



Focus On Blacks

News We Lose: Black Student Gains

Black High School Students Close Curriculum Gap!

Black College Graduation Rates Higher than Whites!

Computer Literacy Levels for Black Students Comparable with Whites!

Wouldn't it be wonderful to open the paper one morning and see these headlines? Fiction? Not quite. Many people, educators among them, would be surprised to hear that a few of the nation's most prestigious colleges are reporting higher graduation rates for Blacks than for Whites. Or that Black high school graduates have closed the gap with White students in the percentage completing a mid-level curriculum. Or that some Black college students—who have had far less access to technology than their White classmates—are computer literate at comparable levels. Even across the pond in England, African girls are outscoring White British boys on the general certificate of secondary education exam.

Ghosts from the Past

For many Americans, these stats so startle the ear, they produce a profound cognitive dissonance. But the true tragedy is that those who would be most surprised are probably the students themselves—a state of affairs that's not just regrettable but potentially devastating. Just last year, 17-year-old student Kiri Davis recreated the famous 1950s doll experiment that tipped the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board* with the same staggering results. Anyone who's seen her heartbreaking video—in which Black children consistently identify the White doll as good and the Black doll as bad—realizes that, amid the relentless onslaught of sobering statistics, it's absolutely crucial for Black students, their teachers, and their parents to hear about the victories.

"My own interactions with Black people of all ages indicates that many African Americans perceive Black high school graduation rates and Black college matriculation rates to be far lower than they actually are," says Ajuan Mance, Associate Professor of English at Mills College in California. "Indeed, I have had to cite specific sources in order to convince some of my brothers and sisters that their grim view of African-American achievement is not necessarily the reality of the situation for all U.S. Blacks."

Why the Blackout?

So why is finding good news on Black education like hunting for treasure in the middle of a hurricane? It's there but often buried so deep under a flood of bad news and negative numbers, you almost have to be a detective to find it and parse its significance. "The news has an important function besides providing information and that is to reinforce the way we see the world," says Manse. "Black people only become visible when they're perceived as under-achievers or in crisis."

Counteracting these perceptions is complicated—it's not simply a matter of balancing the good news with the bad. One reason is that the current outlook for many Black Americans is so bleak, focusing on good news may be perceived as minimizing or even denying painful realities. Yet, in some areas, says the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* "Black progress over the past decade has been nothing short of spectacular."



Vital Signs in K-12

The educational attainment of Black children has been painstakingly documented and dissected; since the advent of NCLB, the “forensics” have become even more exhaustive. Yet, despite the issues many Black students deal with every day—poverty, crime, racism, single-parent households, poor health, even inequitable treatment in schools—they’ve made progress—some of it remarkable—in a number of areas.

School Readiness. Black children have improved in the areas of school readiness—scoring at 94 percent of that of Whites, up from 81 percent in 2006, according to the National Urban League’s *The State of Black America 2007* report (based on statistics from the National Center for Education). Black children have even surpassed or nearly matched White children in terms of some home literacy activities: 81 percent were taught words or numbers three times a week compared to 76 percent of White children, and 44 percent visited a library at least once in the last month compared to 45 percent of White children.

Curriculum Catch-Up. The National Assessment of Educational Progress recently completed a study of the transcripts of 2005 high school graduates and found that 52 percent of the Black graduates had completed a four-year curriculum of at least “mid-level” difficulty. The rate for their White counterparts was 51 percent. Three surveys in the 1990s had found that Black graduates trailed White graduates on that measure by a significant margin; as recently as 1994 the gap was 11 percentage points.

Test Gains. Minority students, and large urban districts, have made significant gains on national assessments reports the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). *The Nation’s Report Card: Mathematics and Reading 2007* reveals that between 1990 and 2007, Black fourth grade students made the most dramatic gains in math scores of any ethnic group (35 points), and between 1992 and 2007, Black eighth graders made the greatest reading gains (7 points). NCES also reports that, in most cases, low-income and minority students in several large urban school districts performed as well or higher than their peers nationally.

