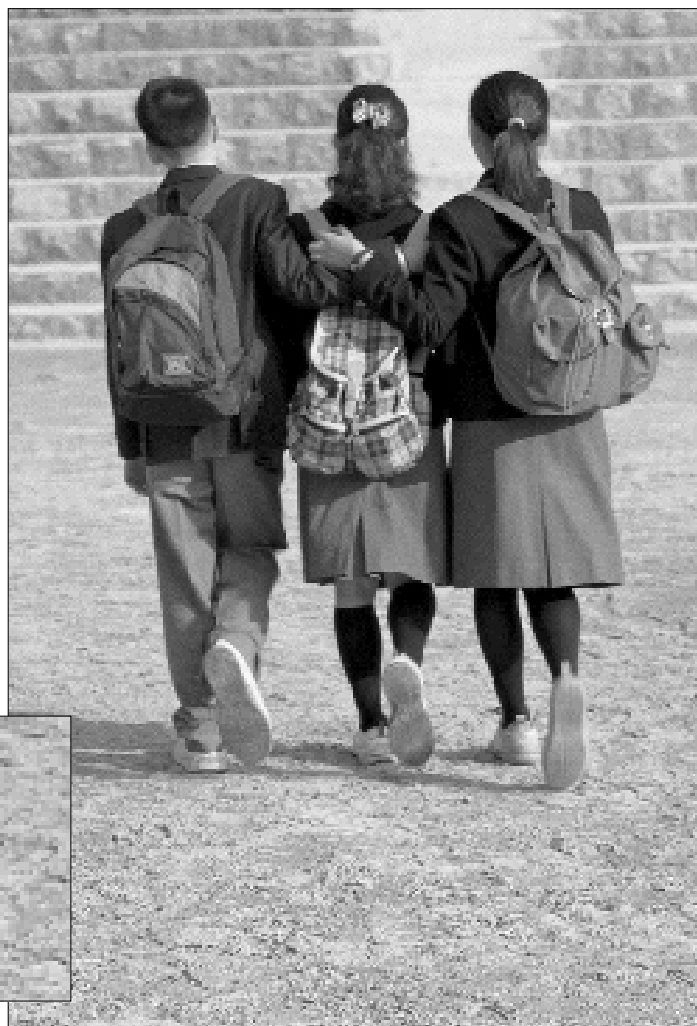


Navigating the Unwieldy Terrain of Urban Education in a Post-NCLB World

By Dierdre Glenn Paul



Urban schools have been facing and continue to face complex challenges in educating their students well. The dilemmas are multifaceted and byzantine, and they did not originate in the schools. Since its passage in 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has done little more than further complicate an already thorny charge. The most significant quandaries posed by NCLB for Black and Latino students focus on the law's underfunding and externally imposed "accountability" standards.

The Harvard University Civil Rights Project prepared a report entitled *A Multiracial Society with Segregated Schools: Are We Losing the Dream?* (Frankenburg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003). According to the study, Whites are the most segregated group in the nation's public school system, with 80 percent attending schools where the student body is White. Latino students are the most segregated group of color. The study's most pointed finding indicates that as of the academic year 2000–2001, there has been a re-emergence of a substantial group of American schools in which all students are racial

"minorities." The authors of the report term such schools "apartheid schools." It is also important to consider these findings within a broader societal context, one in which the society (generally) reflects the same degree of racial and socioeconomic stratification evident in its schools. This pattern is not likely to change in the near future, especially in light of contemporary city planning, mortgage redlining, and pervasive (but understated) housing discrimination.

Black and Latino students who attend apartheid schools (many of which are located in America's urban centers) are more likely to be diseducated. "Dis-education" can be characterized as "the experience of pervasive, persistent, and disproportionate underachievement [of Black and Latino students] in comparison with their White [and Asian] counterparts" (Carruthers, 1994; 45). Black and Latino students who attend such schools are more likely to be hampered

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by lower rates of per-pupil expenditure, less experienced or less qualified teachers, and less challenging curricula. Yet it

becomes increasingly important under these circumstances to point out the pivotal role that parents, teachers, school support personnel, and administrators play in the advancement of solutions to academic failure rather than serving as causes of it.

At present, hyperbolic comments about the inefficacy of Black parents and urban educators have (once again) become en vogue. We also hear a barrage of messages on personal responsibility that deny the impact of systemic and historic disenfranchisement of people of color, excuse structural inequality, and dismiss institutional racism. Within this charged atmosphere, it becomes necessary to highlight the efforts of the numerous parents and educators in urban centers who successfully raise and educate children each day. Parents, teachers, school support personnel, and administrators develop the cultural capital that our children bring with them to school: children who are resilient and resourceful, in spite of the vast trials and tribulations they face.

