IMPROVING SCHOOLS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

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IMPROVING SCHOOLS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

A Reader for Educational Leaders

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*The Center is federally funded to provide technical assistance and training on equity issues to educators in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. For further information about the Center, call 301-657-7741 or visit our website at www.maec.org

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FOREWORD

The most pressing challenge that this nation faces as we begin this new millennium is helping all of America's children meet the standards needed to live, learn, work, communicate, and be productive citizens in the highly technological, global community of the twenty-first century. Current demographics show students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds are in the majority in public schools in the states of California, New Mexico, Mississippi, and Louisiana, as well as in most large urban school districts. In addition, there are predictions of increases in these trends. America's very future depends on how quickly we can end the "savage inequalities," which produce inevitable achievement gaps resulting from the undereducation of African American and other students from diverse backgrounds. Many current school reform policies are causing achievement gaps to widen rather than close. These policies are focusing primarily on high standards and assessment while neglecting issues of access to high-quality education and curriculum taught by competent and caring teachers who hold high expectations for currently underachieving students.

Research shows that an effective school leader is key to any transformation of schools into places where all students from diverse backgrounds succeed academically. The challenge is great in this era of shortages of school principals, especially in urban areas. Into this breech comes *Improving Schools for African American Students: A Reader for Educational Leaders*; it brings together in one volume the accumulated knowledge, from research and experience, of cutting-edge ideas that advance our understanding of "what works." These outstanding researchers and practitioners highlight critical issues and provide proven practices that will be invaluable to those preparing to be school leaders in diverse settings, as well as for those creating policies to support the development of schools where *all* students reach high standards. This volume puts at the fingertips of education leaders and policymakers an institutional and cultural context from which to develop policies, practices, and programs that support high achievement among African American students.

Each author not only discusses what is not working in today's schools and classrooms but also provides the reader with specific examples of what is working and helps us to understand why. While acknowledging that African American students are frequently succeeding despite the institution-

al barriers they face, each article provides detailed discussions of what these barriers are and how to remove them. *Improving Schools for African American Students: A Reader for Educational Leaders* discusses key issues in educational reform, including the processes involved in reforming individual schools and whole school systems, academic standards and assessment practices, staff development, effective leadership, literacy, math education, and parent participation, all from the perspective of strategies that have been proven to work for African American students. Administrators and other educational leaders will be exposed to important new ideas and will revisit ideas of the past from a new perspective. The information presented in this volume is important for anyone who is struggling to improve our schools so that they become institutions that support the learning of all students.

VINETTA C. JONES

INTRODUCTION

> The question is not whether we can afford to invest in every child; it is whether we can afford not to.
>
> *Marian Wright Edelman*

Improving Schools for African American Students: A Reader for Educational Leaders provides education leaders with access to critical ideas, research, and knowledge across a broad range of educational issues that affect the successful schooling of African American children and youth. The articles that make up this book discuss generic education issues such as policy reform, the importance of high-quality teaching, and the improvement of schools from the perspective of the academic achievement of African American students. They explore the need to identify and redress policies and practices that hinder African American student achievement. They discuss effective teacher training programs, both pre-service and in-service, that focus on the academic and the ethical, social, political, and cultural dimensions of teaching African American students. These articles explore educational programs that build on the strengths that African American students bring to school, as well as how to create these programs in a wide variety of school settings, ranging from schools that serve predominantly African American students to schools in which African American students are a small percentage of the total school population.

The articles in this anthology were selected to provide concerned education leaders with a better understanding of how they can support high levels of academic achievement and social development for African American children and youth. *Improving Schools for African American Students: A Reader for Educational Leaders* contains articles that will help educational leaders to recognize the institutional barriers that present formidable stumbling blocks to successful educational outcomes; understand the diversity of strengths that their African American students bring with them to school; and become familiar with how successful educators use the strengths of African American students to improve achievement. Although many school leaders are already playing a key role in mobilizing teachers, parents, and other community stakeholders to work together to improve schools and achievement levels for African American students, they are the first to recognize that this is not an

easy task.

