

By Tammy Johnson

## EDUCATION

### RACIAL EQUITY AND THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

For many of the 20 million students of color in the United States<sup>1</sup>, attending a public school is a daily trial by fire. They do battle with a system that methodically alienates their parents and routinely fails them. Black students were nearly twice as likely to drop out of high school as whites in 2005, and Latinos were over three times more likely to drop out than whites. According to the 2000 U.S. census, of 25-year-olds with less than a high school education, Hmong were at 59 percent, Cambodian at 53 percent and Vietnamese at 31 percent.<sup>2</sup> And in 2006, 15 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native young adults were status<sup>3</sup> dropouts, compared to 7 percent of their white peers.

For some, getting to the bottom of the problems in education means eliminating the academic achievement gap—the racial disparities seen in test scores, grade point averages and college entrance rates. But defining the cause of academic failure in this way relies primarily on the agency of individual students while ignoring decades of systemic decay and neglect common to schools serving mostly students of color. This masks a cruel truth: U.S. public schools have a racialized opportunity gap.

Volumes of research clearly demonstrate that students of color disproportionately face severely limited access to the “opportunities to learn” reflected in key educational components such as the assignment of qualified teachers, the content of instructional materials and the condition of facilities. For instance, Black and Latino students are more likely than their white peers to be taught by teachers who are inexperienced or lack majors in the subject they teach.

This essay presents a prescription to undo this damage. The way we fund schools, prepare and engage teachers, and hold the system accountable must change. But before we apply the cure, we must diagnose the illness.

#### NINETEENTH CENTURY SCHOOLS STUNTING TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LIVES

The racially disparate treatment of students in America is not an accident. Birthed in 1805 by wealthy business interests calling themselves the *New York Public School Society*, the factory school model focused on discipline, obedience and rote teaching. As the decade drew to a close, the nation experienced an influx of 3.1 million southern and eastern European immigrants. It must be noted that, upon arrival, this particular group had not yet been granted the privileged status of whiteness in the normative racial hierarchy of that era. At the same time, Blacks were migrating from southern rural areas to northern urban industrial centers. As the urgency behind dictating the trajectory of this workforce grew, the white power elite took steps to ensure that public schools became the setting for the assimilation and indoctrination of future factory workers.

Almost simultaneously, a growing eugenics movement promoted false claims about the genetic inferiority of darker skinned and foreign-born groups. They successfully implemented their pseudoscientific ideology through the popularizing of IQ testing, which led to the assignment of students to a course of study based on a single score.

<sup>1</sup>Give Kids Good School Organization. (2008). Public schools in the United States. Retrieved September 26, 2008 from: [http://www.givekidsgoodschools.org/main/learn.cfm?Category=Public\\_School&Section=FAQ\\_About\\_1](http://www.givekidsgoodschools.org/main/learn.cfm?Category=Public_School&Section=FAQ_About_1)

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Educational Sciences. (2003). U.S. Center for Education Statistics: status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic minorities. Retrieved September 26, 2008 from: [http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/minoritytrends/ind\\_2\\_7.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/minoritytrends/ind_2_7.asp).

<sup>3</sup>National Association for the Education and Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans. Retrieved on October 1, 2008 from: <http://www.nea.org/mco/dropoutsupport.html#naealva>

<sup>4</sup>National Assessment of Educational Progress. 2005. National Indian Education Study. Retrieved on September 27, 2008 from: [http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nies/nies\\_2005/l2001.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nies/nies_2005/l2001.asp).

In 2002, the federal Office of Civil Rights stated that using a single test score to make significant educational decisions for students “can undermine the quality of education and equality of opportunity.” Yet today, such a “high-stakes” test score is seen as a legitimate measure of an individual’s academic achievement, as well as a credible basis for the establishment of standards for curriculum and professional development. The No Child Left Behind Act popularized and proliferated standardized testing as a cornerstone of our modern-day education system.

The legacy of the eugenics movement—intent on sorting people and protecting privilege by whatever dubious means it took to gain public legitimacy—stretches throughout our nation’s history, reflected in the establishment of the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools, the legal exclusion of Chinese immigrants from public schools until 1905, or the severe restriction of bilingual programs in California in 1998, to the stubborn pervasiveness of racially segregated public schools that exist to this very day.

For the privileged few, there are schools that have taken on another American model of public schooling. The Jeffersonian model<sup>4</sup> promoted education as a means of creating a functional democracy through a well educated, self-actualized populus. It also deemed non-white members of society as unworthy of such lofty pursuits. A choice number of today’s public schools have actualized this idea and provide almost boundless learning opportunities for their students. They have access to experienced teachers who respect their students’ communities and culture. They have state-of-the-art libraries, gymnasiums, and computer and science laboratories. The curriculum encourages students to dream of a world beyond their own neighborhoods and prepares them for college and a life of their own choosing. Parents are welcomed and are fully integrated in the school community. Graduation rates are high. Drop-out and suspension rates are low. These schools exist in America, but they are predominately white and affluent.

