NATIONAL FORUM

Along The Color Line

by Dr. Manning Marable

Black Education In Crisis Part I of a Series

The American public education system is facing a crisis, and its primary victims are African-Americans, as well as millions of Hispanics and low income people. According to the statistics of the U.S. Department of Education and the Educational Testing Service, about twenty million American adults are functionally illiterate. Each day, 3,800 American teenagers drop out of school. Only 71 percent of all ninth graders graduate within four years. Thirteen percent of all 16- to 24-year olds are not currently in school and have not completed high school. One half of all American 17-year olds cannot perform math problems which are usually taught in junior high school, more than one quarter of all thirteen year olds, cannot successfully complete elementary level arithmetic, and only six percent of 17 year olds can answer most algebra problems.

Perhaps the greatest deficiency of students is their inability to write and read clearly and with comprehension. According to the recent report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), less than two thirds of all 17-year olds are able to write an adequate letter of application for a job--''adequate'' being defined as the ability to write clearly enough to merit the author a job interview.

Students do even worse when they are asked to write on a topic employing evidence and an argument pro or con. Only 27 percent of the 17 year olds could do an adequate job when asked to write a letter to their Senator discussing whether or not to cut the budget for the space program. And as for the NAEP's highest category of writing, ''elaborate writing''--that is, writing which does an excellent job informing or persuading--only a small minority of 17 year olds were in this category; only four percent for the job letters, and only one percent for letters to the Senator.

The crisis is greatest for Black youth. African-Americans are disproportionately represented among those who are functionally illiterate and who drop out of school. Educators have known that one of the primary predictors of what sociologists call a person's ''life chances'' is the level of education one receives. More than two thirds of all Black men currently in prison, for example, have an eleventh grade education or less. The U.S. Center for Education Statistics did a national longitudinal survey of high school sophomore in 1980. The survey tracked the progress of three groups: high school graduates, who graduated with a C+ or better; ''at-risk'' graduates, who had academic averages below C+ but nevertheless finished high school; and nongraduates, students who dropped out. Five years after their sophomore year in high school, it was learned that nine percent of all Black female high school graduates were on welfare and were unwed mothers. A much larger percentage of this group were enrolled in colleges or vocational schools. Nineteen percent of the ''at-risk'' high school Black female graduates were receiving welfare by 1985. For Black female dropout, 44 percent were on welfare by 1985, and 54 percent were unmarried mothers.

There is a direct correlation between poverty and inferior eduation. Keep in mind that 57 percent of all Black families headed by 15- to 24-year olds live in poverty, and the chief breadwinners of such families usually have no high school diplomas. Seventy five percent of all Black poor families are headed by single females.

In recent years, many American politicians and corporate leaders have tried to find a scapegoat to explain away the crisis in American public education. There's a long tradition of scapegoating in American politics. When things go wrong, find someone to blame, regardless of the actual evidence. And politicans and even some educators, such as William Bennett, Reagan's former Secretary of Education, have sometimes tried to attribute the crisis to teachers. This scapegoat thesis claims that the federal government is spending more than ever to improve schools, but money isn't the answer. The productivity and performance of teachers has to be improved, which means various merit pay proposals and efforts to mandate more strict statewide teachers' exams.

Like all half-truths, such rhetoric sounds plausible enough to seem valid. The ''blame the teachers'' rhetoric plays well with those who don't want to increase taxes to pay for academic excellence. But let's examine the evidence, not the rhetoric.

Part of the crisis in public education exists because since 1981 the Federal government has actually retreated from its historic financial commitments. According to the U.S. Department of Education, federal spending on education between 1980 to 1988, when adjusted for inflation, actually fell 12 percent, $49.3 billion to $43.3 billion. Overall spending for elementary and secondary school programs declined by 19 percent, and federal expenditures for postsecondary education plummeted 26 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars.

Why are we losing the battle for quality education? We want to give lip service to excellence, but we are unwilling to pay for it. Since 1980, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education: ''Child nutrition programs fell 10.2 percent, vocational and adult education fell 23 percent, and Chapter I grants for the disadvantaged fell 17.3 percent, now serving only about half of the eligible participants, down from 75 percent coverage in 1980. Head Start funding grew 20 percent in constant dollars, but still only serves about one-quarter to one-third of the eligible population . . .''