Dropout Decline. Dropout rates are notoriously controversial, varying widely depending upon the type of measure used. Although the Manhattan Institute estimates that only about 70 percent of all students and 55 percent of minorities graduate from high school “on time” (four years after completing the 8th grade), a new study by the Economic Policy

Institute (EPI) contends that this much-repeated refrain is misleading and that claims that Black and Hispanic students have only a 50-50 chance of completing high school rely on data that have been too unquestioningly accepted. The National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) reports minority high school completion rates as much higher, with about 74 percent of Black and Hispanic students receiving diplomas nationally. In fact, says the EPI study, “the NELS data suggests that the dropout rate for Blacks is closer to 25 percent and roughly half of those obtain a GED, which allows entry into post-secondary education, the military, and other second-chance systems.” Although gaps remain between the graduation rates of White students and their Black and Hispanic peers, the EPI report estimates that graduation rates have been growing and racial/ethnic gaps closing over the past four decades.

High Marks for Higher Ed

As in K-12, the news for Blacks in higher education is mixed. While graduation rates remain low overall, college attendance rates for Black students are at an all-time high, reports the American Council of Education. In fact, some of the most dramatic news is coming out of college campuses.

College Bound. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE) recently reported that Black students comprise 11.7 percent of all students enrolled in higher education in the U.S. (based on 2005 Department of Education statistics). Noting that this is equivalent to the percentage of Blacks in the college-age population, JBHE concluded that “Black progress over the past decade has been nothing short of spectacular. In 1995 there were 1,474,000 Blacks enrolled in higher education. By 2005 Black enrollments had increased by more than 42 percent.”

The Graduate. Five of the nation’s highest-ranking colleges have higher graduation rates for Black students than for Whites: Mount Holyoke, Pomona, Smith, Wellesley, and Macalaster. Washington University in St. Louis has a 91 percent graduation rate for both Blacks and Whites. At Wake Forest University, Hamilton College, and Vanderbilt University, the White student graduation rate is only one percentage point higher than the rate for Blacks, while at Amherst College, Harvard University, Grinnell College, and Bryn Mawr College, the difference is just two percentage points.

Technology Leap. According to JBHE, new evidence reveals that some Black college students have overcome their reduced access to technology to become computer

literate at levels comparable with Whites. A study conducted by associate professors of allied health at Florida A&M and Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania surveyed students majoring in allied health fields where computer usage is commonplace. The survey found that current levels of computer knowledge for Blacks and Whites were statistically identical. The report cautions against rushing to the conclusion that the trend holds true nationwide but underscores the value of a college education in helping some Black students close the technology gap.

Learning While Black

The education of Black children is taking place against a social and political backdrop marked by an increase in overt racism (a proliferation of noose incidents around the country recently drew national attention), a growing trend toward resegregation in the nation's schools, and a new Supreme Court decision eliminating race as a factor in diversifying school populations. Still, much of the progress Black students have made is the direct result of effective teaching and learning—the efforts of educators and children working together to beat the odds despite the powerful drumbeat of failure and underachievement.

Admittedly, there are more grave statistics than good ones, and many of the nation's educators, who are toiling to turn those statistics around, are all too familiar with the numbers. So are their students—those negative numbers reinforce society's view of them and, too often, their view of themselves.

These students need to know that success is not only possible, say educators, it's taking place right now on school campuses across the country. For every failing NCLB test score and painful stat, children need to hear about young, Black students who are thriving despite the odds. They need to hear about public school students like Chamara Moore of Chicago, a young member of the American Mensa Society, whose members' IQ scores are in the top two percent of the nation. They need to hear about Brandon Washington, a budding young scientist in North Carolina, who consistently scores in the 98th percentile in reading, math, and language arts and ranks among the top achievers in his state. They need to hear about students like Jermol Jupiter with his cool braids and Ignacio Evans with his edgy Mohawk, two of the Baltimore Urban Debate League's hottest high-school debaters. But most of all, say their teachers, students need to be able to hold up a mirror and see these possibilities in themselves.

