

Big Bad Wolf in Sheepskin

by A. Lee Henderson

Truth is not so distant from the fairytale parables of our childhood. Disguised as fantasy, it masks the ugly future.

So I was reminded on a recent trip through Oklahoma where I tuned in by radio to a debate among educators on the incursions of Parental Prerogative legislation in the public schools.

Minnesota, Arkansas and Oklahoma were reported to have passed such legislation which could provide parents with a choice initiative of placing their children wherever they desired within the school system.

Freedom of choice was propounded as healthy, yet as I listened, the implications rang a bell of foreboding. What would happen if every minority-integrated school in the geographical borders accessible to minority students were stripped of its majority Caucasian students through "freedom of choice" Parental Prerogative?

Was this the anti-civil rights, anti-integration Big Bad Wolf stalking minorities from the halls of education armed with the sheepskin deception of "freedom of choice" to graduate from the schools of choice?

Although the general public, and even some of the top media people such as Elaine Woo, Los Angeles Times Education Writer in California told one they have not researched the issue or covered it as yet, the spectre stalks our legislative county and gubernatorial houses. Ms. Woo acknowledged that Bill Honig, Superintendent of Schools in California ultimately wants Parental Prerogative Legislation passed, and it must be germinating in one form or another among legislators there! To date, she was not aware of any media coverage on the issue by the August Los Angeles Times.

California is unique since the Los Angeles Board of Education "faced with grim statistics showing pervasive low achievement will consider approving an ambitious ten-year \$431 million plan aimed at reversing years of academic failure, particularly among poor, minority students."

What exists here in microcosm shows up en masse across the nation. High dropout rates and chronically poor test scores demand action. In L.A. County the March 27 release of the document "The Children Can No Longer Wait" publicly states that "institutional racism" prevents minority youngsters from getting the quality of education available to Anglo students; but community leaders are concerned that the report is still inadequate in addressing the specific needs of Black, Latino, and Asian school children.

When we look at the nation's second largest school district, Los Angeles, we see that the minorities are kept at a disadvantage by the way they are taught academically, far below their critical-thinking level and their potential.

But instead of directing a frontal attack upon the prevailing inadequacies of overcrowded classrooms and low-paid, limited teachers, the problem is being approached from an administrative/organizational re-structuring that seems inadequate to the problems facing us on the local, state and nationwide levels.

Good intentions decorate the Big Bad Wolf's disguise like a pretty bonnet. Subtracting from the carnivorous bite of the monster who would prefer to reign upon his own terms and gratify his selfish appetites at the expense of human progress and dignity.

Reform, however, is sorely needed and most welcome. We welcome its beginnings in Los Angeles and hope that it is precedent-setting in its exemplary national scope.

A unique view of Parental Prerogative came to us from Stuart Gothold, Superintendent of the Los Angeles County Office of Education, in an exclusive telephone interview with us.

Gothold was totally aware and informed of the issue, citing Minnesota as the state where this has made far-reaching gains.

Gothold's considered views were readily shared with us in his earnest attempt to cooperate and share his personal and academic evaluations on a quality professional level.

"We now have modifications of Parental Prerogative programs in Los Angeles," he pointed out. "No longer is the school district attendance mandatory to residential areas. Children can qualify for a school outside their residential family boundaries. Work location of parents can also define where the child may elect to attend



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school subject to parental request."

Parents who wish to enroll children in "magnet" schools, a designation for specialty arts, music, and accelerated academic programs may consider such schools as options. Permits with transportation are available, and these schools are drawing increased attention and interest.

Film executive Ross Merrin whose son Beau, twelve-years-old currently (and Graham, nine-years-old, subsequently) attends the Magnet Loyola School in Santa Monica, California, notes that the creative teaching staff enjoys a United Nations cross-section of students from wide minority ethnic groups. Merrin, an activist in human rights-and-potential causes, enjoyed his own childhood in integrated community activities with his brothers Bruce and Scott Merrin. (Indeed, they played basketball as minority members of my all-Black team!) At the magnet schools, the diversified ethnic groups enriched the cultural and academic potentials of the pupils. Expanding future horizons of the world and its peoples as a planetary experience must be shared equitably to be fully enjoyed socially and economically.

Superintendent Gothold cited a specialized high school magnet program available in Los Angeles county-wide through the Fine Arts College at California State.

