

THE EDUCATION OF MINORITY CHILDREN[©]

by Thomas Sowell

Will Rogers once said that it was not ignorance that was so bad but, as he put it, "all the things we know that ain't so." Nowhere is that more true than in American education today, where fashions prevail and evidence is seldom asked or given. And nowhere does this do more harm than in the education of minority children.

The quest for esoteric methods of trying to educate these children proceeds as if such children had never been successfully educated before, when in fact there are concrete examples, both from history and from our own times, of schools that have been successful in educating children from low-income families and from minority families. Yet the educational dogma of the day is that you simply cannot expect children who are not middle-class to do well on standardized tests, for all sorts of sociological and psychological reasons.

Those who think this way are undeterred by the fact that there are schools where low-income and minority students do in fact score well on standardized tests. These students are like the bumblebees who supposedly should not be able to fly, according to the theories of aerodynamics, but who fly anyway, in disregard of those theories.

While there are examples of schools where this happens in our own time-- both public and private, secular and religious-- we can also go back nearly a hundred years and find the same phenomenon. Back in 1899, in Washington, D. C., there were four academic public high schools-- one black and three white.¹ In standardized tests given that year, students in the black high school averaged higher test scores than students in two of the three white high schools.²

This was not a fluke. It so happens that I have followed 85 years of the history of this black high school-- from 1870 to 1955 --and found it repeatedly equaling or exceeding national norms on standardized tests.³ In the 1890s, it was called The M Street School and after 1916 it was renamed Dunbar High School but its academic performances on standardized tests remained good on into the mid-1950s.

When I first published this information in 1974, those few educators who responded at

all dismissed the relevance of these findings by saying that these were "middle class" children and therefore their experience was not "relevant" to the education of low-income minority children. Those who said this had no factual data on the incomes or occupations of the parents of these children-- and I did.

The problem, however, was not that these dismissive educators did not have evidence. The more fundamental problem was that they saw no need for evidence. According to their dogmas, children who did well on standardized tests were middle class. These children did well on such tests, therefore they were middle class.

Lack of evidence is not the problem. There was evidence on the occupations of the parents of the children at this school as far back in the early 1890s. As of academic year 1892-93, there were 83 known occupations of the parents of the children attending The M Street School. Of these occupations, 51 were laborers and one was a doctor.⁴ That doesn't sound very middle class to me.

Over the years, a significant black middle class did develop in Washington and no doubt most of them sent their children to the M Street School or to Dunbar High School, as it was later called. But that is wholly different from saying that most of the children at that school came from middle-class homes.

During the later period, for which I collected data, there were far more children whose mothers were maids than there were whose fathers were doctors. For many years, there was only one academic high school for blacks in the District of Columbia and, as late as 1948, one-third of all black youngsters attending high school in Washington attended Dunbar High School. So this was not a "selective" school in the sense in which we normally use that term-- there were no tests to take to get in, for example-- even though there was undoubtedly self-selection in the sense that students who were serious went to Dunbar and those who were not had other places where they could while away their time, without having to meet high academic standards. (A vocational high school for blacks was opened in Washington in 1902).⁵

A spot check of attendance records and tardiness records showed that The M Street School at the turn of the century and Dunbar High School at mid-century had less absenteeism and less tardiness than the white high schools in the District of Columbia at those times. The school had a tradition of being serious, going back to its founders and early principals.

Among these early principals was the first black woman to receive a college degree in

the United States-- Mary Jane Patterson from Oberlin College, class of 1862. At that time, Oberlin had different academic curriculum requirements for women and men. Latin, Greek and mathematics were required in "the gentlemen's course," as it was called, but not in the curriculum for ladies. Miss Patterson, however, insisted on taking Latin, Greek, and mathematics anyway. Not surprisingly, in her later 12 years as principal of the black high school in Washington during its formative years, she was noted for "a strong, forceful personality," for "thoroughness," and for being "an indefatigable worker." Having this kind of person shaping the standards and traditions of the school in its early years undoubtedly had something to do with its later success.