Contrary to popular belief, ''the federal role in education spending has always been relatively small. In 1990, of the $353 billion to be spent by the public and private sectors on education, federal expenditures will account for only 6 percent of the total, private spending will account for 27 percent, and the balance will come from state and local governments.'' Meanwhile, as George Bush parades and postures himself as the so-called ''Education President,'' this winter he sent to Congress a federal budget for 1991 which would cut aid for 300,000 college students, and do next to nothing innovative to address the problems of urban public schools. We will never achieve excellence in the public schools for Black children so long as the Federal Government refused to do its fair share.

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AT ISSUE

Grant Statehood to the District of Columbia?

The Rev. Jesse Jackson is president of the National Rainbow Coalition, Inc., a human rights organization. He is also national president of Operation PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity).

YES

Should Congress grant statehood to the District of Columbia?

Yes. The American Revolution began when people said ''taxation without representation is tyranny.'' District residents pay more than $1 billion annually in federal taxes—more than nine states. Of 115 nations with elected national legislatures, only the United States denies representation to the citizens of its capital. District statehood is morally right, rationally sound, legally possible and constitutionally permitted. All that's needed is a simple majority vote in the U.S. House and Senate and the President's signature. Historically, statehood has been granted when three criteria have been met: (1) the people publicly have expressed their desire to become a state; (2) the people agree with the democratic form of government practiced in America; and (3) there are sufficient people and economic wealth to support a state government. The district meets all these criteria.

What effect would statehood have on the rest of the country?

District of Columbia statehood is not for the district only! Quite likely it would mean an integrated Senate where two progressive senators and a congressperson would fight for a national health plan, for affordable housing, for increased funding for education, for strengthened laws that provide equal protection under the law for all, for a cleaner and safer environment, for a more just and peaceful world through development of the Third World, for the rights of workers (e.g., for raising the minimum wage and against so-called ''right-to-work'' laws), for fair farm prices and for fairer and more progressive tax laws.

How else could we provide district residents with full representation?

We could grant partial representation through various annexation schemes. But democracy demands full self-determination, not just some representation. The Soviets granted representation to the Baltics, but they voted for self-determination instead. District residents deserve full self-determination.

U.S. Rep. Ralph Regula (R-Ohio) was first elected to Congress in 1972. He serves on the House Appropriations Committee as well as the House Select Committee on Aging.

NO

Should Congress grant statehood to the District of Columbia?

No. Numerous constitutional lawyers have advised that Congress does not have the right to "grant" statehood to the district. They believe a constitutional amendment would have to be passed by Congress and ratified by the states. I do not support district statehood because the constitutional questions are serious, the added bureaucracy could be unmanageable for the district, and there are other means for district residents to achieve full voting representation.

What effect would statehood have on the rest of the country?

I do not think district statehood would have a profound effect. Politically, some conservative states are concerned that the traditionally liberal district would vote for liberal representatives. This is not such a big issue in the House with 435 members, but would have a greater impact in the Senate. I often hear a question like, ''Why should that city be made a state when other cities, like New York, have millions of citizens living in them?'' There are valid arguments against this question, but it seems to represent some of the country's sentiment.

How else could we provide district residents with full representation?

It is not necessary to create a whole new state to give district residents voting representation in Congress. The land now comprising the district once belonged to Maryland, and it makes sense to turn it back to that state—minus a reduced enclave of federal buildings administered by Congress—just as the western portion of the district was returned to Virginia in 1846. Current district residents would become citizens of Maryland, with full voting representation. And retrocession would preserve Maryland's intent that the land it gave be the seat of government. The question of voter representation for district residents is an involved, serious one, but we do a disservice to the people of the district if we limit the debate to only one option.

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Rev. Al Sharpton, Pedro Espada Back New Alliance Party's Dr. Fulani In Plan to Run Independent Race for Governor of New York

The Reverend Al Sharpton, president of the United African Movement, and Pedro Espada, the executive director of the Soundview Health Center in the Bronx, have given their full backing to New Alliance Party chairperson Dr. Lenora Fulani in her plan to run as an independent for governor of New York this year. Cheers, sustained applause and standing ovations from a multiracial crowd of several hundred people greeted the two leaders and dozens of others who made statements supporting Dr. Fulani's campaign for youth and democracy at a citywide meeting of the independent party in Manhattan on Friday night where she announced her campaign for youth and democracy.

The extraordinary coalition represented by Reverend Sharpton, a civil rights leader in the militant civil disobedience tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Mr. Espada, an insurgent Democrat who received a stunning 42% of the vote in his run for City Council from the predominantly Black and Puerto Rican eleventh Councilmanic District in the South Bronx last year on the independent NAP line, a coalition which includes high school and college students, helping professionals, rank and file labor and lesbian and gays virtually guarantees that Dr. Fulani would easily get the 50,000 votes needed to put the Black-led, multi-racial and pro-gay independent party permanently on the ballot in New York.

