



Building a positive future for black boys

BY ROSA A. SMITH

It's time to move from words to deeds and work to save our most vulnerable population

Every day we hear public declarations of love that ring hollow. The mayor declares his love for the city while creating policies that provide more advantages to suburban commuters. The public demands better schools and safer streets but won't approve taxes to pay for those services. The parents love their children but leave them alone to watch hours of television and grow obese.

Nowhere—except perhaps in our churches and religious halls—is love declared more often than in schools. Educators speak of teaching and learning for all students, and yet statistics show dismal graduation rates for African-American and Hispanic youth. It is especially true for males in these two groups; nationally, fewer than half of black males receive diplomas with their high school cohorts.

That figure alone makes one wonder: What does love have

to do with this? Consider these facts:

■ **Special education:** African-American males represented 8.6 percent of the nation's public school students in 2000-01, but in some districts, they make up as much as 41 percent of the special education population.

■ **Expulsions and suspensions:** 22 percent of those expelled from school and 23 percent of those suspended are black males.

■ **Dropouts:** The dropout rate for African-American males in metropolitan areas is well over 50 percent.

■ **Juvenile incarceration:** For black youth, the rate is more than three times as high as for whites. More African-American males receive their GEDs in prison than graduate from college.

Reports from Harvard, the Urban and Manhattan Institutes, the Education Trust, Johns Hopkins University, and the Schott Foundation for Public Education illustrate this great educa-

tional and human tragedy occurring in our public school systems. No one with a professional responsibility in the education community—especially not superintendents and school board members—should be surprised by these findings. Calling the situation an achievement gap simply imposes a label, but not a solution.

And yet, the majority of teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members remain complicit in their silence about the plight of black male students. On the basis of my experience as a superintendent and with the Schott Foundation, a Cambridge, Mass.-based organization that has studied the student achievement of black males, I believe the lack of public outrage has contributed to the problem.

It's not that these children seek to fail. In fact, a poll released in June by Junior Achievement Worldwide and the Diversity Pipeline Alliance showed that 89 percent of African-American youths plan to go to college. The number is significantly higher than whites (79 percent) or Hispanics (77 percent). The reality is that these dreams, plans, and expectations are seldom realized.

Without the public calling for change, leaders—in schools and in the community—are permitted to abdicate their responsibility. The result, I believe and the research shows, is leading to an educational genocide of our most vulnerable students.

The question is: What can be done to change this situation? And how can you help, not just with your declarations of love, but with your actions?

PAYING LIP SERVICE, PASSING BLAME

Starting a discussion about the achievement of minority students, let alone race, is a difficult task. It is easy to tiptoe around the topic, pay lip service to it, or sidestep it entirely by blaming forces beyond your control.

In urban communities, where the majority of African-American students reside, outside forces do play a role. And in urban schools, overlooked and usually not acknowledged are some hard realities: the lack of highly qualified teachers, insufficient and outdated technology and science labs, few or no Advanced Placement courses, and poor teacher/student ratios.

No, educators are not solely to blame for the low achievement of black and Hispanic males. But when you look at the facts, it's difficult to fathom why we haven't shouldered more responsibility for the education of every student.

In 2004, the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University released *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*. According to the calculations used in the report, just 50 percent of all African-American students, 51 percent of Native American students, and 53 percent of Hispanic students graduated from high school. Males in the three groups fare even worse, ranging from a 43 percent graduation rate for African Americans to 48 percent for Hispanics.

In California, the nation's most populous state, the overall

graduation rate was approximately 71 percent. It was 60 percent for Hispanic students and 56.6 percent for African Americans. This means the state's public schools are neglecting the education of nearly half their most vulnerable children.

As part of our initiative, "A Positive Future for Black Boys," the Schott Foundation considered the school-related factors that contribute to the low graduation rate among black males. In California, for example, just 53 percent of African-American freshman males graduate with their class four years later. In San Diego, 47 percent of black males graduate with their class. The percentage is two percentage points lower in Los Angeles and 18 points lower in Oakland. The achievement gap in Oakland is 33 points, nearly a quarter larger than the graduation rate for black male students.

California and its largest districts can move between two-thirds and three-quarters of white male students through the system and succeed in their mission to educate children, but they fail dismally in their effort to educate black boys. These are not results based on acts of love.

Unfortunately, California districts are not atypical. In fact, San Diego and Los Angeles do better than some other major districts in regard to African-American males. Urban districts like New York, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Chicago, and Tampa have graduation rates for black boys around half those of their California counterparts.

Harvard's data reflects what many in the education community already know: There is a deep, long-standing failure to educate students most in need of the public schools' best efforts. The public has been kept in the dark about these facts, confused by inflated or misleadingly presented data, so the situation for *most* students is believed to be the personal problem of only a few.