However, in the guise of providing creative schools to gratify the performance potentials and motivate students to increased levels of learning, can we shield ourselves from the negative, the downside impact of pervasive Parental Prerogative legislation? Will the arbitrary choices of parents push minority students back to a lonely, inadequate educational ghetto?

Stuart Gothold expressed reservations. "It can lead to racial isolation," he concurred. "The better facilities will operate at capacity. And there is a problem that gives me great concern, too. Should we be marketing schools like candy bars or products and reducing educational institutions to popularity contests?"

Indeed, we must be careful, as Superintendent Gothold counsels, to sidestep the pitfalls that place our school choices for our children in the arena of major and minor league sports teams. Yet the challenge to achieve on a student level, scoring to top oneself when encouraged in academic competition is exciting.

The objective of providing our children a basic education in our democracy is founded on a premise that by developing skills, knowledge and training in informative years, we can equip our children to formulate their future.

The seeds of pre-school kindergarten, individualized attention through smaller classes, and cultural sensitivity to the racial and ethnic language/performance expressiveness and values inherent in our new citizens and recently enfranchised minorities can be nurtured to overcome currently dismal outlooks.

The problems within our school nationwide impact all children, all parents. Until we deal actively with these problems and accelerate aggressively to correct the deficiencies, all will suffer.

Jaimie Escalante, the heroic teacher portrayed in the film "Stand And Deliver" whose challenge to his students emancipated them from their inner deprivations of viewing themselves below the levels of their potentials to excel, can be the folk hero of an inspired teaching profession and aspiring students in minority neighborhoods.

We must pay careful attention, however, not to regress into ghetto isolation.

Deeply rooted social values impact education in our children. The Japanese youngsters have been inculcated with a respect for a high-tech industrial world within which they are expected to function at peak levels of

achievement if they are "good" children.

What are the deeply rooted social values that impact our minorities?

What does the minority Black child extract from its environment and is there any cultural expectation to function, to achieve a "good" child level to participate in our world of commerce, communications, creative arts?

The major Parental Prerogative we have to initiate is in the choice of preparing children, less in our image than in our clear and urgent vision of vaulting forward to become progressively better, challenging our children to accomplish and enjoy their accomplishments.

Economic blight takes a tormenting toll of our psychological resources. Yet we must determine to roll forwards, not backwards!

Beyond Parental Prerogative for minorities, let us bag the Big Bad Wolf from marauding our civil rights, and in the best measures available to us, let us keep alert to the legislative processes in our respective constituencies so that we not only stand our ground to protect our educational equality, but struggle further to a vantage point of educational superiority in competition with ourselves.

Education, a milestone to so many of us before achieving our fuller advances into economic prosperity, can jolt the per capita index into a new story in the annals of Black achievement. Success is as viable as failure.

By gearing our children toward "The New Jerusalem," we may gain the momentum to rocket us into a startling new page in the annals of our own success.

NOTE: Carly Simon won the 1989 Oscar for her song "Let The River Run" featured in the movie "Working Girl" where the phrase "the New Jerusalem" is used, ironically, in context with the accelerated pace of executive achievement and competition to connote the megafrontiers of the business world as "the New Jerusalem!"

Mules Cannot Pull And Kick At The Same Time

REPUBLICANS CLAIM CREDIT FOR DROP IN BLACK UNEMPLOYMENT

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Republican National Committee (RNC) chairman Lee Atwater said today that another drop in the unemployment level among black Americans will be a helpful factor in the Republican Party's effort to reach out to black Americans.

According to Department of Labor statistics, the rate of unemployment among blacks dropped from 11.9% in February 1989 to 10.9% last month.

"Since 1982, when the Reagan-Bush Administration submitted its first budget, the unemployment rate among blacks has dropped from 18.9% to the current level of 10.9%," said Atwater.

"These figures show that our party has provided opportunity for all Americans through sustained economic growth," Atwater continued. "Black Americans have taken an active role in the revitalization of our nation's economy, and these figures are proof that Republican leadership is the key to continued growth and prosperity for the country."

"Even though this drop shows great progress from the figures we inherited from the last Democratic administration, there is still a major difference between the white and black labor force. We must strive to achieve equal employment for all Americans," he concluded

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