Today's educational leaders must have skills that go far beyond management and budgets. In school systems where they are very likely to have accountability without authority, today's leaders must have the skills to make connections with a broad cross-section of education stakeholders, build a thriving school community, and facilitate effective communication and collaboration. A school leader must not only be knowledgeable about curricular and instructional choices, he or she must be an advocate for children. At the school level, this means that he or she must be able to create and maintain relationships: school to community, children to learning, teachers to children and parents, parents to school and children, teachers to teachers, and students to students. To gain the level of results we are seeking for African American and other students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds, educational leaders must be prepared to "create a web of support around children and their families" (Houston, 2001). The roles and duties of today's educational leaders are complex and challenging, often without obvious rewards. To do the job well, to be able to withstand adversity, requires a commitment not only of their time, energy, and professional resources but also of their heart and soul. Houston describes the job of school superintendent as a "calling"; Cornel West (cited in Houston, 2001) describes it as "soul craft."

To make schools work for African American and other students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds, a school's culture and structure must be built on a foundation of respect for diversity and support for the high achievement of all students. The institutional structures of schools must provide a variety of organizational options designed to support the high achievement of all students. The most effective educational leaders are collaborators, working with their staff, their students and their students' families to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to establish educational climates that ensure the high achievement of African American students.

To assist school leaders in their efforts to more effectively serve African American students, this anthology highlights a wide variety of policies, programs, practices, and research that provide insight into how educators can successfully restructure their schools so that they offer teaching and learning environments that provide diverse pathways for African American students to meet high standards. Concentrating on African American students does not mean creating one separate pathway to success for African American students and another pathway for students from other backgrounds. It does, however, mean creating institutional infrastructures, cultures, and environments that support the many ways in which people learn. Such institutions effectively meet the needs of individuals and diverse groups of learners, ultimately promoting the educational success of all students.

If education leaders are to make substantial progress toward building, sustaining, and replicating effective programs for African American students,

they need to understand the many dimensions of institutional racism. Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, and Lipton (2000) advise us that we must do more to address institutional racism than create effective schools. We must nurture new and existing local successes to prevent them from being undermined or dismantled. Part I, "Recognizing and Addressing Institutional Racism," provides readers with an opportunity to explore institutional racism in the context of America's public schools. It also provides suggestions for how education leaders can begin to eliminate harmful policies and practices within their educational institutions and settings.

The articles in Part II, "Institutional Change and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Two Sides of the Same Coin," discuss the kinds of institutional and instructional changes that are needed to support the successful schooling of African American children and youth. Part III, "Achieving Results," focuses on the challenges presented to African American students by the current high stakes testing environment that surrounds standards, assessment, and accountability. Through the articles in this chapter, we hope to stimulate education leaders to think more broadly about their approaches to defining and measuring the achievement of African American students. Part III also includes a review of the literature on schools that have succeeded in improving achievement for African American students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, as well as districts that have moved toward narrowing the achievement gap.

Although evidence clearly shows that the past fifty years have brought tremendous educational, economic, and social gains for African American people as a whole, equally clear is that progress toward educational parity for most African American students has slowed. Large disparities in educational outcomes still persist between ethnic, cultural, and language-diverse groups, and by some indicators, educational gaps have widened in recent years. Overall, the data are not encouraging (Tidwell, 2000). Regardless, education remains the most effective road to success. Removing the barriers that prevent African American students from accessing a high-quality public education is an essential first step to achieving access to the economic, social, and political resources that are needed to support strong families and a truly democratic society.

There is no doubt that the most recent educational reform movement has helped uncover the contradictions between our desire to improve the overall quality of public education and our ability to do so for all groups of students. Changing the institutional culture of schools so that it focuses on achievement and other related outcomes is a good idea. Having universally high standards is another step in the right direction. However, there remains a powerful contradiction between establishing the goal of high achievement for all students and maintaining differential access to the kinds of educational programs and resources that are needed to support high achievement for all students. Although we have had many years of "school reform," most schools serving Black students and families still fail to provide them with a

high-quality educational experience, as evidenced by reports from some urban school systems of dropout rates of up to 50 percent for their African American students. Other schools throughout the country continue to place a large percentage of their African American students into "lower ability" tracks. Even schools that redesign their policies so that African American students gain equal access to challenging educational programs often fail to address other important issues, such as access to effective prerequisite courses, the need for supportive and caring student-teacher relationships, and the need to increase the levels of parent and community involvement. Given the widespread cultural and academic disconnects between Black students and the schools they attend, it is safe to say that most of America's schools are still not supporting the high achievement of African American students.

