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The Struggle for Better Schools

Bernard C. Watson

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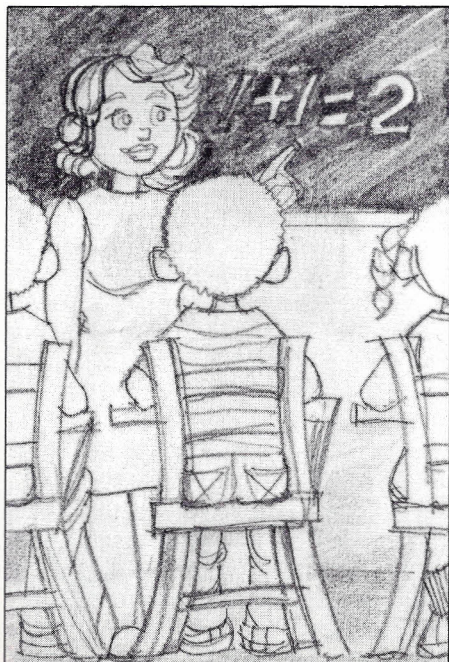
to act on the notion that Blacks and whites of the same class will have similar experiences in the housing market.

The special concerns and problems of Blacks should continue to be given special attention and that appropriate remedies to deal with these different effects continue to be available. Blacks are still at a substantial disadvantage when it comes to housing opportunities and neighborhood environments. The panacea of the "strong economy" does not always filter down its benefits to the less well off. There is no basis for confidence that the experience in the 1980s will be different. □

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The Struggle for Better Schools

By Bernard C. Watson



Significant numbers of Black Americans continue to leave school prior to graduation, while an additional significant percentage graduate from high school without even the most rudimentary reading, writing and mathematical skills necessary to function in modern society.

The quality of education received by a significant percentage of Blacks, Hispanics and poor Americans is unacceptable. Concentrated in public schools located in the older cities and urban areas of this country, Blacks and other minorities are the victims of systems beset with the major problems of under-financing, violence, vandalism, teacher and administrator fear, hostility, and low expectations.

White parents continue to resist any attempt at desegregation and increasing numbers of Black parents, after years of seeing the burdens of desegregation placed disproportionately on Black children, are questioning the benefits of desegregation. Many Black parents, instead, argue for improving the quality of education their children receive wherever the children attend school.

State legislators, quickly seizing upon taxpayer and citizen discontent, introduced and passed minimum competency legislation requiring that tests be administered to high school students preparing to graduate and requiring that every student demonstrate a pre-determined level of competency as a prerequisite for graduation and receipt of a high school diploma. Thirty-eight of the 50 states have passed such legislation. The passage of this legislation represents an attempt to develop accountability. Although some efforts in this area have attempted to include teachers and, to a lesser degree, administrators, the major effort to date has been to develop educational accountability by placing the burden upon the student; e.g. to hold the student accountable.

It is apparent that the burden of minimum competency must not be borne entirely by students. To expect students

to produce and be held accountable for the educational process when teachers and administrators are not is foolish and unrealistic. At the very minimum, competency and accountability must include educators. Minimum competency testing programs must be seen for what they are: political responses which do not address the basic question of whether educators are educating. Black Americans cannot allow minimum competency to become the acceptable measure of education. By definition, education must be more than a minimum.

Studies of school desegregation show that Black children and youth were suspended and excluded more often than whites, and similar research on school violence and vandalism reveals the same patterns. For too many of these young people, suspension, exclusion or dropping-out is their introduction to membership in the urban underclass.

This existing and expanding underclass is not insignificant. Its members numbering in the hundreds of thousands are cast adrift in our cities and urban areas. The underclass represents not only an indictment of the American dream of equal opportunity and employment for all who want it, but also represents a clear and present danger of the harmony and civility which are absolutely necessary to human interaction in American life.

There are thousands of poor, Black parents who are doing a commendable, even herculean, job of rearing, encouraging, and motivating their children to succeed and achieve in school. There are thousands of disadvantaged Black children and youth who are willing to pay the price for scholastic achievement, for excellence. These young people work hard, study their lessons and, somehow, make it through the often stultifying, depressing and discouraging hurdles thrown in their path. The Black student achiever is almost totally ignored. Attention is showered on athletes, street gang leaders, unwed adolescent mothers,

¹⁴ the violent and the lazy. The clear impression created is that all inner-city, disadvantaged, Black youth are alike: unmotivated, underachieving, violent, disruptive and lacking in interest in matters educational. Poor parents of disadvantaged Black youth are portrayed as uneducated, discouraged and unable to cope with or to discipline and inspire their children.

The tragedy is that these individuals—students, parents, administrators in disadvantaged urban and city schools—become scapegoats, the victims of a prevailing stereotype and mythology which consigns all of them to the educational trash heap. It is an additional, unnecessary, and cruel burden placed on the shoulders of poor, Black and minority children.

With the exception of the historically Black institutions of higher education, the two-year colleges have done more than any others to increase access to higher education for minority students. Well over 40 percent of all Black students enrolled in higher education are in two-year colleges. The reasons for this overrepresentation in two-year institutions are obvious: they are located in areas where Black and other minority Americans are concentrated, admissions standards are lower, and, because most are commuter institutions, they cost less to attend than four-year residential institutions.

Black Americans attending predominantly white colleges and universities continue to face problems because of their race. Significant numbers of Black students on a predominately white campus continue to cause concern among white faculty and students. In 1980, there were serious racial incidents at several of the eastern, elitist institutions of higher education. The incidents included threats and assaults on Black students and the burning of a cross in front of a house where a number of Black students lived.

Because Black Americans have historically educated their children in the public schools, the decline in the quality of public education, the erosion of support for public education, and the recent attempts to further undermine public schools through such means as tuition tax credits and anti-busing legislation must be viewed as frontal attacks on a primary means of upward mobility for Black Americans. It is imperative, therefore, that Black Americans understand the consequences of these assaults. During the 1980s, it is likely that the trend toward more conservative attitudes as illustrated during the recent presidential election will be reflected in the development of more conservative public policies.

It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the survival of Black people is at stake. Black Americans must no longer depend solely upon the schools to provide children and youth with the skills and knowledge necessary to contend with a political, economic and social milieu which is not only unsympathetic, but may very well be hostile in many respects. Black organizations of all kinds must begin to institute programs which provide skills, knowledge, and support for Black youth. Black youth must be politicized by making them aware of the history of struggle. Educational forums of all kinds must be a staple of Black communities throughout the country in order that the youth may be instilled with a sense of pride that only history can provide, especially when that history is conveyed by those who were a part of the struggle for equality and human dignity.

It seems clear that in 1981 Black Americans must return to a period in history when we relied more heavily on our own inner strengths and resources for survival and for the education of our children and youth. We must draw upon our past experience and look to ourselves for our educational and political survival, while, at the same time, mak-

ing sure that those who are officially charged with such responsibilities are held accountable. Because there is power in our numbers, all Black Americans must realize the necessity for understanding and participating at all levels and in all areas of the educational and political process. □

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The Status of Children

By Marian Wright Edelman