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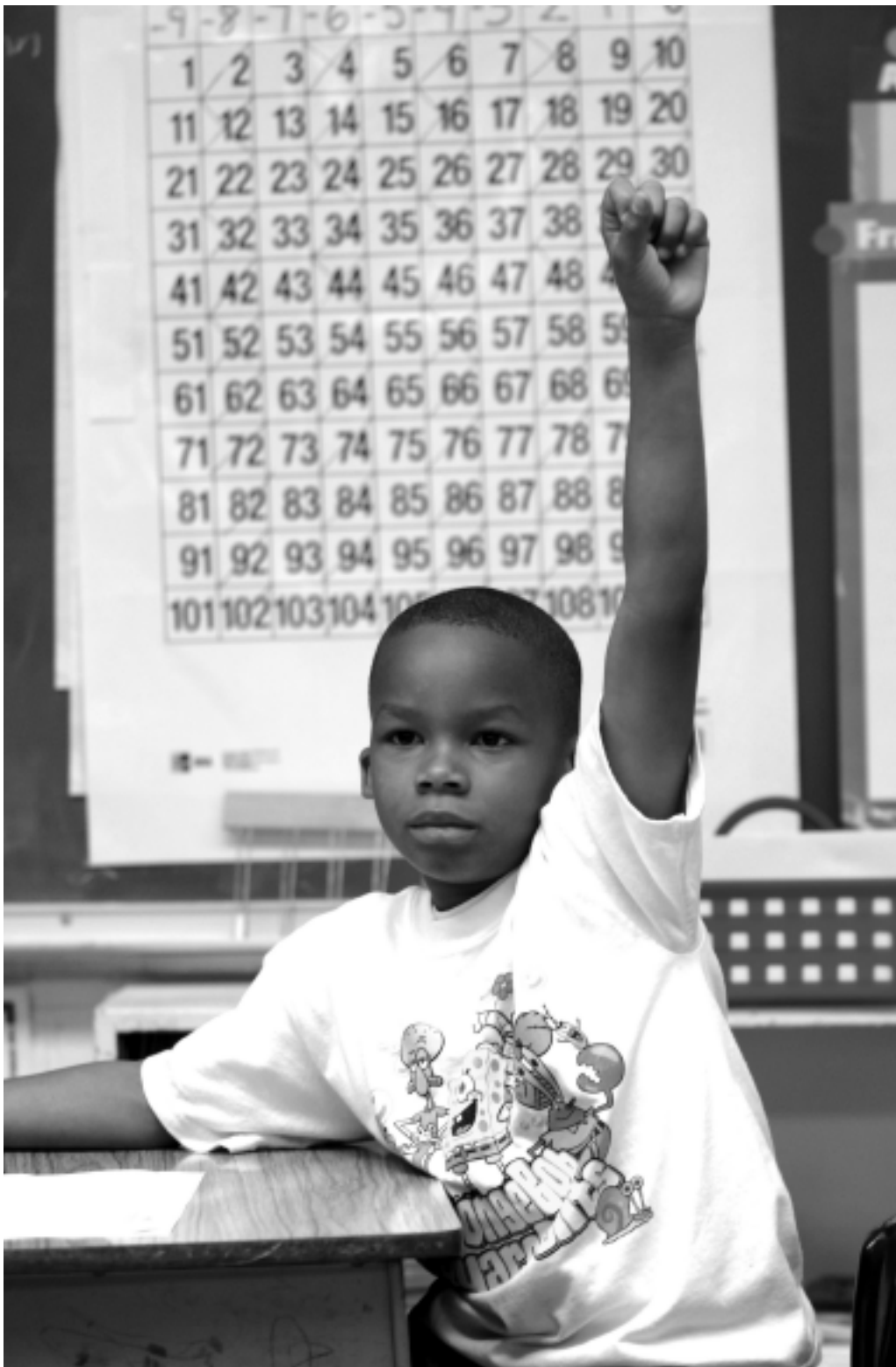
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