

No Child Left Behind: Building Educational Systems of Integrity

By Stacy D. Dandridge

Education is vastly becoming less and less of a priority amongst our children. While weapons, drugs, and other death-dealing cravings enter our schools, the desire to be educated is often left at the front door. As an educator in my local school district, I see firsthand the apathy and indifference that is often displayed towards education and its administrators. Children appear disinterested in, disconnected from, and discombobulated by the offered curriculums. They are no longer inclined to look at, listen to, or learn from their teachers. However, the problem with the education system does not mainly rest with the children; rather, the problem lies within the systems that have been established to educate them; the governmental structures that govern public schools, and a lack of parental and community participation in public education.

Recently President Barack Obama made what he believes are significant changes in the Bush Administration's "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB Act). The NCLB Act initially promised to increase the level of education within American schools by testing students yearly in the areas of math and reading. The problem with the NCLB Act is that it focused greatly on students passing standardized tests but failed to equip them to meet the intense demands of pursuing a quality education over time. The demand to meet certain requirements for the NCLB Act often resulted in children being passed to the next grade in order to keep the school from appearing as a non-productive or failing institution. President Obama, however, is suggesting that states be allowed flexibility in creating curriculums that work and move our children towards pursuing a college education. He states, "The purpose is not to give states and districts a

reprieve from accountability, but rather to unleash energy to improve our schools at the local level.”¹

While many children across the nation are suffering in our broken education system, it is no secret that African American children typically suffer the most. How can we enhance the educational systems that surround African American children and ensure that they are systems that are committed to children rather than the statistics? How can we make sure that our children as well as their educations aren't left behind? This article focuses on the widespread dilapidation found in the educational systems that house African American children, while offering hope in the form of solutions that can help change these systems.

The first step to building educational systems of integrity begins with reclaiming our children. Children have been bamboozled by the appearance of successful actors, reality television stars, and music entertainers who have achieved great success in spite of their low levels of education. They are flooded with images of entertainers who have somehow defied the odds and made it from the urine-soiled hallways of ghettos to million dollar mansions in the Hamptons. They have been bamboozled by reality shows that depict life as being absent of struggle and always having a fairy tale ending. They are being bamboozled by the entertainment industry that flaunts riches and rewards, but rarely exposes the struggles and strains that come with living life in the spotlight and the fast lane. They are constantly exposed to a culture that promotes instant gratification.

However, the fact that our children have been bamboozled is not their fault. Children have a measure of innocence and naiveté that demands protection by parental figures; and in some cases, the parental figures have failed. Parents who are willing to invest in their children by exposing them to wholesome and healthy environments, attending PTA meetings, and supporting

the extracurricular activities, in which their children engage, will find that their investment will pay dividends. A modest amount of parental involvement goes a long way in ensuring the academic success of a child.

Second, educational systems of integrity can be built by parents, the government, and communities engaging in the hard but necessary work of building healthy homes for our children. It is easy for administrators to spend time looking at test scores, evaluating the performances of teachers, and calculating the amount of money needed to run a school while never paying attention to the environments in which many of our children live. Focusing on the welfare of the education system becomes irrelevant if we do not pause to consider the welfare of the homes that produce the children who make up our education system. Some of our children are living in homes where they are abused sexually, mentally, and physically. Some are products of homes where they are the primary authority figure in the absence of parental guidance and presence. They may live in homes where there is never enough food on the table; therefore, they show up to school physically tired, mentally abused, and malnourished. No wonder they can't focus in school!

At times we are guilty of declaring that our children have no manners, are incapable of behaving, or do not care about education, and this may be true for some, but not for most. The hardships and abject poverty that some children experience in their homes may result in bad attitudes or disdain that they bring to the classroom. Creating better home environments for our children will increase their success in the classroom. Study after study has shown this but somehow we have not been willing and able to make it a reality.

Finally, the path to building educational systems of integrity must run through the African American community. The things that I briefly discussed above that are harming

children in schools are certainly not limited to African American children. However, our children suffer most from these ills. The Black community has grown from a tightly knitted, oppression-overcoming people, only to be surmounted by narcissism and nihilism. We have become so in enthralled with our individual success that we fail to notice when one of our children is in need. Our narcissism has led us down a path of rugged individualism and self-destruction. Cornel West, the author of Race Matters says this, “The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness.”² We see pervasive evidence of nihilism in young black Americans every day. We see our teenage girls lose themselves in young black men who leave them longing for an intimacy that sex cannot bring. We watch the teen mothers of our children stay in degrading and abusive relationships with men because they see no value within themselves. We witness our teenage boys give themselves to violence, vandalism, and other vulgar forms of expression in an effort to fill obvious emotional and other voids. We watch our black boys destroy one another in the name of territory and honor. Where are the buffers? Where are the communities that were built to dispense the buffers of love, protection, and guidance? We are responsible for creating the buffers to help our young people ward off such pervasive decay.

African American children are suffering most in our broken education system. Accordingly, the African American community has a signal responsibility to create buffers that help our children ward off nihilistic behavior. This article proposes a system of education that must be reconciled in the home and wider society; the African American church is part of the wider society and has a critical role to play. Much of what brought our ancestors through slavery was their ability to create faith communities that enhanced the character of each individual and

families. This is not an invitation to start another program for the sake of having another program. Instead, we must begin to enhance the programs that already exist within our parishes and communities. We need programs that help build character in children and parents to help them ward off the harsh realities that African Americans face daily. We need churches who through their consistent involvement, allow no child in their immediate community to be left behind.

Fixing our broken education system must also include enhancing the schools that our children attend. In order to make schools places of integrity we must begin to help the children, parents, and even teachers and administrators within those schools. We cannot merely focus on statistics, reading scores, and money; we must focus on building children, teachers and parents of character and integrity. It will be a waste of time to create great curriculums only to give them to children and parents who are mentally, physically, and emotionally warped by hellish environments. Fixing the education system is not mainly about making kids smarter; rather, it is about preparing them for their future and enabling them to think critically about all future endeavors. Charles Murray says this, “What we need is leaders with more integrity, prudence, self-discipline, and moral courage, not smarter ones. What we need is more common sense in public life, not a bunch of overeducated intellectuals telling us what to do.”³ The work must start with enhancing the quality of life for those who are most harmed by our broken education system instead of continuing to push curriculums and education bills that are not working as churches and the community stands silently on the side-lines. Let us try focusing on the children for a change so that they will not be left behind!

Notes

1. "Obama Administration Sets High Bar for Flexibility from No Child Left Behind in Order to Advance Equity and Support Reform." The White House, 23 September 2011. Web. 29 November 2011. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/23/obama-administration-sets-high-bar-flexibility-no-child-left-behind-orde>
2. West, Cornel. Race Matters. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.
3. Murray, Charles. Real Education: Four Simple Truths For Bringing America's Schools Back To Reality. New York: Crown Forum, 2008.