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## In reform debate, racial discrimination gets short shrift

By Eric J. Cooper and Yvette Jackson

With extensive coverage on television, in newspapers, on blogs, in the film *Waiting for Superman*, and in conversations in union and school halls, the perceived urgency for national education reform and how best to achieve it has ignited debate on what many perceive to be the two best chances for improving achievement: the charter school movement, and the idea that with restructured schools, including newly recruited administrators and teachers to lead them, our nation can answer much of its public education “problem.” Given America’s economic downturn and concerns about our ability to compete in the global economy, the call for a focus on these two structural interventions has grown louder and, at times, more strident.

As educators who work in districts and schools, we know there is much more to it than that.

We’ve got to move beyond the current thinking reverberating through the media. The United States is indeed providing insufficient education for millions of its children—primarily for children of color and those who struggle with poverty. Charter and restructured schools by themselves do not unravel the Gordian Knot of education reform—especially for metropolitan children of color and those who live in poverty.

### Distressing data

Consider the data. By some measures, U.S. adolescents rank 15th internationally in literacy, math, and science skills. The nation ranks below the OECD average in drop-out rate, with roughly 6,000 to 7,000 students choosing to drop out or being pushed to drop out every day.

Across racial and ethnic demographics, approximately 30% of our K–12 students are not succeeding. If you disaggregate the data by race and ethnicity, the picture gets uglier. On average, 55% of black and brown Americans graduate from high school, compared to approximately 78% of white Americans.

Sadly, many of those students who drop out end up going to prison. Nearly two-thirds of America’s inmates are people of color. What does this say about a nation that works to embrace the values of our Constitution and Bill of Rights that were designed by the nation’s founders to “never give up on its citizens?” It sure seems as if we are giving up.

With all due respect to *Waiting for Superman* and those who boldly labor on behalf of creating “good to great” schools, 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 among home, school, students, teachers, and community. In framing the solution, a number of social factors have been given short shrift in the national debate about improving low-performing schools.

One critical factor is dealing with racial discrimination against brown and black citizens in employment, housing, education, health care, and the criminal justice system. This continues to present a huge challenge for our nation and for the families who send their children to public schools seeking to break the cycle of poverty that continues to define their destiny.

The discrimination is especially blatant in job searches. 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.” For the vast majority of these people, the evidence of discrimination is so blatant that it is clearly the result of racial bias.

In schools, notions of race can restrain achievement even before the student 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, disabled, gay, 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 because the students may already believe they are doomed to fail because of a widely held belief about their “aptitude” or intellectual capacity.

The “identity contingencies” students bring to school can become stereotype threats for children of all races and genders if not recognized and carefully controlled. For example, one can point to the situational effects Larry Summers, then president of Harvard, may have had on female students when he stated that women are not cognitively wired for performing well in math and science.

### Raising expectations

In recognizing the identity contingencies all children bring to our nation’s classrooms, along with the recognition that we all “blink” at times, as Malcolm Gladwell has written—where we inadvertently project stereotypical assumptions about who is “smart” and who is not—we at the National Urban Alliance have been partnering with targeted school districts to address what has been deemed “the soft bigotry of low expectations.”

This initiative, called “Student VoiceNUA,” works to raise expectations for middle and high school students by engaging them in the same ongoing professional development as their teachers. With their teachers, the students lead teaching demonstration lessons.

Additionally, they are engaged in producing radio spots, blogs, poetry slams, and student performances such as those at

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assemblies where students present music and dramatic skits that affirm their culture and the unique potential they bring to learning. "Habits of minds" or dispositions are stressed, with a focus on social, critical, reflective, and creative thinking.

The preliminary and yet dramatic achievement results are surprising teachers and administrators alike in districts such as Bridgeport, Connecticut, Newark, New Jersey, San Francisco, California, East Allen, Indiana, and Greene County, Georgia. What we have learned is that a focus on improving teacher quality, situated in the context of student learning, does enable students to accelerate their achievement.

Meanwhile, through IRA and NUA's Urban Literacy Initiative, we are recruiting consultants (or mentors as we call them) to bring a knowledge base to the classroom that emerges from neuroscience and cognitive research. Through this partnership, NUA and IRA have embraced the African proverb: "If you want to go quickly, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together."

For more information about NUA, visit [www.nuac.org](http://www.nuac.org).

Eric J. Cooper is president and founder of the National Urban Alliance. Yvette Jackson is CEO. Jackson's new book, *Pedagogy of Confidence*, will soon be released by TC Press.

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