Other early principals included the first black man to graduate from Harvard, class of 1870. Four of the school's first eight principals graduated from Oberlin and two from Harvard. Because of restricted academic opportunities for blacks, Dunbar had three Ph.Ds among its teachers in the 1920s.

One of the other educational dogmas of our times is the notion that standardized tests do not predict future performances for minority children, either in academic institutions or in life. Innumerable scholarly studies have devastated this claim intellectually,⁶ though it still survives and flourishes politically.

But the history of this black high school in Washington likewise shows a pay-off for solid academic preparation and the test scores that result from it. Over the entire 85-year history of academic success of this school, from 1870 to 1955, most of its 12,000 graduates went on to higher education.⁷ This was very unusual for either black or white high-school graduates during this era. Because these were low-income students, most went to a local free teachers college but significant numbers won scholarships to leading colleges and universities elsewhere.⁸

Some M Street School graduates began going to Harvard and other academically elite colleges in the early twentieth century. As of 1916, there were nine black students, from the entire country, attending Amherst College. Six were from the M Street School. During the period from 1918 to 1923, graduates of this school went on to earn 25 degrees from Ivy League colleges, Amherst, Williams, and Wesleyan. Over the period from 1892 to 1954, Amherst admitted 34 graduates of the M Street School and Dunbar. Of these, 74 percent graduated and more than one-fourth of these graduates were Phi Beta Kappas.⁹

No systematic study has been made of the later careers of the graduates of this school. However, when the late black educator Horace Mann Bond studied the backgrounds of blacks with Ph.D.s, he discovered that more of them had graduated from M Street-Dunbar than from any other black high school in the country.

The first blacks to graduate from West Point and Annapolis also came from this school. So did the first black full professor at a major university (Allison Davis at the University of Chicago). So did the first black federal judge, the first black general, the first black Cabinet member, the first black elected to the United States Senate since Reconstruction, and the discoverer of a method for storing blood plasma. During World War II, when black military officers were rare, there were more than two dozen graduates of M Street or Dunbar High School holding ranks ranging from major to brigadier general.¹⁰

All this contradicts another widely-believed notion-- that schools do not make much difference in children's academic or career success because income and family background are much larger influences. If the schools themselves do not differ very much from one another, then of course it will not make much difference which one a child attends. But, when they differ dramatically, the results can also differ dramatically.

This was not the only school to achieve success with minority children. But, before turning to some other examples, it may be useful to consider why and how this 85-year history of unusual success was abruptly turned into typical failure, almost overnight, by the politics of education.

As we all know, 1954 was the year of the famous racial desegregation case of Brown v. Board of Education. Those of us old enough to remember those days also know of the strong resistance to school desegregation in many white communities, including Washington, D. C. Ultimately a political compromise was worked out. In order to comply with the law, without having a massive shift of students, the District's school officials decided to turn all public schools in Washington into neighborhood schools.

By this time, the neighborhood around Dunbar High School was rundown. This had not affected the school's academic standards, however, because black students from all over the city went to Dunbar, though very few of those who lived in its immediate vicinity did.

When Dunbar became a neighborhood school, the whole character of its student body changed radically-- and the character of its teaching staff changed very soon afterward. In the past, many Dunbar teachers had continued to teach for years after they were eligible for retirement because it was such a fulfilling experience. Now, as inadequately educated, inadequately motivated, and disruptive students flooded into the school, teachers began retiring, some as early as 55 years of age. Inside of a very few years, Dunbar became just another failing ghetto school, with all the problems that such schools have, all across the country. Eighty-five years of achievement simply vanished into thin air.

It is a very revealing fact about the politics of education that no one tried to stop this from happening. When I first began to study the history of this school, back in the 1970s, I thought that it was inconceivable that this could have been allowed to happen without a protest. I knew that the Washington school board in the 1950s included a very militant and distinguished black woman named Margaret Just Butcher, who was also a graduate of Dunbar High School, Surely Dr. Butcher had not let all this happen without exercising her well-known gifts of withering criticism.