In introducing Dr. Fulani, Rev. Sharpton told the crowd, ''This meeting is launching a new trend in the political spectrum of New York State and the entire country.'' The ''new alliance'' for which her campaign is the catalyst, he said, ''has raised new political prospects. We who couldn't even talk together have learned to walk together, to march together, and to fight together. Dr. King died trying to make a new alliance. Dr. King was holding meetings like this all across the country. He was bringing poor people of all colors together. I vow that we are going to finish Dr. King's work and build that new alliance.''

In expressing his support for Dr. Fulani, Mr. Espada was equally jubilant. ''We're celebrating the dawning of a new era, a new movement that will spill from this meeting and scream out for social justice,'' said the grassroots Puerto Rican leader. Mr. Espada denounced the vendetta orchestrated by New York's political and judicial estabishment against Reverend Sharpton, who is currently being tried in the State Supreme Court on 67 counts of fraud: the case is widely viewed in the Black communities as an attempt to punish the outspoken African Amerian leader for his uncompromising stand on behalf of Tawana Brawley. ''We have an attorney genral who, without our permission, is spending million of dollars to prosecute and persecute the greatest defender of our youth, the Reverend Al Sharpton," charged Mr. Espada. He urged that the meeting constitute itself a public tribunal to indict Mr. Abrams for the misuse of public funds.

Directly addressing the many young people at the meeting, he encouraged them to ''take your spirit and talk to your parents and to your grandparents, to those who say 'I've heard it all before. The last time this, the last time that.' Tell them that this time is Fulani time!''

On March 31, Fulani will host a new weekly cable televison show broadcast Manhattan-wide on Channel J (23) at 6 pm.

On the show Fulani addressed the persecution and prosecution of Rev. Sharpton by Mario Cuomo and Robert Abrams, and will present a mini-documentary that reviews the Tawana Drawley case.

To Be Equal

by John E. Jacob

The very different role the U.S. is-playing in eastern Europe and in Africa makes it hard to void the impression of a racial double standard in our foreign policy.

As country after country in eastern Europe freed itself from communist domination, the U.S. took a highly visible, supportive role.

American businesses flocked to eastern European capitals to scout investment opportunities and our government is prepared to pump large amounts of economic development aid funds to those countries, supplementing even larger sums promised by western nations.

There is even talk about a new Marshall Plan to help those countries develop their economies and a new international investment bank, funded by the West.

But Africa, the world's poorest continent and an area which is also undergoing far-reaching reform, is virtually ignored ,although its needs are far greater.

This year, for example, total U.S. economic aid to Black Africa comes to about $575 million, or only eleven percent of total U.S. foreign economic assistance. On a per capita basis, that comes to only $1 for every African.

The argument has been advanced that a major goal of our foreign policy ws freeing eastern European nations from Soviet domination and therefore we have to assure that they will become self-sufficient now that our goal has been reached.

That's a good argument. It makes sense, since our former advocacy entailed responsibilities for the outcome of our policy. But that same argument also holds for Africa.

For many years we expended diplomatic energy and resources to get South Africa to end its illegal occupation of Namibia. Now, Namibia is a free, independent state.

But ,while we therefore have an obligation to assist the new nation in its transition to democracy, our current aid amounts to an insignificant $500,000.

And despite Namibia's great needs for development assistance, next year's aid package is slated to come to only about $8 million, living at the knife-edge of survival.

On a purely humanitarian basis, it should be getting a much larger share, not only of U.S. aid, but also of assistance from other wealthy countries such as Japan, Germany, and the former colonial powers that once ruled large parts of the continent.

Aid is also in our self-interest. The more we help those countries develop, the more they'll buy from us, creating jobs here at home and expanding our trade.

Some point to past misuse of aid funds to justify present policies, and it is true that many African nations suffered from misrule and wasted scarce resources.

But many nations have learned from their mistakes. They have instituted economic and political reforms, cut back noneconomic spending plans, reintroduced free markets for farmers, and taken other responsible steps.

Such reforms should be rewarded by international assistance to help develop their economies, but that assistance has not been forthcoming.

We urgently need to frame aid policies that encourage economic development and political democracy in Africa. Much of that urgency stems from the coming negotiations to transform South Africa from a minority racial dictatorship to a racially equal democracy.

We can influence those negotiations by the promise of aid and private investment to help a newly democratic South Africa. And we can make our influence credible by implementing an enlightened aid policy for Black Africa today.

