

# **No Child Left Behind: Building Educational Systems of Integrity**

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Education is vastly becoming less and less of a priority amongst our children. While weapons, drugs, and other erroneous 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 to be 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. As a result, America's schools are falling lower and lower on the totem pole. However, the problem with the education system does not solely rest with the children; rather, the problem lies within the systems that have been established to educate our children.

Recently President Barack Obama made what he believes to be 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 America 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 and failed to properly equip them to meet the intense demands of pursuing a quality education over time. The demands to meet certain requirements for the NCLB Act often resulted in children being passed along 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.”

While many children across the nation are suffering in this broken education system, it is no secret that African American children often suffer the most. How can we build up the educational systems that surround African American children, systems that are committed to the child rather than the statistics? How can we make sure that our children as well as their educations aren't left behind? This article intends to focus on the widespread dilapidation found in the educational systems that surround our children, namely African Americans, while inspiring hope for how to enhance those systems.

The first step to building educational systems of integrity starts with reclaiming our children. Children have been bamboozled by the appearance of successful business persons, actors, reality television stars, and music entertainers who have achieved great success in spite of their 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, 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. They are constantly being exposed to a culture that promotes instant gratification without having to endure a process. However, the idea of children being bamboozled is not merely their faults. Children have a certain innocence that demands the protection of parental figures, and in some cases the parental figures in their lives have somehow failed them. Parents who are willing to invest time with their children by attending PTA meetings or supporting extracurricular activities will find their investment to be fruitful.

Leading to our second observation, educational systems of integrity can be built by parents engaging in the hard work of building healthy homes for our children to live in. 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 that our children are living in. Focusing on the welfare of the education system becomes irrelevant if we don't pause to consider the welfare of the homes that produce the children who make up our education systems. Some of our children are living in homes where they are being sexually, mentally, and physically abused. 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! At times we have been guilty of declaring that our children have no manners, are incapable of behaving, or don't care about education, and this may be true for some, but not for all. The hardships and abject poverty that some children experience in their homes may result in bad attitudes or disdain in the classroom. However, creating better environments for our children to live in could lead to their success in the class room.

Finally, the path to building educational systems of integrity must run through the African American community. Many of the above topics that I have discussed are not limited to, but often plague African American kids. The Black community has grown from a tightly knitted, oppressed overcoming people, only to be surmounted by narcissism and nihilism. We have become so in love with ourselves that we fail to notice when one of our own is in need. Our narcissism has led us down a path of self-denial 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.” 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 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 of society, and other vulgar forms of expression in an effort to fill a void inside. 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.

If it is African American children who are suffering the most in this broken education system, then the African American community has a responsibility to create buffers that help our young people ward off nihilistic behavior. While this article proposes various systems of education that must be reconciled in the home and community, the African American church must play a role as well. Much of what brought our ancestors through slavery was their ability to create faith communities that enhanced the character of each individual. This is not an invitation to start another program for the sake of having another program. However, we must begin to enhance and use the programs that already exist within our parishes and communities; programs that help build character in children and parents to help them ward off the harsh realities that African Americans may face daily.

Perhaps fixing a broken education system must begin by enhancing the educational systems that surround our children on a day to day basis. In order to make those systems

structures of integrity we must begin to build up the children, parents, and even teachers and administrators within those systems. We cannot merely focus on statistics, reading scores, and money we must focus on building children of character and integrity. It does us no good to create great curriculums only to give them to children who are mentally, physically, and emotionally warped by their environments.

Fixing the education system is not about making kids smarter; rather, it is about preparing them for their future and enabling them to think critically about those 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.” The work must start with enhancing the quality of life for those who have an impact on the education system instead of continuing to push curriculums and education bills that don’t appear to be working. Let’s try focusing on the children for a change, that neither child nor their educations will be left behind!

#### Notes

Murray, Charles. Real Education: Four Simple Truths For Bringing America’s Schools Back To Reality. New York: Crown Forum, 2008.

“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>

West, Cornel. Race Matters. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.