Although we applaud universally high standards and a responsive and responsible system of assessment, our definition of effective schools must include the institutionalization of a variety of supports and pathways that enable students from all backgrounds to attain the high standards. The concept of multiple pathways to academic success is entirely consonant with the constructivist approaches to education now recommended by many experts. Among other things, constructivist approaches call for educators to build on the individual and cultural resources students bring with them to class. However, this proven strategy is made much more difficult to enact, given that the teaching workforce is largely White and middle class, and the nation's students are increasingly poor and from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds. Simply put, most White, middle-class teachers do not have the knowledge or experience they need to build on the cultural resources of their African American and other diverse students. And not unlike their White, middle-class counterparts, many ethnically diverse teachers who also come from middle-class backgrounds frequently find themselves disconnected from the lived experiences and cultural backgrounds of their lower-income students and families.

Many of our widely publicized "successful" school reform models have been measured by how much they improve test scores. Even if we accept standardized test scores as a measure of improved achievement, we must still recognize that many of these reform models have not brought about the changes needed to close the achievement gap between African American and White students. Some schools have succeeded in generally improving achievement for many of their students, but such efforts have failed to decrease or eliminate existing gaps in achievement and dropout rates. When test scores rise more or less equally among African American and White students, the achievement gap is maintained, and unfortunately, rising test scores can be the result of increases in student dropout rates.

A singular focus on high stakes assessments and accountability practices as the only measure of school and student success has the power to undermine the entire school reform effort with a disproportionate negative impact on poor students of diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds.

Houston (2001) tells us, "If you lean your ladder against the wrong wall, you will paint the wrong house." He goes on to describe the problem with this wave of education reform as one that tries to force students to learn by giving them high-stakes tests and a narrow curriculum. Houston believes that this external pressure approach is doomed to failure. It certainly flies in the face of a constructivist approach by undermining efforts to encourage students to explore topics of interest in some depth and by subverting attempts to build diversity into the restructuring processes.

Many educators acknowledge the importance of authentically addressing diversity in school reform efforts. They often recognize that designing effective educational programs for African American students requires a great deal more than celebrating Black History month, having African American role models, or incorporating the historical contributions of people from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds into the curriculum. They are not always sure, however, how to integrate issues related to differences in students' backgrounds and learning preferences into the overall reform effort.

In the pages of this book, education leaders will find the information they need to improve their understanding of the myriad issues and concerns surrounding the successful education of African American students. As educational leaders, we have the responsibility to lean our ladders against the right wall. We must use our knowledge, resources, and power to help ensure the academic success of all African American students. To do this, we must establish a climate of support and collaboration in which all teachers, students, and their families are valued, and each student's achievement and well-being is monitored and supported as part of a collective schoolwide, family, and community responsibility. As we go about our school change efforts, we must make the kinds of institutional changes that result in high achievement for all students. This anthology focuses on how we can best accomplish this goal for African American students.

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To the education leaders who work every day on behalf of African American students, their families, schools, and communities, you remain an inspiration. To the researchers who have persisted despite a severe lack of funding and support for your efforts, we could not have done this book without you. To our African American students and their families, we want you to know that our work is driven by the need to right the injustices and inequitable conditions you face as students in America's public schools.

To our husbands, Steve and David, and our children, Nathan and Leah, and Micah, Adia, Dasan, and Orion, without whose ongoing support, inspiration, and love this project would not have been possible, we offer our most profound love and thanks. You are the light in our eyes.

SHERYL J. DENBO
LYNSON MOORE BEAULIEU

NOTE TO THE READER

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CONTENTS

IMPROVING SCHOOLS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

Part I

RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

O, let America be America again–
The land that never has been yet–
and yet must be–The land where *every* man is free.

Langston Hughes

ALTHOUGH RACISM IS A FAMILIAR SUBJECT to many, the discussion of institutional racism may be overwhelming, stressful, or shocking to others. We believe, however, that it is important to understand both intentional and unintentional racism if we are going to create educational environments that support the high academic achievement of African American children. As Professor Asa Hilliard continues to tell us in speech after speech, many African American students have reached and continue to reach high levels of academic achievement. Our failure to replicate these successes has a great deal to do with institutional racism.

