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The Quality of Education for African Americans in Houston

Dr. Kimberly McLeod

No one can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending. The experience of African Americans in public education has historically been a fight to advance education as a civil right. It has been a constant pursuit of financial equity as well as equitable student achievement results on standardized examinations. Although slavery and racial oppression were responsible for the astronomical gap in the Black-White literacy rate in the 1800's, African Americans continued to struggle to close the major achievement gap well beyond slavery. What has changed in the past 10 years for African Americans in public education for Texas?

In 2008-2009, African-Americans in the State of Texas represented 14.1% percent of the total school population and in 1998-1999 they were 14.4 % percent of the population. Although there has not been a huge statistical difference in the African American student population from 10 years ago, there have been many other significant changes. One change is in the number of African Americans that are represented in special education. African Americans represented 15.5% of the special education population in 1998-1999 and in 2008-2009 they represented 18.0%. Nationally, African American students are 2.7 times more likely of being identified as having an Emotional & Behavioral Disorder (EBD) than other students. The overrepresentation of African Americans in special education, whereas traumatic, has been consistent for decades, across the country. Although an increase of African Americans identified as having a special need is disturbing in and of itself, what is most disconcerting is that in 10 years, the statistics -as they have been for years before- may remain unchanged, or grow worse for this demographic population (Texas Education Agency (TEA), 2009).

What this trend communicates, whether it represents the heart and purpose of education or not; is that referring, identifying and over-identifying African Americans for special education is an acceptable alternative practice with a tradition and predictable pattern of consistency. Although nothing can be done to change the past situations, how can a new outcome for African American education be created?

In 2008-2009 African American third grade test scores (reading, math) were the lowest performing demographic falling behind all ethnic categories. African American scores were

lower than at risk populations, economically disadvantaged populations and special education populations. Ten years ago in 1998-1999 the scores reflected similar results. African Americans were the lowest performing demographic in every subset.

Underachievement cannot be explained by lack of attendance. According to the Academic Excellence Indicator System state performance report from the 2008-2009 reporting year, African Americans are attending Texas public schools at similar rates as other demographics. However, dropout rates are higher for African Americans than for any other ethnicity. Respectively, the dropout rates for African Americans is 16.1 percent, which is higher than the state average of 10.5 percent, Hispanic 14.4 percent, White 5.1 percent, Native American 8.4 percent and Asian 3.6%. Not only is this an increase over the past 10 years, it has more than doubled. It is triple the dropout rate as compared to whites. African Americans are attending schools at similar rates, yet performance scores, graduation scores and every other statistic represents mediocrity. Why are these students underachieving in the public school system?

Research clearly shows that the African American student experience is greatly impacted by issues surrounding race and poverty. Although poverty does not impact a student's ability to cognitively process content, the impact poverty has on schools, communities and families has a significant influence on academic outputs. Schools in high poverty areas experience more challenges in recruiting and retaining high quality teachers. In addition, many high poverty schools are grossly underfunded. A study conducted by the Education Trust indicated that 37 of 48 states provided less funding for school districts with the most ethnic minority students. Low funding can have a negative effect on educational quality. For example, high poverty districts have twice as many uncertified teachers and teachers teaching outside their fields, fewer or no textbooks, and a lack of many other resources in comparison to more affluent districts. High-poverty schools, on average, employ teachers with less experience and fewer advanced degrees than low-poverty schools. This means that with more experienced, more educated, more expensive teachers gravitating toward more affluent schools, the district ends up spending more on teacher salaries in affluent schools than in impoverished ones.

Although the impact poverty has on schools is a formidable force to contend with, there is hope. African Americans that enroll in high-quality pre-kindergarten programs experience

long-term benefits such as higher rates of high school graduation and post-high school employment.

However impactful poverty is on African American education, race is also an influencing factor. According to the Washington Assessment of Student Learning data reveal that White and Asian students in poverty score higher than African American students not in poverty. Simply, for some African American students, inequitable academic learning experiences are solely based on the fact that they are African American. Woods and Achey noted that teachers at times have negative attitudes about and lower expectations of children from nonmainstream cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Ferguson's research corroborated this perception, showing that many teachers believe that African American students lack the intellectual capacity to function successfully in gifted programs. When capable black college students fail to perform as well as their white counterparts, the explanation often has less to do with preparation or ability than with the threat of stereotypes about their capacity to succeed.

