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San Francisco Chronicle

OPEN FORUM

Underperforming schools -- new front in today's struggle for civil rights

Arlene Ackerman

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"What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"

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-- Langston Hughes.

More than 50 Years after Brown vs. Board of Education, the modern struggle for civil rights for people of color is still being waged in the classrooms of our public schools. Despite the dramatic progress that I have witnessed and experienced firsthand during my lifetime, many core educational inequities still exist for black and brown children.

As one of 50 black students integrating an all-white high school of 3,000, I felt the sting of racism every day. As my honor society's first black student, I marched alone during the induction ceremony because the white student who was assigned to escort me refused. Since my high school days, we have seen important progress -- in civil-rights protections, African Americans and women running for President, the rise of the black and Latino middle class, and ever-greater diversity due to immigration of Latinos, Asians and other people of color.

I am grateful to have been an American while these

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advances occurred and proud to have done my part as an educator to help this cause. In my career, I have chosen to work in the most difficult schools and sometimes with the children who face the greatest challenges: black, brown, Asian, immigrant and poor. Tragically, as a nation we have failed many of our black and brown young people by condemning them to a substandard education. Only 53 percent of Latino students who begin the 9th grade graduate four years later. By 17, African Americans are achieving at the same level as 13-year old white students.

We know the terrible consequences of such failures to provide a decent education. We have watched the quality of countless young lives erode before our own eyes. As The Chronicle reported this month, the "grim reality" facing San Francisco's African-American children is that more than a third of them between ages 15 and 17 were taken to juvenile hall in 2002. Sixty-one percent of California's children who are living in poverty are Latino.

What are we as a community obliged to do to for the young people facing these challenges? As a lifelong educator, I have always believed that we need to teach our youth the skills and knowledge they need to succeed as responsible adults. Regardless of what station in life they are born into, all children deserve a good education. Shame on anyone who looks the other way while some children are denied these rights, year after year. In evaluating schools as superintendent, I have always asked, "Would this school be good enough for my children?" Unfortunately, in several cases even in our community, the answer is no.

Our latest and most ambitious attempt to improve these schools is a dramatic intervention called the Dream Schools initiative. Creating Dream Schools is a process of turning around our lowest performing schools by establishing within them more rigor, more resources and the best possible quality of teaching for the underserved students who attend them. The first three of these schools have opened, and are thriving, in Bayview/Hunters Point. We plan to open seven new Dream Schools next school year and, in fact, have been ordered to do so by a federal court.

Recently, the most controversial aspect of the initiative has been the requirement that teachers in these schools reapply for their positions. I understand the difficulty this approach presents to the affected teachers, and by no means do I intend to discredit them. Many of them work minor miracles with their students every day and are among our district's most

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dedicated educators. But despite their best efforts, the academic performance of the students in each of these schools is unacceptably low. In order to catch up, these kids cannot afford teaching that is "good enough"; it must be exceptional. Many of the teachers at these schools should remain there. The rest will be offered teaching positions at other public schools in the city. Not one of these teachers will be forced out of a job.

I am convinced that if we don't intervene dramatically for these students, including taking steps to ensure that all of them are taught by outstanding teachers, we are undermining their future and perpetuating inequality in our schools. By providing students unequal education, we help create a permanent underclass. Avoiding this fate is the major civil rights challenge we face today.

Some opponents to Dream Schools claim that the district is not showing respect. I regret that some feel this way, but my first priority is confronting the educational inequalities that harm some of our children every school day. The situation is urgent. What will happen to these young people if we don't intervene? Faced with the difficult choice of avoiding making adults uncomfortable and improving the education these children receive, I must choose the latter. Every time.

Arlene Ackerman is the superintendent of the San Francisco Unified School District.

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