Although I realize that many rural schools are also in peril, this article's focus is on Black and Latino learners in urban school systems. While there are some substantial signs of deterioration, the post-*Brown* South remains the most integrated region for Blacks and Whites (Frankenburg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003). Today, far too many U.S. cities are suffering the effects of widespread neglect, the outsourcing of jobs, and skyrocketing rates of unemployment. In explaining the rapid deterioration of urban centers, sociologist William Julius Wilson (1996) contends that substantial rates of unemployment, rather than the absence of family values, have caused the most brutal devastation. Joblessness places more than one third of our young men in prison or elsewhere in the criminal justice system, mostly for nonviolent offenses (Bell, 2004). Schools cannot thrive and meet unrealistic standards (often guided more by politics than sound educational practice) in this atmosphere of neglect, unemployment, incarceration, and disenfranchisement.

Within this context, NCLB has done little to advance the progress of Black and Latino learners in urban classrooms. I have contended that, as a result of being "overwhelmed by the vastness and perplexity of societal problems, we become distracted from the pursuit of finding answers and realistic proposals for action" (Paul, 2003; 8). In this article, I will examine in more detail the shortcomings of NCLB and present suggestions to guide urban educators toward transformative school reform and ways to navigate the law.

UNDERFUNDING AND NCLB

On the broadest level, the funding for NCLB simply does not exist.

It would take about a 30 percent annual increase in current school spending for states to come close to meeting NCLB's goals—even on its own narrow test-score terms. That's about \$130 billion a year, or almost 10 times what current funding is for Title I programs. To date, the much-touted increase in federal spending accompanying NCLB represents about a one percent increase in total U.S. spending [on education]. (Karp, 2004)

Most educators do not mind being held accountable for results. We understand that our stakeholders (policy makers and the public) choose to view our success in quantitative terms only (dollars and test scores). We know that we must do a more effective job of re-educating our stakeholders, so they are more receptive to richly textured and comprehensive approaches to assessment and modes of qualifying success. Yet we are also disturbed by the fact that there appears to be no comparable level of understanding and even less recipro-

ity. Who is holding accountable those who consistently underfund education and leave promises unfulfilled? Karp (2004) writes, "To expect schools to wipe out long-standing academic achievement gaps while denying them substantial new resources...is not an 'accountability' system."

In the case of urban schools, some make the claim that we are throwing good money after bad: Money goes in and results do not come out. For example, there is evidence that the gulf is closing in

respect to per-pupil expenditure rates for White districts and those serving children of color (Irvine, 2003). Yet it is important to ask how much of the funding increase associated with NCLB will actually make its way into urban classrooms to benefit children directly as opposed to sustaining bureaucratic layers. Also, does the funding come at times when schools need it or so late (if ever) that it does little good?

Further, one must acknowledge that the costs of military defense and wars on terrorism have left very little currency for domestic priorities like education. The relationship between militarism and education is evident in such measures as the requirement, inserted into the NCLB bill, that high schools make student contact information available to military recruiters (Wells, 2003). In addition, "the Department of Education budget proposal for 2003 [was] \$56.5 billion. The approved Department of Defense budget [was] \$396 billion, nearly seven times what is allocated for education, and more than three times the combined military budgets of Russia, China, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Libya, Cuba, Sudan, and Syria" (Wells, 2003; 3).

In the end, I believe that NCLB will actually do little to

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improve education aside from opening it up further as a new frontier for corporate interests to exploit. While education remains a “feel good” issue that politicians routinely use to garner the votes of women (primarily), “the real prize is the more than \$100 billion dollars...spent annually in urban school districts for building construction, school supplies, textbooks, food services, testing programs, and Internet infrastructure and services” (Anderson, 2001; 100).

ACCOUNTABILITY AND NCLB

NCLB’s other difficulty, “accountability,” proves equally consequential for Black and Latino student populations. NCLB defines “success” in very narrow terms and specifically as one’s ability to score well on standardized tests. A number of NCLB’s components are based on a formula used “successfully” by President George W. Bush and his Secretary of Education Rod Paige during Bush’s tenure as governor and Paige’s stint as Houston’s superintendent of schools. Unfortunately, the good results yielded in Houston have been exaggerated. For example, while the number of Houston students who passed statewide achievement tests went from 44 percent to 64 percent, the gains were boosted by an “abysmal drop out rate” (Winters, 2001). Low-performing students, under constant pressure, simply surrendered and left school prematurely. Almost half of the ninth graders in most of Houston’s school system failed to reach graduation. Consider these statistics in light of the broader ones indicating that Latinos throughout the United States have the highest drop-out rates (Frankenburg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003) and Blacks remain twice as likely as Whites to drop out (Bell, 2004).