The failure of U.S. public schools is reflected in the lives of generations of uneducated youth of color. The system’s failure demoralizes talented and dedicated educators, seeds racial disunity and predestines millions to lives diminished of the opportunities, rights and benefits they deserve. Despite rhetorical nods to democratic ideals, this system is not colorblind. In fact, it is a system that uses race as a means of solidifying our nation’s hierarchy of privilege and power.

## **TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LIVES REQUIRE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SCHOOLS**

Globalization has arrived at the schoolhouse door. It is in the cell phone in every teenager’s pocket, it’s in the language they speak, in the money they spend, in the music they hear and in the friendships that they make. That is why a 21st century model of public schooling must be one that keeps pace with our ever-changing world and meets the desire of students to be active agents of that change. But in order to do so there must be a conscious and immediate shift away from 19th century racist ideology about schooling. Today’s public schools must embrace the multiracial realities of its students in a way that validates who they are and nurtures the leaders that they want to be.

Our nation’s students come from and aspire to reach all corners of the globe. The Civil Rights Project of UCLA reported that white enrollment in public schools has dropped from 80 percent in 1960 to 57 percent in 2005, with Latinos comprising 20 percent, Blacks at 17 percent and Asians at 8 percent and growing fast.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, these students live in communities bereft of quality grocery stores, safe public parks, affordable hospitals and health clinics, and reliable public transportation. Their parents are farm workers, nurse’s aides and secretaries who labor without healthcare benefits, decent wages and access to affordable housing. Yet despite all of this, they hold firm to high hopes for their children’s future. Over 80 percent of parents of color expect their children to obtain an associate degree or higher.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Thomas, J. (1903). Jefferson’s quest for knowledge. In A. A. Lipscomb & A. E. Bergh (Eds.), *The writings of Thomas Jefferson*, (pp. 3-26). Washington D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association.

<sup>5</sup>Orfield, G & Lee, C. 2007. *The Civil Rights Project: Historic reversals, accelerating resegregation, and the need for new integration strategies*. Retrieved on September 26, 2008 from: [http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/deseg/reversals\\_reseg\\_need.pdf](http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/deseg/reversals_reseg_need.pdf).

<sup>6</sup>The Applied Research Center. 2006. *New America media, great expectations: Multilingual poll of Latino, Asian and African-American parents reveals high education aspirations for their children and strong support for early education*.

Solutions exist. We see glimpses of a new way to learn and teach in a handful of schools across the country. These schools confront the challenges and embrace the opportunities that our 21st century society brings them:

- The Alaska State Board of Education adopted and implemented the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools as a curriculum standard.<sup>7</sup> Curriculum development is based on an understanding of how indigenous knowledge relates to academic disciplines. In addition to providing a culturally aligned, standard-based curriculum, the standards also serve as the basis of professional development for teachers and principals.
- When a survey showed that the majority of parents wanted English literacy and GED and college-level courses offered at the school site, teachers and parents at the Telpochcalli Elementary School set out to make it happen.<sup>8</sup> Located on Chicago's South Side, the Telpochcalli Community Education Project offers a range of programs to adults and students, while incorporating the arts and culture as learning goals and standards.
- Some California schools are making the grade, as well. June Jordan School for Equity and Leadership in San Francisco utilizes student portfolios and community service internships as a part of a project-based college preparatory curriculum.<sup>9</sup> And San Diego's Construction Tech Academy turns the racist tracking history of vocational education on its head with the integration of college preparatory coursework with internships in architecture, engineering and construction.

As inspiring as they are, when it comes to the millions of students of color who need quality education, we can no longer afford to be satisfied with islands of excellence.<sup>10</sup> Now is the time to take the knowledge that we have acquired from these successes and bring them to scale, and with great speed.

Many of the values and policy changes needed to make a 21st century shift in schooling can be found in the Justice Matters Institute's *Racial Justice Education Framework*.<sup>11</sup> This approach supplants the factory school model with an explicit application of racial justice values and equitable policy demands. It is a model that understands that public schools must fully recognize the nation's multiracial realities and embrace its multiethnic communities in order to achieve academic excellence. Accountability is redefined to aggressively include community voice. And there is significant investment in the preparation, diversified recruitment and professional development of culturally competent teachers and principals. Justice Matters Institute Executive Director Olivia Araiza explains the shift in focus in this way:

“The myth of American schools is similar to the myth of the American Dream, that schools are race-neutral, level playing fields where anyone who works hard enough can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Instead, our communities want racially just schools that speak to their experiences, histories and cultures, and provide students with an enriched learning experience and authentic opportunity to thrive. In transforming our schools to at last serve us, organized communities of color also demand a place at the table making decisions for their school system.”