Nationally, 32% of African American students, as compared to four percent of White students attend high poverty schools. Studies show that students in poverty are associated with low student achievement. According to Trusty, Niles and Carney (2005), once students grow accustomed to less challenging courses in elementary school, it is difficult for them to succeed in more rigorous coursework in middle and high school. African American students must be exposed to curricular materials that have rigor and relevance. The necessity of having a rigorous curriculum has been a focal point of educators for some time, having a rigorous curriculum is virtually pointless if an educator is not prepared to teach with rigor and enrich the learning experience with various teaching and learning modalities. In addition, the relationship teachers have with students is as equally important as the material they are teaching. Teachers, administrators and other leaders that genuinely and anxiously desire to close the achievement gap must be able to arrest cultural interferences that hinder student learning. They must foster improved relationships and increase expectations. In addition, they must know how to teach and teach with enough depth, rigor and relevance that they afford students the opportunity to master curricular material. Material based on abstract and concrete subjects, encounters and experiences in both a practical and testing environment.

From 1971 to 1996, the achievement gap narrowed considerably, yet African American students still lagged significantly behind their white peers. Even though the gap has narrowed in

recent years according to the 2002-2003 National Academy of Education Progress data, the reading skills of African American 17-year-olds were still found to be similar to those of white 13-year olds. African American students in Texas represent 57% of the total student population that meet federal poverty levels. Yet, there are enough schools scattered across the country in high poverty areas with concentrated numbers of African American learners that have evidenced that being poor or meeting federal poverty levels has nothing to do with one's ability to learn. African Americans in poverty are able to learn and demonstrate that learning in performance, so why does African American student performance in 1998-1999 look so much like 2008-2009?

According to Academic Excellence Indicator System, in 2010, only 8.1% of the total African American student population is in gifted and talented courses and the average African American student has an excellent opportunity of meeting qualifications to receive special education services. In addition, with only 70% of all African Americans, as compared to nearly 90% of white students, completing a high school program, the average African American student represents the highest demographic to drop out of high school. Those that graduate and enroll in college, have only a 40% chance of completing a college program. Not surprisingly, African Americans have the lowest college graduation rate of all ethnic groups.

We know that all children can learn. Educators have decades of pedagogy applicable to any kind of learner in any kind of situation. "We can whenever, and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we about the fact that we haven't so far." So if educators know how to teach and children are capable of learning, African American learners are not failing standardized systems, standardized systems are failing them.

The data are clear: by every measure, from test scores to college attendance rates, African American students are less likely to get the education he or she needs to succeed in today's world. Recent research reveals that while African American and white one-year-olds are on average equal in their development, a gap appears by the age of three. The gap tends to grow as these children continue in school, unless they get more time, better teaching, and more resources to help them catch up. The effects of even a single ineffective teacher are enduring enough to be measurable at least four years later. Good teachers in subsequent grades boost achievement but not enough to compensate for the effects of an earlier ineffective teacher. African American learners that have two ineffective teachers in a row, almost never recover from this experience.

Based on analysis of Dallas data, researchers warn that assigning low-performing students to a series of ineffective teachers is “educationally deadly.”

Texas schools do exactly the opposite of what it takes to help low-income students catch up. Of the state’s 50 largest school districts, 43 have the highest concentration of novice teachers in their poorest schools. Brand new teachers—those who are still learning the craft—are less likely to be effective in enabling their students to meet state standards than teachers with at least a few years of experience. Considering that the majority of African American learners are in poverty and that most students in poverty are attending schools in high poverty areas in concentrated numbers, assigning teachers without experience or the proper certification is a significant contributing force to African American academic underachievement.

In addition, the turnover rate in these schools presents confounding variables. According to the Education Trust in 2008, in 44 of the 50 largest school districts in Texas, teacher turnover in the highest poverty and highest minority schools is consistently higher than it is in more affluent schools and schools serving a majority of white students. Not only are African American learners subjected to inexperienced teachers, inequitable funding, high-teacher turnover rates and the multifarious influences poverty has on a learning community, these learners are being taught by teachers who are not certified to teach in areas of need. Specifically, those areas in which they are tested by standardized systems. In high schools with the highest enrollment of low-income students, 36.9% of teachers lack certification in the subjects they are teaching, more than twice the rate (16.1%) in the most affluent high schools. At both the middle and high school level, a small number of these teachers are certified in other fields, but most are fully certified in nothing.