Much of the research literature indicates that a student’s ability to perform well on standardized tests is most closely correlated with parental income, the level of maternal education, and the quality of her/his classroom teacher. There is an important caveat here, and it focuses on the fact that socioeconomic status (SES) does not explain all distinctions in test scores between Black and Latino students and their White and Asian counterparts.

SES theories are problematic in that they fail to explain why African Americans from affluent families still score significantly lower than their White counterparts on standardized measures of achievement. Nor do these studies provide insight into why Blacks in desegregated suburban schools score only slightly better than Blacks in segregated urban schools. (Irvine, 2003; 4)

NCLB is deceptive in stressing accountability through testing. Its advocates fail to acknowledge that most U.S. schoolchildren are tested each year anyway, especially those children attending schools in poor communities.

This testing requirement increases the possibility that Black and Latino children will be further dis-educated through placement in special education. Black youngsters

are overrepresented in each category of special education services and in every state. Furthermore, it has become increasingly difficult for Black students to extricate themselves from special education placements. Latino children, on the other hand, are overidentified in some states and underidentified in others (Parrish, 2002). Yet the ways in which these identifications are affected by second-language acquisition factors should be explored and further studied.

The potential for an increase in referrals to special education for Black and Latino children and youth becomes even greater when the following consideration is taken into account. An inverse correlation has been established between decreased federal funding for remedial reading programs and concomitant increases in funding for special education programs (Allington, 2002). Thus, students who may not be eligible for assistance through underfunded Title I reading programs do become eligible once they are diagnosed as learning disabled—a distinction for which there is no standard or universally accepted definition (Allington, 2002).

STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Relatively few people would quarrel with the premise that the U.S. public education system, especially in its service to poor children and students of color, is in need of an overhaul. The public should challenge, however, whether NCLB is the solution.

However, many administrators find themselves in the position of understanding the shortfalls of the law but still being held accountable for results. These same administrators feel obligated to defend flawed policy (that they may find just as problematic) in the face of heated criticism from teachers in their schools. So how do they remain committed to sound educational practice and listen to the legitimate issues raised by teachers under their supervision while complying with federal guidelines?

I have developed the following strategies that will, hopefully, prove helpful to educators in navigating the unwieldy terrain of a post-NCLB world.

- Read as much of the professional literature as you can, attend workshops, and consult with education experts on a regular basis. The goal is to gain a comprehensive understanding of NCLB, as well as its implications for your school and district. Read even those pieces that express vastly different perspectives on the matter than those that you hold. Go beyond the resources provided through the district (if feasible).
- Forge strong partnerships with teacher educators from local universities and colleges. This can be a cost-effective way, in respect to time and money, of routinely consulting with experts and being directed to appropriate resources.
- Study best educational practice that is also culturally relevant, and involve teachers and school support personnel

in the process. Consider the fact that “44% of the nation’s schools have no teachers of color on staff, and many students will complete their K-12 schooling without being taught by a single teacher of color” (Irvine, 2003; 53). The numbers of administrators of color is even lower. We can safely assume that many of those who choose to work in urban centers are not as familiar with their students’ various cultures and learning styles as they could be. In the best interest of those students (to which most of us are deeply committed), it is incumbent on all educators to learn how to create atmospheres conducive to teaching students of color. Culturally relevant pedagogy must not just become an aspect of the school curriculum; it must also become part of the school’s culture.

- While accepting that standardized testing is a reality and will not disappear anytime in the near future, administrators and teachers should be provided with opportunities to study authentic assessment and consider the feasibility of using multiple measures to determine academic success. High attendance should be considered a measure of success as well.

- Provide multiple and varied opportunities for teachers to learn more about NCLB and authentic assessment. These opportunities should extend beyond those provided after school (during staff meetings) and for a couple of half- and full-days each semester. Investing in teachers by providing them with more comprehensive staff development (which includes opportunities to attend conferences and workshops) serves as an investment in education generally.

Support and invest in new faculty. Many new teachers leave urban schools after the first year, citing lack of support, problems with classroom discipline, and harsh working conditions. I believe they would stay if we did a better job of supporting them. One way is to provide comprehensive ongoing staff development that involves mentoring, the introduction of diverse teaching strategies, and in-class support as teachers learn those strategies.

- Become political. We must use our unions effectively and forge interest-convergence alliances with other unions. Write letters to the editor of your local newspapers, explaining the issue to constituents so that our point of view regarding flawed education policy is heard.

Send letters and e-mails, as well as make phone calls, to local politicians on NCLB and other education legislation. Remind them on a regular basis that, although children are a silent minority, teachers, school support personnel, administrators, and parents are a strong and vocal voting bloc.

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