

The mis-education of African-American students

By Nakia Hall, Pam Manning, Patrick Rice, and Theresa Robinson

Nakia Hall, Ph.D., is with Executive Order Leadership Development and is a board member of Crete-Monee CUSD 201U. Pam Manning, Ph.D., is assistant professor of Education at McKendree University. Patrick Rice, Ph.D., is director of Field Services/Equity Director with IASB. Theresa Robinson, Ph.D., is associate professor of Education and director of Secondary Education at Elmhurst College.

"It is strange, then, that the friends of truth and the promoters of freedom have not risen up against the present propaganda in the schools and crushed it."

— Carter G. Woodson

Current events continue to reflect and propel us to analyze the social, political, and economic progress of African-Americans, in light of blacks' collective struggle for rights as American citizens through slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation and the turbulent Civil Rights era, to the election of Barack Obama, the first black president of the United States of America.

Civil rights leaders and others diligently examine various civil rights issues that African-Americans contend with in their current struggle to secure full equality and the constitutional rights. There is little to no consensus regarding what, exactly, are the uppermost civil rights issues of the 21st Century, although the issues include fair treatment, voting rights, drug policy reform, school-to-prison pipeline, affordable housing, and economics.

Undeniably, these issues must be addressed in order for African-Americans to have similar statuses as their white counterparts, but it is education that is the cornerstone for the success of African-Americans, and education therefore must be thoroughly and continuously examined. Malcolm X put this in perspective when he said, "Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today."

Education is of vital importance for the advancement of African-Americans.

Why?

Because an appropriate education provides wisdom and understanding in transforming the mind both intellectually and ethically. Education can guide the actions of students in their journeys to discover self-purpose, as well as how they can be of service to family, community, and nation. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. noted concerning the purpose of education, "Intelligence plus character — that is the goal of true education."

Dr. King was wise when he combined intelligence with character. We

know that a well-crafted educational system encompasses techniques for reading and math, such as scaffolding, higher-order questioning, using applications, including engagement, and much more. However, King also knew the character of the student was equally important to successfully reach true education.

Chike Akua's book, *Education for Transformation*, expresses that although character education is present in some schools, programs often do not address the daily exposure that African-American students have as images of their own race. There seems to be a bombardment of negativity shown in the media, news media, and within communities. These visions and cognitive influences have a negative impact on many African-Americans' character. Akua says they see crime, violence, incarcerations, youth being killed, irresponsible parenting, and sexual promiscuity as the norm for black people.

These seemingly intentional, subliminal messages negatively impact African-American students on a daily basis. Many educators may not know how to address this

need, or may feel it is not their job to address it. Nevertheless, it is essential that educators consistently offer African American students positive images. Akua states in his book that, "educators' intent on meeting the needs of African-American children must make a calculated effort to constantly and consistently show their students images of excellence, achievement, and authentic power that looks like them."

If intentional efforts of character building do not include images of African-Americans, students will forever adopt their own subliminal choices.

Parallels can be drawn regarding current economic, social, and health conditions of African-Americans and the education that has been provided. Therefore, education must be critically examined to ensure that it supports the continuous advancement of African-Americans. Dr. Carter G. Woodson, founder of Negro History week (subsequently adapted to become Black History Month), published *The Mis-Education of the Negro* in 1933. He contended that "the Negro" was being culturally indoctrinated and conditioned, rather than appropriately taught, to ensure their dependency on others for basic and vital needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. Woodson summed up this view when he stated, "When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will

go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary."

Woodson contended that if African-Americans were not given an education that would lead to

same for the 21st Century as well? This article attempts to shed light on these questions.

Past U.S. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama passed and promoted sweeping reforms aimed at improving public education for all

"If intentional efforts of character building do not include images of African-Americans, students will forever adopt their own subliminal choices."

their independence, ultimately they would never enjoy full rights and equality. Other African-American activists have expressed similar concerns about the need to reform the mind in order for blacks not to be in slavery mentally. Reggae singer and activist Bob Marley said, "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds."

Abolitionist Harriet Tubman said, "I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed more if only they knew they were slaves."

In recognizing the truth of the expression that "those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it" (attributed to philosopher George Santayana), it is fitting that we ask the question: Are African-American students being provided an education that will lead to their advancement? Or, quite the contrary, is education leading to more dependency?