Yet I looked in vain through the minutes of the school board for even a single sentence by anybody expressing any concern whatever about the fate of Dunbar High School under the new reorganization plan. Finally, in complete frustration and bewilderment, I phoned Dr. Butcher herself. Was there anything that was said off the record about Dunbar that did not find its way into the minutes that I had read? "No," she said. Then she reminded me that racial "integration" was the battle cry of the hour in the 1950s. No one thought about what would happen to black schools, not even Dunbar.

Now, decades later, we still do not have racial integration in many of the urban schools around the country-- and we also do not have Dunbar High School. Such are the ways of politics, where the crusade of the hour often blocks out everything else, at least until another crusade comes along and takes over the same monopoly of our mind.

Ironically, black high schools in Washington today have many of the so-called "prerequisites" for good education that never existed in the heyday of Dunbar High School-- and yet the educational results are abysmal. "Adequate funding" is always included among these "prerequisites" and today the per pupil expenditure in the District of Columbia is among the highest in the nation. During its heyday, Dunbar was starved for funds and its average class size was in the 40s. Its lunchroom was so small that many of its students had to eat out on the streets. Its blackboards were cracked and it was 1950 before the school had a public address system. Yet, at that point, it had 80 years of achievement behind it-- and only 5 more in front of it.

As a failing ghetto school today, Dunbar has a finer physical plant than it ever had when it was an academic success. Politics is also part of this picture. Immediate, tangible symbols are what matter within the limited time horizon of elected politicians. Throwing money at public schools produces such symbolic results, even if it cannot produce quality education.

Another black school that I studied-- P. S.91 in Brooklyn, New York-- was housed in an even older building than the original Dunbar High School. This building in Brooklyn was

so old that it still had gas jets in the hallways, left over from the gaslight era, before there were electric lights. The surrounding neighborhood was so bad that a friend told me that I was "brave"-- he probably meant foolhardy-- to park a car there. Yet the students in most of the grades in this predominantly black elementary school scored at or above the national norms on standardized tests.

This was not in any sense a middle-class school or a magnet school. It was just an ordinary ghetto school run by an extraordinary principal. What was more extraordinary to me than even the test scores of the students was the openness with which I was welcomed and allowed to see what I wanted to see. Educators usually like to give guided tours to selected (and often atypical) places, much like the Potemkin village tours in Czarist Russia. But, in P.S. 91, I was allowed to wander down the halls and arbitrarily pick out which classrooms I wanted to go into. I did this on every floor of the school.

Inside those classrooms were black children much like children you can find in any ghetto across the country. Many came from broken homes and were on welfare. Yet, inside this school, they spoke in grammatical English, in complete sentences, and to the point. Many of the materials they were studying were a year or more ahead of their respective grade levels.

It so happened that I had to fly back to California right after visiting this school and did not get to talk to all the people I wanted to interview. I asked a mother who was head of the school's Parent-Teacher Association if I could call her at home after I got back to California and interview her over the phone. It turned out that she did not have a telephone. "I can't afford one," she said. That too hardly seemed middle class.

Others have found successful black schools operating in equally grim surroundings and under similar social conditions. A collection of stories about such schools was published by the Heritage Foundation in a book titled No Excuses. Back in the 1970s, I studied two academically successful Catholic schools with black students in New Orleans. In both schools, a majority of the parental occupations were in the "unskilled and semi-skilled" category. Dr. Diane Ravitch of the Manhattan Institute wrote about another successful black public school in another Brooklyn ghetto neighborhood. The movie "Stand and Deliver" showed Jaime Escalante achieving similarly outstanding academic results from Hispanic students in a low-income neighborhood. Yet the dogma marches on that a middle-class background is necessary for academic success.

St. Augustine high school in New Orleans was a particularly striking example of achieving academic success while going against the grain of prevailing opinion in educational circles. It was established back in 1951, during the era of racial segregation in

the South, as a school for black boys, presided over by an all-white staff from the Josephite order. None of these young priests had ever taken a course in a department or school of education. To the horror of some outside members of the order, the school used corporal punishment. There was no unifying educational theory. The school simply kept doing things that worked and discarded things that didn't.