What's Happening to Individual Choice?

By Dr. Benjamin L. Hooks

Over the past several months, increased attention has been focused on advertising by tobacco companies in minority publications and on billboards in minority neighborhoods. Charges have been made that these companies are specifically targeting minority communities because they offer a tempting target, and are more likely to be persuaded by the advertiser's message than the majority community.

Implicit in this is the premise that blacks are so naive they will be persuaded to smoke by a billboard or an ad. Buried in this line of thinking, and never really mentioned by these critics, is the rationale that blacks are not capable of making their own free choices and need some guardian angels to protect their best interests.

This is an insidious form of paternalism. Blacks, like the rest of the populace, can make the choice of whether to smoke or not.

Many of the critics of the billboards are also critical of tobacco companies for sponsoring positive activities in the black community.

A number of the major tobacco companies, as well as many other firms producing different products, have been long-time supporters of worthwhile activities in the black community without asking a single thing in return.

For example, one company annually sponsors an achievers award to honor five black men and women who have made major contributions to their communities. Each is awarded $10,000 to present to the community-based organization of his or her choice.

Should these contributions cease, and if other companies stopped supporting scholarships, skills training programs, single parent programs, and a whole host of good initiatives, would these same critics step forward to fill the gap? I doubt that very much.

There is a great deal of cynicism involved in outside forces criticizing black groups for accepting help from tobacco companies, while offering no alternatives. Ironically, these critics don't apply the same degree of heat to white groups that accept funds from these companies. You figure that one out.

Critics also have blasted the black press knows it has to struggle to get national advertising, a prime source of revenue. If black publications did drop tobacco advertising, they would face a serious financial crunch, in fact, might cease to exist. Would this be a good thing? No!

Many flagship black publications have gone out of business in recent years. Many were the only organs that objectively reported positive news from the black community. Some did not accept tobacco or alcohol ads. Where were the critics when these publications could have used their support?

Interestingly, the critics don't zero in on majority media—such as Time, Newsweek, Playboy, etc.—and demand that they yank their tobacco advertising, or impugn their motives in accepting such ads.

Let me make it clear that I am not advocating that anyone smoke. However, I believe that African-Americans have the right, just as everybody else, to make that choice on their own.

QUICK QUIZ

1. True or False: George Washington was our first president.
2. Where was the northernmost battle of the Civil War fought? a) West Virginia b) Kansas c) Vermont d) New York
3. What famous gangster had a brother who was a law enforcement officer?
4. How did Daniel Boone die? a) killed by Indians b) lost his way in the wilderness c) attacked by a bear d) from indigestion.
5. What First Lady once told her husband that women were "determined to foment a rebellion" if denied their rights, including the right to vote?
6. Which member of Washington's cabinet was blackmailed over an affair with a married woman?
7. True or False: A Civil War general lies in two graves, each with its own headstone.
8. Why did John Harvey Kellogg invent breakfast cereal?
9. Who acquired America's first eight-figure fortune?

Answers

1. False. John Hanson, a congressman from Maryland, served a one-year term as president under the Articles of Confederation beginning in 1781. George Washington wasn't elected president until 1789.
2. (c) A band of Confederate raiders turned up there as they came down from Canada.
3. The gangster Al Capone, who made a fortune in bootleg whisky in the 1920s, had a brother, Jim, who was a federal prohibition agent.
4. (d) In 1820, at the age of 85, he overindulged in one of his favorite dishes—baked sweet potatoes—and died of indigestion.
5. Abigail Adams wrote about women's rights to her husband, John, in 1776, while he was helping draft the Declaration of Independence.
6. Alexander Hamilton, then secretary of the treasury and a married father of eight, carried on an affair with a woman who appeared on his doorstep one day begging for a loan. Her husband demanded cash satisfaction for his wife's favors. Later arrested for fraud, he implicated Hamilton in the scheme. To prove his innocence in the fraud scheme, Hamilton produced the blackmail letters.
7. True. When Confederate officer and Civil War hero Stonewall Jackson's arm was shattered by bullets, it was amputated and given its own formal military burial. A week later Jackson died and was buried more than 100 miles away from his arm.
8. John Harvey Kellogg, a dietary crusader, developed a variety of health foods. His biggest breakthrough came as a result of an old lady's false teeth. She broke them on some zweiback he had prescribed and she sued. He set to work developing softer foods, resulting in breakfast cereal.
9. John Jacob Astor, whose success in the 1830s hinged on transporting illegal whiskey into Indian country to grease the wheels for his fur trading ventures.