W.E.B. DuBois noted in his 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, that the color line would be the major issue of the 20th Century. Is it the

students, but notably for Hispanic, African-American, Native American, and Native Alaskan students who lagged behind their white counterparts. This "achievement gap" is the disparity in measures of educational performance among subgroups of the U.S. students, especially groups defined by socioeconomic status (SES), race/ethnicity, and gender. Often, the achievement gap conversation sends a subliminal message that depicts one race as superior to another educationally.

Under Bush's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), high-stakes standardized testing became the norm. Testing was used not to guide curriculum, instruction, and assessment as intended, but as a tool to decide which schools were succeeding and which were underachieving. Furthermore, test results were also used to categorize, marginalize, and label students of color.

Though the intent of the NCLB practice of identifying students into subgroups was to promote the closing of the achievement

gap by recognizing students who were underachieving, and developing programs and strategies to improve their academic success, it often led to stereotypical assumptions being made about students in those subgroups. African-American students were often categorized as low-achieving students, resulting in a common practice of African-American students to be considered for special education programs, particularly African-American males. The categorization also affected the consideration of students of color as candidates for advanced course placement and prevented African-American students from being considered capable of participating

and being successful in advanced learning opportunities.

Under NCLB, schools that did not meet benchmarks had to offer school choice options, submit school turnaround plans, and offer tutorial (often private) services. Additionally, schools who failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress for at least four consecutive years were subject to school reconstruction, with staff members needing to reapply for their positions within the school. School systems such as Chicago Public Schools utilized high-stakes tests to determine which schools would be turned around, and which would be closed. These decisions ranged

from inconveniencing to devastating for many families who had to send their children to schools in unfamiliar communities, often schools that were dissimilar and/or did not perform better than their previous schools.

In attempting to address the issues and provide solutions, President Obama promoted reforms and concepts such as lifting states' caps off the numbers of charter schools, strongly urging states to raise teacher preparation requirements, incentivizing states' adoption of the Common Core State Standards, aligning teacher evaluation to student performance, and changing tenure laws. The Obama administration supported harsh school turnaround models, such as converting an underachieving school to a charter school and firing school principals and at least 50 percent of the staff if a school was deemed as failing per standardized tests. These efforts were received with mixed reviews as some were viewed as more punitive in nature than productive and progressive.

President Donald Trump may overhaul public education based on the appointment of Department of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, who is well known for supporting charter schools both financially and theoretically. The administration also supports the implementation of school choice vouchers and tax credit scholarships for students. It appears now that Trump's ideology, supporting alternatives to public education, will be felt locally. In 2017, the Illinois General Assembly approved \$75 million of taxpayer money to be allocated as tax credits



Policy Services

Board policies are only as effective as the administrative procedures and district actions that implement them.

As the board monitors district performance many questions will arise, including the following:

- How are board policies being implemented?
- Are administrative procedures up-to-date?
- Are administrative procedures in alignment with board policy?



IASB Policy Services offers an Administrative Procedures Project service designed to help administrators provide their district with the procedures necessary to assure implementation of and alignment with board policy.

For more information, visit www.iasb.com/policy or call 630/629-3776, ext. 1214 or 217/528-9688, ext. 1154

to organizations that provide scholarships for low-income students and students attending severely underachieving schools to attend non-public schools.

Various educational reforms from Presidents Bush, Obama, and now Trump claim to enhance public education experiences for African-American and other marginalized student groups, but important stakeholders, specifically African-American parents and families, local school boards, and public education practitioners, have been left out of the reform conversation. Many raise questions about reform and suggest recent reforms have had adverse effects on students of color. For instance, in 2016 the NAACP called for a moratorium on charter schools, primarily because they concluded that charter schools lead to greater segregation of students.

It is true that schools are more segregated today by race and economic indicators than they were in the past, with charter schools aiding this segregation as they are not prevalent in predominantly non-minority communities. Nevertheless, various educational reformists such as Joel Klein, former chancellor of New York City Schools, former Washington D.C. schools chancellor Michelle Rhee, and former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan cling onto the concept of charter schools as the vehicle to change public schools.

Reforms like these may have led to a third generation of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic segregation in public schools, but may

have also contributed to teacher shortages. African-American and Hispanic parents and families value having teachers of color who can

relationship with minority students, but are willing to teach minority students in districts to be eligible for student loans to be forgiven. The jury

“Ironically, public school practitioners believe that a school’s success should not be measured by a high-stakes test, but by multiple indicators such as graduation rates and attendance rates. Shouldn’t we use the same logic for teacher candidates?”

help mentor, guide, and serve as role models. Sadly, black students have few — if any — teachers who can fill these roles. It is often difficult for non-minority teachers to build relationships with black students. In some cases, non-minority teachers are not afforded the opportunity to work with black peers who would be instrumental in assisting them in working with black students.