The first black student from the South to win a National Merit Scholarship came from St. Augustine. So did the first Presidential Scholar of any race from the state of Louisiana. As of 1974, 20 percent of all Presidential Scholars in the history of the state had come from this school with about 600 black students.

Test scores were never used as a rigid cutoff for admission to St. Augustine. There were students there with IQs in the 60s, as well as others with IQs more than twice that high. For individual students and for the school, the average IQ rose over the years-- being in the 80s and 90s in the 1950s and then reaching the national average of 100 in the 1960s. To put that in perspective, both blacks and whites in the South during this era tended to score below the national average on IQ and other standardized tests.

Most of these children did not come from middle-class families. Those whose parents were in professional or white-collar occupations were less than one-tenth as numerous as those whose parents worked in "unskilled and semi-skilled" occupations.

What are the "secrets" of such successful schools?

The biggest secret is that there are no secrets, unless work is a secret. Work seems to be the only four-letter word that cannot be used in public today.

Aside from work and discipline, the various successful schools for minority children have had little in common with one another-- and even less in common with the fashionable educational theories of our times. Some of these schools were public, some were private. Some were secular and some were religious. Dunbar High School had an all-black teaching staffs but St. Augustine in New Orleans began with an all-white teaching staff. Some of these schools were housed in old rundown buildings and others in new, modern facilities. Some of their principals were finely attuned to the social and political nuances, while others were blunt people who could not have cared less about such things and would have failed Public Relations One.

None of these successful schools had a curriculum especially designed for blacks. Most

had some passing recognition of the children's backgrounds. Dunbar High School, for example, was named for black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and it set aside one day a year to commemorate Frederick Douglass, but its curriculum could hardly be called Afrocentric. Throughout the 85 years of its academic success, it taught Latin. In some of the early years, it taught Greek as well. Its whole focus was on expanding the students' cultural horizons, not turning their minds inward.

For all I know, there may be some Afrocentric schools that are doing well. The point here is simply that this has not been an essential ingredient in the successful education of minority students. At St. Augustine school in New Orleans, its principal, Father Grant, resisted attempts to bring into the school the issues arising from the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Although sympathetic to the civil rights movement himself, and to some extent a participant in it, Father Grant opposed the introduction into the school of what he called "extraneous elements, issues, and concerns." Keenly aware of the students' cultural disadvantages and the need to overcome them, as well as the importance of the social issues that some wanted to address in the school, he said that "we absolutely could not do both things well"-- and both deserved to be done well, or not at all. As Father Grant put it bluntly: "Do not consume my time with extraneous issues and then expect me to have enough time left over to dedicate myself to a strong academic program where I will turn out strong, intelligent, competent kids."

Again, the point here is not to say that this is the only viable approach. The point is that the social visions of the day have not been essential ingredients in educational success.

Important as the history of outstanding schools for minority students has been, there is also much to learn from the history of very ordinary urban ghetto schools, which often did far better in the past-- both absolutely and relative to their white contemporaries-- than is the case today. I went to such schools in Harlem in the 1940s but I do not rely on nostalgia for my information. The test scores in ordinary Harlem schools in the 1940s were quite comparable to the test scores in white working-class neighborhoods on New York's lower east side.

Sometimes the Harlem schools scored a little higher and sometimes the lower east side schools scored a little higher but there were no such glaring racial disparities as we have become used to in urban schools in recent years. In April, 1941, for example, some lower east side schools scored slightly higher on tests of word meaning and paragraph meaning than some schools in Harlem but, in test given in December of that same year, several Harlem schools scored higher than the lower east side schools. Neither set of schools scored as high as the city-wide average, though neither was hopelessly below it.¹¹

While the lower east side of New York is justly known for the many people who were

born in poverty there and rose to middle-class levels-- and some to national prominence-- very little attention is paid to a very similar history in Harlem.