## **TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SCHOOLS REQUIRE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LEADERSHIP.**

When it comes to fundamentally changing our nation's public school system, the first order of the day for the new President must be to publicly voice his support of a constitutional amendment establishing public education as a federal right for all U.S. residents. Providing high-quality public education, from pre-school to college, is a prerequisite for establishing an equitable education system that truly serves everyone. In light of where we have

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<sup>7</sup>Justice Matters Institute. 2008. Racial equity framework; Native Alaskans shaping learning.

<sup>8</sup>The School of Redesign Network at Stanford University & Justice Matters. 2007. High schools for equity: supports for student learning in communities of color.

<sup>9</sup>Justice Matters Institute. 2008. Education Policy Academy: Creating a racially just education system.

<sup>10</sup>Dror, Y. (1986). Adjusting the central mind to adversity. *International Political Science Review*, 7(1), 11-25.

<sup>11</sup>Justice Matters Institute. 2008. Education Policy Academy: Creating a racially just education system.

been and where we are now as a nation, a federal constitutional right to an education is a prerequisite for setting past wrongs right, for the collective advancement of all people and for the nation's ability to be accepted as a moral voice in the world. The President and Congress must re-envision our educational system, not as a tool of global dominance, but as an institution dedicated to empowering future ambassadors of peace, justice and shared prosperity. Our elected leaders must affirm this right in words and deeds.

After declaring public education as a federal right, the President would do well to take counsel from the *Schott Foundation's 50 State Opportunity to Learn Report*.<sup>12</sup> The report recommends a number of game-changing policy directives that, if implemented, would fundamentally improve the plight of students of color in public schools. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) must primarily move the following recommendations.

### **Teacher Quality**

A dual issue for low-income communities of color is access to the teaching profession and the placement of prepared, qualified teachers in the schools that their children attend. The next administration must revamp the very definition of teacher quality to include the following components:

- The recruitment of the workforce from culturally diverse communities
- Knowledge of practices that effectively engage English learners
- Credentialing within the subject matter in which they teach
- Ongoing professional development, with emphasis on cultural competency
- Compulsory engagement with the communities in which their students reside
- Institutional support in the areas of quality and relevant curriculum, peer mentorship and collaboration, sound and inviting facilities, and adequate compensation.

### **Title I Distribution**

A criticism lodged by even supporters of President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act was that the law was significantly underfunded. That means taking particular aim at the Title I distribution formula. Title I is a federal support program designed to address the needs of poor and special needs students:

The current formula provides more Title I funds to states that spend more per pupil without consideration of the different levels of wealth that each state has to draw upon. The reauthorized ESEA should change the state distribution formula to better reflect the per-person income, property values and other potential sources of state wealth. The degree to which states have tapped into their capacity to provide for education should also be considered such that the federal distribution of Title I funds would send more money to poor states that were near their capacity to provide education (Schott 2008).

More specifically, such revision would require a larger amount of federal funding to states and school districts with at least 15 percent students in poverty. No longer would funding be based on the absolute numbers in a district, but on the concentration of poverty. Included in the new funding priorities in the reauthorized ESEA would be the full funding of universal pre-school through reform of Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

### **Enforcement and Monitoring of Rights**

Finally, we must call on the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights to rededicate itself to its mission.

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<sup>12</sup>The Schott Foundation. 2008. The Schott 50 state opportunity to learn report.

After Title VI of the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, the DOE's OCR played a major role in investigating forms of segregation, and taking enforcement action to address many other forms of discrimination in access to programs, discipline and resources. OCR is the primary federal monitoring and enforcement arm charged with preventing discrimination by gender, national origin and disability. OCR also has the unique charge of preventing unintentional forms of discrimination that pervade our public schools (Schott 2008).

A significant part of ensuring public education as a federal guaranteed right is ensuring that every student attends a school that provides a safe and nurturing learning environment. Racial tracking, the use of zero tolerance disciplinary practices, the segregation of resources based on race and countless other racially biased policies and practices must be stopped. The Office of Civil Rights must be fully funded and renewed in its charge of weeding out discrimination and protecting those least able to protect themselves.

### **A VISION REALIZED**

A 21st century public education system is one that prepares the nation's children to be fully realized human beings. It embraces their culture. It sparks their curious minds and engages their able hands. It builds schools that become vital community centers that foster racial unity and social equity. It provides sustainable and fulfilling careers for teachers, principals and staff from an array of backgrounds. It measures success not only by the quality of schooling, but also by equity standards that ensure that racial disparities, discrimination and harassment are no longer tolerated.

And no matter who they are, where they are from or what language they speak, our nation's public schools must educate all of our children. It is essential for the redress of our nation's racially stained history. It is a demand required by our collective future. And for our new President and Congress, it must be a destiny realized.