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Education can eliminate 'reservations' of poverty

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Watching more than 1,000 people walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma recently, I was touched by a civil rights movement still alive today and yet strangely reminded of the commemoration's irony.

More than 40 years have passed marking the watershed of the civil rights movement, and our nation still struggles to provide the children and grandchildren of those who first marched to remove barriers, such as literacy tests, with their most basic of all civil rights - a quality education. To this end, the National Urban Alliance hosted its "Teaching for Intelligence: Believe to Achieve" conference in Birmingham last weekend to raise awareness of the issues facing urban education in America.

About 13 years ago, author Charles Murray made the startling prediction that in thousands of neighborhoods across the United States, "the underclass will become even more concentrated spatially than it is today." In his book, "The Bell Curve," Murray proclaimed that in calling for a policy to create a "custodial state, we have in mind a high-tech and more lavish version of the Indian reservation for some substantial minority of the nation's population, while the rest of America tries to go about its business."

Turned a blind eye:

In communities near and far from Alabama, Murray's prediction has become a reality. Too many Americans have turned a blind eye to the consequences of concentrating poverty, crime and despair in disadvantaged communities, while not affording all children a pathway for educational achievement. Instead, indifference has built ramps to the newest "reservation" that breeds crime, community blight, poor health and an education system that prolongs these inequalities.

This alarming revelation suggests that today's continuing chaos in urban education has diminishing returns for the entire nation. It is an embarrassment that our urban "reservations" grow larger every day. Rather than isolating a disadvantaged community, we should better leverage existing resources to derive a solution.

Through research, trial and error, we have access to culturally and cognitively appropriate strategies that recognize the uniqueness of America's inner-city populations. While there is no one simple answer to education reform, there is indisputable proof that an excited, skilled and motivated educator, an engaged student, supportive family and community are critical ingredients to educational achievement.

Future programs must target teachers, the public school system, its staff and the surrounding community where "reservations" flourish and grow. We must continue to foster the belief that public education should combine policies, programs, practices, data, beliefs and sustained action that lift and accelerate all student achievement. And we must trust the truism that learning will occur one person at a time, for the learning is within each of us.

Last weekend's conference provided a platform for this discourse.

Teaching improves one teacher at a time, for no public policy - nor outrage - can force teachers to do what they will not do, certainly not for as long as it will take for their students to overcome deficiencies, to gather external supports and to build internal strengths. While the nation renews its focus on leaving no child behind in considering the national legislation of the same name, the simple truth is that teacher quality is the key to opening pathways of success for schoolchildren. Without skilled teachers who have been supported, nurtured, guided and rewarded financially for improved student achievement, the life trajectories of urban students will not significantly improve to maintain Alabama's and America's global competitiveness.

Educators, working with political and community leaders and others, are uniquely positioned to build a movement for economic and educational change in urban communities. Together, we have the

responsibility to integrate self-interest with what is best for the common good. The achievement of other people's children is as important to the nation as our own children. Eric Cooper, Ed.D., is president of New York-based National Urban Alliance for Effective Education. E-mail: nua4556.

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