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Closing The Gap On Black Students' Achievement

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Other than the unfortunate souls who must deal with them regularly, does our society really notice our festering inner-city schools plopped on the shoulders of our education system?

Probably not much until now, but Florida's 2nd District Court of Appeal may force more of a public debate on these schools with its recent ruling that 21,000 black students in Pinellas County can join in a five-year-old lawsuit against their school system.

The suit alleges that the achievement gap between black and white children points to the county's breach of its duty to provide the "high quality" education mandated in our state constitution.

School officials counter that the gap has little to do with any alleged failure to educate, but rather with issues such as poverty and class that schools are powerless to control.

Scores Define Gap

That black and white students achieve at staggeringly disparate levels is not debatable; in Hillsborough and Pinellas County, for example, blacks rank 24 to 33 percentile points behind whites in grades five through eight in reading and mathematics on the nationally standardized Stanford Achievement Tests. That's alarming, since these are the school years when most students make the fateful decision whether they will take their education seriously.

Educators hold a solemn public trust to do the best they can with the children before them. Almost every child who walks into a schoolhouse, regardless of background, is endowed with the gray matter and spirit to succeed. Far too many inner-city educators provide every justification for their students' failures other than their own lack of resolve to get the job done.

Over the past three years, Academy Prep Center of Tampa has tested hundreds of fifth- and sixth-grade students for admission. It never ceases to amaze me the number we admit coming out of chaotic inner-city schools who are unable to do such simple things like spell the words wrinkle, wrench, arrival, material, scarce and smiling; write a coherent sentence; identify parallel lines; or understand that

7 over 8 is of greater value than 3 over 4. Who is running these places and educating the children?

Economic hardship and skin color do not kill brain cells and drive. I've been educating inner-city students long enough to know that if they're held to strong standards, they will rise to the occasion.

It doesn't surprise me that the same children described above, entering Academy Prep as a fifth-grade class below grade level in reading and math, finished their sixth grade last spring significantly outscoring Hillsborough and Pinellas students in both subjects. Moreover, the children at Academy Prep want to be in school working hard - last year's average daily attendance rate was higher than that of every Hillsborough public middle school. Our students, some of the nicest kids you'll encounter, are 99 percent minority, mostly black, and all on free or reduced- priced meals. So much for insurmountable hurdles.

Tough Decisions

If we really want to improve the education of large segments of our minority student populations, we need to make tough decisions. These are but a few suggestions:

- * Stagger teacher and staff schedules in order to extend school days with activities that supplement academics, and get away from the repetitive and dull school days that are dominated by the obsession to succeed at FCAT.
- * Hold children to strict rules of discipline and have the guts to carry out the consequences of misbehavior.
- * Cease the insulting practice of promoting children with inflated grades simply because they're getting older.
- * Engage any adult relative or friend of a child to be part of the school family. (Behind almost every child is at least one adult who loves him.)
- * Seriously strengthen the admissions standards of our schools of education and destroy the myth that these schools are the best and only path to teaching careers.
- * Finally, continue holding traditional public schools accountable by supporting charter schools, vouchers and scholarships, thus allowing economically disadvantaged families the choice of where to educate their children.

It is a national disgrace that we force these families into lousy public schools simply because of their ZIP code. And let's be intellectually honest here; inner-

city charter and private schools are not immune to incompetence, and those clearly failing to honor their educational trust have no business staying open.

We live in the greatest country in the history of mankind, where background rarely fells those who stride to their dreams. Whether they want it or not, inner-city educators have one of the most profound responsibilities in our society - helping those most in need to find the stride and create the dream.

A trial court in our own back yard is poised to make us confront whether that responsibility is being met.

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