

Charming the Cobra: Education and Race

Much political noise has been made about providing grants and/or loans for higher education. For minorities, these programs are seen as invitations for full participation in the American system. Many Americans believe changing the higher education equation for minorities is the only way to “level the playing field” economically for America’s minorities.

More specifically, liberals often believe solving the education conundrum is mandatory for our future. Conservatives, however, almost universally declare that the education gap can be addressed by neither federal programs nor funding. They both are probably correct in this situation.

Solving America’s education gap is tantamount to our nation fighting a cobra. In cobra fighting, you have two choices. First, you can charm the cobra (typically by playing music), and prevent him from striking you today. Secondly, you can choose to attack him like Rikki Tikki Tavey, the mongoose of Rudyard Kipling fame, and solve your problem permanently. Dealing with our educational woes at the university level, while the majority of minority children are vastly unprepared for life, simply charms the cobra.

To kill the cobra of educational inequities in America, we must begin in pre-elementary school. Although we can do important work at every stage of the educational process, our problem is that no one wants to wait the 20-30 years it will take to reform a system. I want to sound an alarm concerning our urgent national need to improve the education of minority students. Further, I want to advocate that resources and focus be directed primarily at charter schools.

Let me explain. While the nation’s high school dropout rate

for black and Latino students is 43 percent, in urban centers like Detroit it is as high as 80 percent. This does not mean these young people will never graduate. It simply means they do not graduate on time. Unfortunately, academic failure is only the indicator of much greater problems.

High school dropouts have higher rates of unemployment, incarceration (60 percent of black male dropouts are eventually incarcerated), drug use and violent behavior. Our struggling economy has served to exacerbate these problems: The black unemployment rate nationwide surged to 16.7 percent this fall, the highest since 1984. But for black males in their 20s who lack a high school diploma, the unemployment rate is a shocking 72 percent!

While almost everyone acknowledges that these problems begin in childhood, the failure of urban public schools is an extremely touchy subject. Many teachers are quick to point out the chaotic environments poor urban students go home to every day. On the other hand, parents who cannot afford private school are frustrated with the disorderly school environments to which their children are exposed. Unfortunately, both are correct: Too many inner city parents do not provide the structure and discipline their children need to succeed, but too many urban classrooms lack precisely the same things.

These are exceedingly complicated problems with multiple causes, and they will not be speedily resolved with one particular intervention. However, that does NOT mean there is nothing we can do; we must increase educational choice for urban parents, and local churches must equip those parents to prepare their children for educational success.

According to Andrew Broy of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools, "Across all [Chicago area] charter schools, the average growth rate of 3.8 scale points over those three years is 60 percent higher than the Chicago average, an average that includes selective enrollment high schools." This means inner-

city children in Chicago charter schools showed more improvement than middle-class children in magnet schools. Most famously, Urban Prep Academy in Chicago has achieved 100 percent college enrollment for its all-male (and almost entirely black) graduating class for two years successively.

How can we duplicate these results? Charter schools that show the most success have comprehensive behavior policies, intense coaching of teachers, longer school days and a “no excuses” approach to education. Better trained teachers are able to offer rigorous instruction, as well as be better attuned to the particular needs of their students. For students from a disordered home environment, longer days not only allow for more instruction, but limit the time students are unsupervised or subjected to poor influences.

The “no-excuses” approach is vital to student success. Students of any socioeconomic status who are given excuses not to achieve will find ways to fail, but poor students lack stable parents who can cushion their fall until they determine a course of action toward a future. It is not surprising then how schools that acknowledge the obstacles many urban students face but refuse to accept them as excuses for failure are seeing their students succeed at higher rates.

I want to encourage you to advocate for charter schools in your region. Be sure your county commissioners and state representatives are clear on your opinions regarding the need for quality education from the youngest student to the postgraduate level. We can make a difference today for the future of the next generation of Americans.