It is easy, and convenient, to blame those students, their families, and their communities, yet I believe that few school leaders stand up and take responsibility for the persistent failure of our educational institutions to do their job. They too often allow young people, their parents, and their communities to get all the blame.

RESPECT STUDENTS, BUILD TRUST

Blunt talk? Sure. But real love is deeds—not just words—that are manifested in meaningful acts. Love is real when it leads to the necessary professional preparation and ongoing teacher training that make one a more skillful reading and math teacher. Love is genuine when it demands thoughtful teaching and learning policy, effective practice, and adult accountability. Love does not just build more enjoyable relationships; it also insists on knowledgeable and artful teaching and effective leadership.

Students, despite poor grades, are intuitively intelligent. They know when loving behavior is shallow and seeks to gloss over poor teaching and administrative leadership. Students know which classmates matter the most to adults in the school, and which ones are treated unfairly. In national surveys, they

state clearly that they want caring teachers who are excellent instructors and building leaders who deal with students fairly. Why don't we hear students and respond to their ongoing evaluation of our behavior?

As a superintendent in Columbus, Ohio, I announced my intention to close a dysfunctional high school. This announcement was met with horror. Parents loved the school's history and told stories of loving teachers who really cared for their children. Teachers spoke of their commitment to the students. Administrators spoke proudly about what they did for the students. Community members worried that closing the school would hurt the viability of the community.

No one spoke about the fact that only 8 percent of students were meeting state standards, or that the school was faced with steadily decreasing enrollment. No one spoke about the lack of materials and dismal facilities, or that the district had allowed a student body of low-income and black students to exist in that environment. It was clear to me that no one loved these students enough to demand that the school system educate them.

After much discussion, the board and I finally agreed that closing the school would disperse poor and black students to the outer rim of the district. Instead, we decided to fix what we already had, knowing that it was a journey that required not just words, but deeds to back them up.

The journey started when the board gave me the total freedom to lead and make decisions on behalf of our shared commitment to the students and community. I transferred the district's best principal from a middle-class school to the troubled school. The principal was given time, budget, and authority to make new staffing, curriculum, and school-level decisions.

Board members and I partnered with community leaders and parents to support the principal, and eventually the teachers organization joined us. Everyone working together created trust and hope, redefining love for the school's students by our words, behavior, follow through, and results. By continuing to increase standards, the school has seen slow but steady growth, especially in reading.

More striking, however, is how the school's culture has changed. It has become what was originally desired for its children, parents, and community: a place where being loved means being well educated.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

How do you accomplish this in your district?

As board members and superintendents, it is your responsibility as school leaders to know which groups of students are succeeding and which ones are failing. This knowledge should determine all decisions: policy, personnel, curriculum, supplies, extracurricular activities, facilities, budget, and professional development.

Board members who allow decisions to be made outside the context of disaggregated student achievement data demon-

strate a self-serving lack of due diligence. A superintendent who makes recommendations to the board without transparently portraying student achievement demonstrates disdain for the welfare of our most vulnerable students.

This requires a partnership that starts when the board moves beyond pettiness and hires a superintendent/CEO who is willing to:

- Do what is necessary to produce high academic achievement and improvement for low-income and minority students;
- Align district resources with a laser-like focus on support for teaching and learning; and
- Embrace parents, the faith community, and business leaders as required ingredients for student success.

The board also should formulate student-focused policies that promote adult accountability and rewards for student success. Develop contract language for superintendents and other administrators with specific academic goals to be achieved, using the success of the district's most vulnerable students as the requirement for pay raises. Budget practices that direct funding to the places most in need.

Board members should also create a system of education that begins with universal access to high-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten. You must require evidence that effective and ongoing professional development is in place for teachers of children who lack support at home for learning in school. Negotiate contracts with your teachers union that protect African-American and Hispanic boys and upgrade the ongoing professional development of teachers.

Superintendents must personally demonstrate their commitment to excellence and voluntarily tie their performance evaluations—and those of other administrators—to the district's continuous improvement. Increase and reallocate your budget to provide quality early childhood education and full-day kindergarten programs. End the overrepresentation of black males in special education. Increase student attendance and lower teacher absentee rates in low-performing schools.

Although our work with the Schott Foundation is addressing the plight of black males, in particular, all I have said about board and superintendent leadership applies to all vulnerable students. The cumulative consequences of school failure have the most severe impact on African-American boys, however. If our public schools are to succeed, it will require personal and focused commitments specific to this population of students. It will begin with policy, good practice, and accountability. It will take much more than we are doing now, and it will take time.

These things are not impossible. They do require from board members and superintendents a personal investment in other people's children. They require not just words, but true acts of love.

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