Some African-American parents prefer a diverse teaching staff in part because they wonder if the relationship between non-minority teachers and African-American students will be authentic and caring — many teachers do not live in the communities in which they work.

Should black parents question the authenticity of their children’s relationships with non-minority teachers? Consider that teachers may prescribe lessons that are not culturally sensitive. And, there may be some non-minority teachers who desire no authentic and caring

may still be out regarding how culturally sensitive non-minority teachers are, but there are many who care and have authentic relationships with all students regardless of race. Nevertheless, many families believe that a diverse workforce can help break down racial barriers.

Reformists seldom mention the need for a diverse working staff, because they place greater emphasis on ensuring teachers are highly qualified as measured by high-stakes testing. Ironically, public school practitioners believe that a school’s success should not be measured by a high-stakes test, but by multiple indicators such as graduation rates and attendance rates. Shouldn’t we use the same logic for teacher candidates?

Dr. Jim Rosborg of McKendree University believes that the teacher shortage in Illinois is a direct result of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) increasing the minimum Basic Skills, now the Test of Academic Proficiency (TAP), test scores for admission into teacher

preparation programs. In light of unprecedented teacher shortages, it has yet to be determined if ISBE will change testing requirements. The overall teacher shortage is a national epidemic, with teacher shortage of educators of color being more severe.

Educational reformers stress a desire for students to be college or career ready, but the call for rigorous standardized tests emphasized college rather than vocational training as the pathway for students after graduation. This has been especially damaging to African-American students. There are now few skilled black laborers. During the Antebellum South, there were plenty of skilled black laborers (carpenters, bricklayers, farmers, tailors and seamstresses, textile production, cobblers, and machinists). Sadly, throughout the 19th Century to today, due to the rise in industrial unionism and current reforms aimed at ensuring students are college-ready, the number of skilled black laborers has significantly declined.

There are many routes to success after high school not limited to college attendance. Military enrollment and entrepreneurship are also options taken by high school graduates. Focusing solely on college

readiness limits students and causes a lack in other skills necessary for alternative career routes after high school.

Though college readiness is important for those seeking to enroll in a college or university, African-Americans that successfully completed college often find themselves unemployed or underemployed. John Schmitt, a senior economist at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, noted, "among recent graduates ages 22 to 27, the jobless rate for blacks last year was 12.4 percent versus 4.9 percent for whites." Moreover, blacks are often stuck with having to pay for exorbitant student loans. This leaves some jobless, with no means of repaying loans.

Throughout history, blacks have also been very influential in the arts (theater, music, poetry, art), evident with the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. The demand for standardized tests has not only led to decreases in skilled black labor, but less support for the performing and visual arts in schools. Diane Ravitch, in her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice*


is *Undermining Public Education*, discussed how reformists and financially well-off families send their children to schools that provide a strong liberal arts curriculum. A strong liberal arts curriculum is needed because such exposure assists students in finding their purpose, which is helpful in becoming a productive citizen.

If blacks are graduating and still not able to find meaningful work, in addition to the decrease in skilled black laborers, we must assume that Woodson's words still ring true. Blacks are still not provided an education that will ensure full equality and constitutional rights, but are afforded an education that keeps blacks dependent on others for goods and services.

W.E.B. Dubois' prediction was realized as well. The color line continues to plague the nation. Until all children, especially African-American students, are given a balanced education — including the arts and vocational training — and a voice in their education as well as the opportunity to be taught by a population of diverse teachers, black students will be continuously mis-educated. School boards as local trustees and superintendents as educational leaders must advocate for meaningful changes to help ensure that the various educational associations they represent will support these aims so that African-American students are not continuously mis-educated. ✍


References

Resources for his article can be found at blog.iasb.com/p/journal-resources.html.



ADVANCING PUBLIC EDUCATION

IASB Service Associates provide quality products and services for schools. Membership is by invitation only. A list of Service Associate firms is on the IASB website and in this *Journal*.



**SERVICE
ASSOCIATES**
Illinois Association
of School Boards

MEMBER by
INVITATION