

OPINION

Giving Boys a Strong Start

Acting with urgency on the achievement gap

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

When Shawn Dove was in sixth grade, the students at his New York City school were asked to decide which academic track they wanted to follow for the next two years. He decided to choose "major gym," just like the rest of his friends. But when he brought the form home to his single mother and said "Hey, Mom—can you sign this for me?" his mother said, "No—you're not going to major in gym! There's no future in gym. You're taking science and math."

Shawn spent the next two years mad at his mother every day as he could hear the noise and laughter coming from the gym while he went 30 yards down the hall for math and science classes. But then when Shawn finished eighth grade, he understood. He and the other young people who had majored in science and math had the chance to move on to good high schools like Bronx Science, but Shawn realized those who had taken mostly gym weren't moving on to much of anything.

Today Shawn leads the Campaign for Black Male Achievement for the Open



Society Foundations. He shared this story at an achievement gap at a recent symposium to confront the crisis facing the 3.5 million Black boys from birth to age nine and to highlight programs that are making a difference.

The need to increase and support parent involvement was a key theme throughout the conference. Scholars noted that the high percentages of black boys growing up in poverty and in single-mother households has had a devastating effect on black boys' outcomes. But as Shawn pointed out in his story, although being a single mother to black boys is full of challenges, his mother made the right choices that opened doors for him. All parents need to be encouraged and educated to make the same kinds of choices throughout their sons'—and daughters'—development.

Many lessons came out of the symposium's sessions, but above all, speaker after speaker reinforced how critical it is to intervene early.

Dr. Iheoma Iruka, a researcher at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, warned us, "we can't wait for the gap to show up"—because by the time we measure achievement gaps in school, many Black boys are already behind. She explained that "the social and family dispari-

ties exist at birth and continue throughout. When you start at that low level you stay at that low level and the disparity continues."

Many of the leaders attending the symposium believe that by looking at the early years and providing a high quality continuum of care and high expectations for every child, we can impact and change the odds for young black boys right now. Focusing on an evidence-based approach to education and early childhood development can change the trajectory for young black boys and all underserved children.

By identifying best practices, policies and strategies that work it will be possible to rewrite the story for young black boys and replace the cradle to prison pipeline with a pipeline to college, work, and a productive life.

Research-based solutions and effective programs show that negative outcomes can be averted with local investment in local programs, community involvement, nutrition, and, at every stage, parental involvement. These kinds of proven results provide a guide for policy changes at the state and national level for we don't have a moment or a child to waste.

President Obama has called education the civil rights issue of our time. Now is the time for the next transforming freedom moment and movement—to set our

children free from illiteracy, low expectations, and jobless, hopeless futures, preparing them to thrive and succeed in the lives God provided them.

Children have only one childhood, and for them tomorrow is today. We need to act with urgency to narrow the achievement gap, stop the erosion of the hard-earned progress of the past 50 years, and move our nation towards true educational equality and excellence for all children. But this will not happen unless adults in all walks of our children's lives step up and pick up our responsibilities to nurture and protect the next generation.

As the symposium was documenting examples of what works to save children and money in the long haul, the very kinds of critical programs and supports we know can close achievement gaps are on the chopping block in statehouses around the country and in our nation's capital.

Providing all children a healthy start, quality early childhood experiences, first rate schools with first rate teachers, and stimulating high quality out of school time programs must be the first order of national business in this quick fix, quarterly profit driven culture. Our most dangerous deficit is not the budget deficit—it's our values deficit.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund.

Accountability and Support for Teachers

Cheating shines light on high-stakes tests

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Since the 2002 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law by then President George W. Bush,

we've heard numerous critics complain that the law stifles real learning and puts undue pressures on teachers and schools.

No Child Left Behind, which originally received support from both Democrats and Republicans, set high standards for education and put goals into place that teachers and schools had to reach or they'd face stiff penalties.

Those who supported the law believed that it was necessary to ensure improved



student performance. They pointed to rising standardized scores as proof that the law's provisions had its place.

Now we're learning that the improved student test scores of recent years may be the result of systemic cheating, not by students but by their teachers.

In Atlanta, as many as 178 teachers and principals from 44 public schools are suspected of having erased and changed some of the answers on student tests to improve scores for their schools. Eight-two of the teachers involved have already confessed to over a decade of cheating.

Those involved blame the high-stakes pressure of the law, saying they had to do something to raise scores or risk losing their jobs. Their accusers maintain they acted in self-interest, cheating in order to earn a financial bonus.

Whatever the reasons for cheating, one thing is clear: these educators have failed

their students. The young people they were in charge of teaching don't really know if their academic performance is where it should be and that is the real crime here.

The National Education Association, the country's largest teacher's union, has long fought against certain types of teacher accountability. Now, for the first time, members voted recently to approve a policy that will hold teachers accountable for what students learn.

However, the union is—and always has been—strongly against the use of standardized, high-stakes tests. They have maintained from the beginning that these types of test put stress on educators, forcing them to abandon the basic principles of education and causing them to 'teach to the test'.

This is all very confusing, even for adults. Can you imagine how our children must feel?

It's no secret that the U.S. public education system is broken. As legislators sit down and think through the next phase of change—and, hopefully, improvement, for public education, there has to be serious thought given to the use of standardized tests.

How will they be developed? What will be used to supplement them? We want to—and must—create a system that encourages our students to think critically while giving them the basic building blocks of an education.

Our education system needs to be one that holds teachers accountable without creating an environment that forces them to behave dishonestly.

We are not even close to where we need to be and our students are the ones suffering.

Judge Greg Mathis is a former Michigan District Court judge and current syndicated television show judge.

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