

America's Education Crisis

Teachers must help students turn their goals into concrete steps of action.

When the U.S. Supreme Court struck down two voluntary school integration plans several months ago, I was upset because it seemed as if the high court was attempting to reverse a major cornerstone of civil rights legislation. But I soon realized the court's decision was actually an indictment against forced racial integration, a process not truly serving the current needs of the average child. All races are in academic danger, and black and Hispanic children are especially vulnerable.

I pastor in Prince George County, Maryland, and we have the distinct privilege of being America's wealthiest, predominately black county. However, our school system is one of the worst in the region.

In a community where million-dollar homes and Mercedes-Benzes are commonplace, quality programs in schools are rare. Therefore, the poor performance of black students cannot be blamed solely on segregation.

In the 1950s, forced racial segregation in public schools was the order of the day. Black schools had few resources, equipment and books, and teachers were underpaid.

According to the Constitution, these schools were supposed to be equal. Yet most African-Americans lagged further behind in academics than white students.

On May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren announced the court's unanimous decision on *Brown v. Board of Education*, a case that turned the tide on racial segregation in schools:

“We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs ... are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.”

What a timely victory! The Brown decision was a huge step forward, though the justices lacked the ability to impart intangible elements such as personal mission and community involvement in their ruling.

Margaret Spellings, U.S. secretary of education, underscores the urgent needs of children of color today. She cites the fact that 50 percent of black males do not graduate from high school on time—making school relevance and efficiency a major issue.

What we need is a well-thought-out plan that would change the structure of education.

Teachers need professional-development training that translates into classroom effectiveness. In addition, we need to equip educators with the tools necessary to build bridges with families to help improve a child’s learning experience.

It’s not enough to know the material; teachers must know the culture. They must be able to help students turn their goals into concrete steps of action.

Imagine an America where teachers know how to deal with discipline problems, understand the culture, and help kids master basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic.

Unfortunately, the Supreme Court can't make the changes the U.S. must undergo to solidify success in education. We must take responsibility and personally make it happen.

Our nation can no longer afford to rest on its laurels from yesteryear. We must zero in on the needs of the hour.

Let's get involved in the education of the kids we love! And let's refuse to elect politicians who do not have substantive plans to improve education.

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