Texas has been known to make exceptions to the rules when it comes to hiring individuals in the classrooms that have not met state requirements. Texas allows this with hopes that they will eventually receive full state certification. However, evidence shows that as many as 40 % of those individuals will not become fully certified. Teachers cannot teach what they do not know. Texas children are depending on school systems to provide them with adequate teachers that have a strong foundation on the particular subject matter being taught. This is a vital necessary step to obtain in order to improve student achievement levels.

In a 2002 study of Texas data, researchers determined that “having a high-quality teacher throughout elementary school can substantially offset or even eliminate the disadvantage of a

low-socioeconomic background.” A similar analysis of teacher and student data in Los Angeles concluded that “having a top quartile teacher rather than a bottom-quartile teacher four years in a row would be enough to close the black-white test score gap.” Definitively, by assigning poor and minority students to stronger teachers, Texas schools could produce much better results, regardless of non-school factors that affect student success. This is particularly important for a state whose economic future literally depends on closing its achievement gaps.

Of dire concern in the education of African Americans is the plight of the African American male. African American males are more likely than any other ethnic group to be suspended from school. They are underrepresented in programs for the highly capable, overrepresented in special education programs and outperformed consistently by African American females. African American males are significantly overrepresented in unemployment numbers, in the juvenile justice system, and prison populations. At the center of necessary change in educating African Americans is the male.

In order to meet the depressing needs of African Americans in Houston and the greater community educators are needed that are prepared to work with and are well equipped to teach with the expectation of achieving high results. Schools need academic professionals working with the express intention of providing equitable academic outcomes for all students, in particular those of African American descent. In order to do this the Houston and greater community should begin to consider multiple alternatives.

New standards and assessments won't make much of a difference if they are not accompanied by a rigorous curriculum lined up with those standards. The curriculum must have rigor, must be relevant and teachers must be able to successfully deliver instructional content that achieves results. As academic rigor is a significant contributor to student achievement, teachers must also be culturally responsive and culturally attune to how their personal cultural landscape influences student achievement and student relationships.

As students matriculate through grades their deficits will accumulate, if nothing is done otherwise, leaving them further and further behind. Early intervention is vital. Early childhood programs and early academic experiences are crucial to student academic development. Houston needs to develop a system in which the strongest, most experienced, qualified and certified teachers are motivated to teach in schools with the highest needs specifically, schools that are in high poverty areas with high concentrations of African American students.

Elucidate the hidden funding gap in Texas schools. Instead of narrowing the academic achievement gap, the education system is essentially widening it by providing insufficient funds to schools. Wilkins (2006) shows that school districts with the most minorities receive less state and local money than those districts with fewer minorities. However, when schools do receive the increase in funding they should be held accountable to produce results regarding student achievement. An increase in funding should correlate with an increase in achievement.

The African American experience in education in Texas is, as it was 10 years ago, remains to be an un-equitable experience for learners of African descent. The economic and social prosperity of the Houston and Texas communities are directly influenced with the current system's ability to produce successful learners who are able to advance academically and apply skill sets to the workforce and community. Creating a different ending for learners of African descent is possible, if effective changes are implemented today.

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Dr. Kimberly McLeod has spent her entire career in public education. She has held various positions in the public school setting including that of a teacher, counselor, and administrator. Currently she is working as an Associate professor for Texas Southern University's (TSU) College of Education. During her four years at TSU she has been awarded five grants, has written over ten published manuscripts, was a principal founder of the Journal of Education and Practice, a nationally peer reviewed journal for the College of Education, is the producer of a documentary on urban school reform for public schools, has introduced four online courses for distance education and presented research representing the College of Education at over 30 professional venues, local, national and international conferences on topics of Education. She is an advocate for social justice, student resiliency and the protection of the academic prosperity for all children whose potential has not been tapped, in public school classrooms. She has earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Houston, a Masters of Education Degree in Counseling and Guidance, a Masters of Education Degree in Educational Administration and a Doctor of Education in Counselor of Education from Texas Southern University.