Racism has become institutionalized in American schools through hierarchical conceptions of intellectual ability. The bell curve, for example, assumes high levels of intellectual abilities for only a small percentage of the population. This assumption does not motivate educators to create and nurture intellectual ability. Instead, it supports the institutionalization of a hierarchical notion of innate mental ability through practices such as academic tracking. These hierarchical conceptions of intellectual ability have led to a focus on the individual and cultural characteristics of students rather than the ways that the social system structures academic success for some and academic failure for others. The result has been a variety of school policies and practices that foil the full development of the intellectual potential of African American children.

In Part I, "Recognizing and Addressing Institutional Racism," we address a wide variety of separate issues that together form many of the components of institutional racism. The section starts with James P. Comer's "My View" that is actually the first chapter of his wonderful book, *Waiting for a Miracle: Why Schools Can't Solve Our Problems and How We Can* (1997). Dr. Comer, clearly an old soul and a patriot who loves his country, recognizes that he is an example of the American dream come true. "The United States," he tells us, has "probably come closer to creating the 'good society' than any society of its complexity in the history of the world." Despite its complexity and history of slavery, the United States is a place where democratic ideals remain alive. Nonetheless, Dr. Comer presents his concerns about the inherent flaws in America's belief in a meritocracy and the damage that that has brought. Dr. Comer expresses the belief that we already have in place the strategies and practices that can be used to redress remaining inequities.

In the next two articles, "Why Can't We Close the Achievement Gap?" and "The Effects of Racism, Socioeconomic Class, and Gender on

Academic Achievement of African American Students," issues related to the effects of institutional racism are addressed. In "Why Can't We Close the Achievement Gap?" Sheryl Denbo presents an overview of institutional racism in America's schools and the resulting privileges experienced by White students. It is concise by design, because many of these issues are topics that educators have been struggling with for decades. It is helpful to look at them together to get a better understanding of what many of our African American students face. In "The Effects of Racism, Socioeconomic Class and Gender on Academic Achievement of African American Students," Susan Shaffer, Pat Ortman, and Sheryl Denbo address issues of gender and class as they relate to African American students. While critiquing the lack of research and data on African American students that is disaggregated by class and gender within race, they discuss what is known or theorized about poverty and its relationship to the achievement of African American students; middle-class African American student achievement; achievement of African American male students; and the achievement of African American female students.

In the final two articles, Donna Y. Ford and Kayte Fearn address the issues of special education and gifted education. In "The Recruitment and Retention of African American Students in Gifted Education," Donna Y. Ford helps to explain the causes of underachievement among African American students. The article suggests specific administrative solutions to decrease the identification of African American students in special education and increase their identification for gifted education. Kayte Fearn offers descriptions of programs that successfully reduce overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs.

Recognizing and addressing racism is an important priority to those who want to support the high achievement of African American students. Educators must recognize and incorporate the voices, experiences, and hopes of their diverse populations of students without labeling, devaluing or tracking them, or requiring them to be submerged into a bureaucratic melting pot. Although it is not easy to address racism and support diversity, it is imperative that these become widespread educational goals if we are to succeed in supporting high achievement among all of our students.

Article 1

MY VIEW*

JAMES P. COMER

I HAVE BEEN MORE FORTUNATE than most Americans. My experience as an African-American has been an expression of what America could be. And that is why I want to discuss how it still can become what it set out to be, the Good Society.

I am from a working-class family. On one side I am a generation removed from extreme poverty and abuse, with grandparents probably born into slavery. On the other side I had great-grandparents whose slave experience was less disorganizing, and a grandfather who was a small farmer and church minister.

My choice of child psychiatry as a career stemmed originally from my curiosity about why equally talented (sometimes more talented) black friends did not achieve their potential. In time, my work led to an effort to do something to improve the chances of such young people.

In many ways my life has been a journey from the margins of society toward the center. What I have been told along the way by various people has often been different from what I have observed and what I know will and will not work. So, throughout this book, I will use as a frame of reference my own life experience. This experience in general, and my work in schools in particular, has brought me to doubt that many institutional policies and programs being used and proposed to address our growing social problems–community and family deterioration, educational underachievement, ethnic and racial tensions, vandalism and violence–will succeed.