Some years ago, a national magazine ran a flattering profile of me, expressing wonder that I had come out of Harlem and gone on to elite colleges and an academic career. Shortly thereafter, I received a letter from a black lawyer of my generation, pointing out that my experience was by no means so unusual in those days. He had grown up in Harlem during the same era, just a few blocks from me. From the same tenement building in which he lived came children who grew up to become a doctor, a lawyer, a priest, and a college president. Indeed, where did today's black middle class come from, if not from such places and such schools? My great fear is that a black child growing up in Harlem today will not have as good a chance to rise as people of my generation did, simply because they will not receive as solid an education, in an era when such an education is even more important.

Parents have been an important ingredient in the success of schools, whatever the racial or social backgrounds of the students. But the specific nature of parental involvement can vary greatly-- and has often been very different from what is believed among some educational theorists. In some of the most successful schools, especially of the past, the parents' role has been that of giving moral support to the school by letting their children know that they are expected to learn and to behave themselves.

Current educational fashions see parents' roles as that of active participants in the shaping of educational policy and on-site involvement in the daily activities of the schools. Whatever the merits or demerits of these notions, that was certainly not the role played by parents of children at successful schools in the past. Nor were they necessarily equipped to play such a role. As of 1940, for example, the average black adult in the United States had only an elementary school education. I can still remember being surprised at what an event it was in our family when I was promoted to the seventh grade-- because no one else in the family had ever gone that far before.

It was much the same story on the lower east side of New York at that time. Biographies of immigrant children who grew up there are full of painful memories of how their parents, with their meager education and broken English, hated to have to go see a teacher-- and how embarrassed their children were when their parents appeared at school.

Parents today may be more educated and more sophisticated but it is not clear that their political or quasi-political involvement in schools has been a net benefit. At the very least, history shows that it has never been essential.

For those who are interested in schools that produce academic success for minority students, there is no lack of examples., past and present. Tragically, there is a lack of interest by the public school establishment in such examples. Again, I think this goes back to the politics of education.

Put bluntly, failure attracts more money than success. Politically, failure becomes a reason to demand more money, smaller classes, and more trendy courses and programs, ranging from "black English" to bilingualism and "self-esteem." Politicians who want to look compassionate and concerned know that voting money for such projects accomplishes that purpose for them and voting against such programs risks charges of mean-spiritedness, if not implications of racism.

We cannot recapture the past and there is much in the past that we should not want to recapture. But neither is it irrelevant. If nothing else, history shows what can be achieved, even in the face of adversity. We have no excuse for achieving less in an era of greater material abundance and greater social opportunities.

NOTES

1. Report of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools of the District of Columbia to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia: 1898-1899 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), pp. 7, 11. [back](#)
2. Henry S. Robinson, "The M Street School," Records of the Columbia Historical Society of Washington, D.C., Vol.LI (1984), p. 122; Constance Green, The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 137. Constance Green said that the M Street school had "a higher proportion of highly trained talent than the white high schools could claim," (Ibid) presumably because of limited career opportunities of for well-educated blacks in the larger society. [back](#)

3. Thomas Sowell, "Black Excellence: The Case of Dunbar High School," The Public Interest, Spring 1974, p. 8. [back](#)
4. Henry S. Robinson, op. cit., p. 141. [back](#)
5. Constance Green, The Secret City, p. 168. [back](#)
6. See the numerous references listed in Thomas Sowell, Inside American Education (New York: The Free Press, 1993), p. 322, footnote 99. [back](#)
7. Mary Gibson Hundley, The Dunbar Story (New York: Vantage Press, 1967), pp. 24, 61. [back](#)
8. Ibid., p. 147. [back](#)
9. Ibid., pp. 75, 149-150. [back](#)
10. Ibid., p. 57. [back](#)
11. Thomas Sowell, "Assumptions versus History in Ethnic Education," Teachers College Record, Vol. 83, No. 1 (Fall 1981), pp. 40-41. [back](#)