Develop enrichment experiences which are based on high pedagogy, content and standards, and which teach application.

America's poor and minority children are like all children and youth in this country. They start life wanting to be happy, to be a person they themselves respect, to be loved by their families and cared about in their communities. They want to prosper. They want to be viewed by the world as a good and aspiring person. But in the underdeveloped areas of our country, in our run-down neighborhoods, in the shadows of poverty, the distance from aspiration to achievement is strewn with social policies and obstacles whose number, intensity and complexity are disheartening. Poor minority children, like all children, want to read and learn good stories. Can't we as a nation, write them more promising life stories? If the American community develops the political will, the answer is a resounding yes!

The challenge the American community faces again at the beginning of this school year is based on the promise of America -- that 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 -- as a community resource that will contribute to improved conditions for all. We should join in following the research and leads provided by many who have argued passionately for changes on *Education Week* pages -- changes in how we view potential, changes in the short-sighted position that resources should only be used to further the education and opportunities for my children -- not other people's children. Though complex, the answer to this challenge resides in how we provide leadership and apply resources to support those who have been shortchanged.

The Chairmen and Board of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, joined by the superintendents and advisors listed below, commit this school year to an irrefutable belief that the achievement gap can be eradicated. We join in support of all those in the nation who work on behalf of this goal.

Chairmen: Robert S. Peterkin, Harvard University
Janice Jackson, Boston College

Board of Directors: Randy Best, Chairman,
Voyager Expanded Learning
Michael Casserly, Executive Director,
Council of Great City Schools
Louis Castenell, Jr. Dean,
University of Georgia, Athens
Daniel Domenech, Superintendent,
Fairfax County, Va.
Stephen Ivens, Vice-President, Touchstone
Applied Science Associates (ret.)
Sonia Diaz-Salcedo, Superintendent,
Bridgeport, Ct.
Hyman Sardy, Professor of Economics,
Brooklyn College, NY

Executive Director: Eric J. Cooper

Superintendents: Marion Bolden, Newark Public Schools
Joseph Olchefske, Seattle Public Schools
Duncan Pritchett, Indianapolis Public Schools

National Advisors: Alan E. Farstrup, Executive Director,
International Reading Association
Peter Gerber, Chairman,
The EdDesigns Group

Eric Cooper can be reached at www.nuac.org.