After several years as director of Yale's School Development Program, I with my colleagues learned how to significantly improve two schools, and then many more. But as we analyzed our work, troublesome questions began to arise. Why did some improve dramatically, some modestly, and some not at all? Why is it so difficult and why does it take so long to improve schools? And most important, why are there so many schools in trouble?

All along we have observed that most schoolteachers and administrators want to succeed. Most parents certainly want their children to succeed. And most students are able and struggling to succeed in all the ways available to young people. What, then, is the problem?

The question calls to mind an apocryphal story.

Two men in a boat rescued a child drowning in a river. As they rowed on, they saw three, then four, and finally a riverful of drowning children. As the man at the oars started for the shore, the other asked him where he was going: there were still so many children to be rescued. The reply was, "I'm going to find out who is throwing these children in the water, and stop them!"

No single person can "stop them"–put an end to institutional and individual problems. But it is

important to point out that the state of our schools is not the problem itself, but a reflection of the condition of the larger society. It gradually became clear to me what the problem is.

In our culture we believe that the life outcome of an individual is due almost entirely to genetically determined intelligence and will. This central belief both flows from and contributes to the *individualism* that is so much a part of the American character. (The belief, not coincidentally, is fundamental to our "trickle-down" economic system, according to which, the brightest and the best create and manage economic enterprises and others fit into the system as they are able.) We deny or downplay all other determinants: child development, access to opportunity networks–educational, economic, political, social–and chance, particularly inheritance and the natural connections stemming from where you are born on the social scale.

I call this belief our First Myth.

The many roots of American individualism have been described, often, as both our major strength and our major weakness. The tension that sets individual effort and rights and interests against the common good is probably necessary and even useful–when in balance, and when all individuals have reasonable access to the same opportunities. But a serious imbalance or limited access, for whatever reasons, creates problems.

The notion that intelligence and will alone determine outcomes implies that everyone has similar opportunities and faces similar obstacles. It suggests that the cream rises to the top through superior intellect and exertion, and that is good for society. For their efforts, the best and brightest deserve all they can get. This creates a winner/loser rather than a win-win mentality. The focus on competition allows individualism to run amok–to be carried to extremes that endanger the common good.

Competition is a highly regarded American value. It is a product of the impulse for survival. But the winner/loser mind-set creates a need to find and attack "losers." The loser deserves disdain and exclusion. Gone is any emphasis on caring and on using individual talents to promote the common good. Gone is any recognition that human beings function best in caring societies–in win-win situations.

The universal human task is to find personal adequacy and meaning in life. These are found most often through pride in work, in care for self and/or family, and in being a valued and contributing citizen of a society–a winner. Some people, for a variety of reasons both personal and situational, are unable to achieve this. Yet the myth holds that they have brought all their problems on themselves.

Those who do not succeed at life's tasks often seek adequacy and meaning through behaviors that are troublesome to the society and the individual–that contribute to problems ranging from poor family functioning to undereducation, dependency, crime, and violence. Also, the fear of being a loser can evoke the immature but very powerful human urge to scapegoat others less able to defend themselves.

The effectiveness of this tactic should not be underestimated. Scapegoating is a primitive but natural response to threat and insecurity. A simple example from my own life illustrates this. As a student in graduate school at the University of Michigan with a $3^1/_2$-year-old son, a newborn daughter, and a wife who had just given birth, I was under stress. One evening I snapped at my son unfairly. He was hurt. Without saying a word, he moved slowly the long way around the room until he reached the crib of his new sister. Then he reached in and hit her.

Because this kind of hurtful reaction is natural, a society must be structured to enable people to deal with insecurity in more mature ways. To minimize scapegoating and to promote the general well-being, a society must make it possible for most people to be successful most of the time. But for many reasons–size, wealth, and particularly the fact that we are a nation of immigrants–America has always resorted to scapegoating. Throughout our history, the latest immigrant group was blamed for any and all problems. The descendants of African slaves have been particularly vulnerable. This caste group would become for the nation what the "problem child" is to a family that is not functioning well–a permanent scapegoat. A common refrain in clinical practice is "There's nothing wrong with us, it's him."

This brings us to what I call the Second Myth–that whites have been successful, and blacks have not.

How is this explained in the face of contradicto-