

# The Washington Post

## Making the Grade Isn't About Race. It's About Parents.

By Patrick Welsh  
Sunday, October 18, 2009

"Why don't you guys study like the kids from Africa?"

In a moment of exasperation last spring, I asked that question to a virtually all-black class of 12th-graders who had done horribly on a test I had just given. A kid who seldom came to class -- and was constantly distracting other students when he did -- shot back: "It's because they have fathers who kick their butts and make them study."

Another student angrily challenged me: "You ask the class, just ask how many of us have our fathers living with us." When I did, not one hand went up.

I was stunned. These were good kids; I had grown attached to them over the school year. It hit me that these students, at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, understood what I knew too well: The lack of a father in their lives had undermined their education. The young man who spoke up knew that with a father in his house he probably wouldn't be ending 12 years of school in the bottom 10 percent of his class with a D average. His classmate, normally a sweet young woman with a great sense of humor, must have long harbored resentment at her father's absence to speak out as she did. Both had hit upon an essential difference between the kids who make it in

school and those who don't: parents.

My students knew intuitively that the reason they were lagging academically had nothing to do with race, which is the too-handy explanation for the achievement gap in Alexandria. And it wasn't because the school system had failed them. They knew that excuses about a lack of resources and access just didn't wash at the new, state-of-the-art, \$100 million T.C. Williams, where every student is given a laptop and where there is open enrollment in Advanced Placement and honors courses. Rather, it was because their parents just weren't there for them -- at least not in the same way that parents of kids who were doing well tended to be.

In an example of how bad the fixation on race here has become, last year Morton Sherman, the new superintendent, ordered

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principals throughout the city to post huge charts in their hallways so everyone -- including 10-year-old kids -- could see differences in test scores between white, black and Hispanic students. One mother told me that a black fifth-grader at Cora Kelly Magnet School said that "whoever sees that sign will think I am stupid." A fourth-grade African American girl there looked at the sign and said to a friend: "That's not me." When black and white parents protested that impressionable young children don't need such information, administrators accused them of not facing up to the problem. Only when the local NAACP complained did Sherman have the charts removed.

Achievement gaps don't break down neatly along racial lines. Take Yasir Hussein, a student of mine last year whose parents emigrated from Sudan in the early 1990s, and who entered the engineering program at Virginia Tech this fall. "My parents were big on our family living the American dream," he said. "One quarter when I got a 3.5 grade-point average, the guys I hung around with were congratulating me, but my parents had the opposite reaction. They took my PlayStation and TV out of my bedroom and told me I could do better."

Yasir said it wasn't just fear that made him study: "Knowing how hard my parents worked simply to give me the opportunity to get an education in America, it was hard for me not to care about getting good grades."

But Yasir's experience isn't what community activists and school administrators at T.C. Williams or around the country focus on. They cast the difference between kids who are succeeding in school and those who are not in terms of race and seem obsessed with what they call "the gap" between the test scores of white and black students.

This year, community groups in St. Louis and Portland, Ore., issued reports decrying the gap. After a recent state report on test scores in California schools, Jack O'Connell, the state's superintendent of instruction, said the gap is "the biggest civil rights issue of this generation" -- a very popular phrase in education circles.

But focusing on a "racial achievement gap" is too simple; it's a gap in familial support and involvement, too. Administrators focused solely on race are stigmatizing black students. At the same time, they are encouraging the easy excuse that the kids

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who are not excelling are victims, as well as the idea that once schools stop being racist and raise expectations, these low achievers will suddenly blossom.

Last year, two of the finest and most dedicated teachers at my school -- one in science and one in math -- tried to move students who were failing their classes into more appropriate prerequisite courses, because the kids had none of the background knowledge essential to mastering more advanced material. Both teachers were told by a T.C. Williams administrator that the problem was not with the students but with their own low expectations.

"The real problem," says Glenn Hopkins, president of Alexandria's Hopkins House, which provides preschool and other services to low-income families, "is that school superintendents don't realize -- or won't admit -- that the education gap is symptomatic of a social gap."

Hopkins notes that student achievement is deeply affected by issues of family, income and class, things superintendents have little control over. "Even with best teachers in the world, they don't have the power to solve the problem," he says. "They naively assume that if they throw in a little tutoring and mentoring and come up with some program they can claim as their own, the gap will close."

Perhaps nothing shows how out of touch administrators are with the depth of poor students' problems more than the way they chose to start this school year. The Alexandria School Board had added two more paid work days to the calendar, a move that cost more than \$1 million in teachers' salaries. So the administration decided to put on a three-day conference they dubbed "Equity and Excellence." We were promised "world-class speakers." If only that had been true. As part of the festivities, Sherman formed a choir of teachers and administrators that gave us renditions of "Imagine" and "This Land Is Your Land." Sherman closed the conference by telling us that if we didn't believe that "each and every" child in Alexandria could learn, he would give us a ticket to Fairfax County.

Now, six weeks into the academic year, some 30 fights -- two gang-related -- have taken place at T.C. Williams. I wish those three days had been spent bringing students to

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school to lay out clear rules and consequences, and for sessions on conflict resolution and anger management.

Last week, Sherman announced that a second installment of "Equity and Excellence" featuring a "courageous conversation" with Ronald Ferguson, director of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard, will take place at T.C. Williams tomorrow. I am eager to find ways to help my students succeed, but I am afraid that Ferguson -- whose book includes a chapter titled "Teachers' Perceptions and Expectations and the Black-White Test Score Gap" -- may underestimate what it will take to meet the challenges that we face.

There is one moment of those frivolous first days of the year that I do keep returning to: One of the speakers, Yvette Jackson, the chief executive of the National Urban Alliance, made it clear that the lip service and labels Alexandria is putting forward are not going to help children who are what she calls "school-dependent learners." These are students from low-income backgrounds who need school to give them the basic knowledge that other kids get from their families -- knowledge that schools expect students to have when they start classes. To her, the gap everyone is talking about is not a question of black and white but of the "difference between children's potential and their performance."

"No matter how poor they are, when little

kids start school, they are excited; they believe they are going to learn," Jackson said. "But unless schools give them the background knowledge . . . so they can connect with what they study and feel confident, they begin to feel that school is a foreign place, and they give up."

For Junior Bailey, a senior in my Advanced Placement English class, school has never been a foreign place, a fact he attributes to his dad. "He has always been on me; it's been hard to get away with much," Junior said. He also told me that hardly any of his friends have their fathers living with them. "Their mothers are soft on them, and they don't get any push from home."

On parents' night a few weeks ago, I was thrilled to see Junior's dad, Willie Bailey, a star on T.C. Williams's 1983 basketball team, walk into my classroom. Willie told me that after seeing how the guys he grew up with were affected by not having their dads

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around, he promised himself that he would be a real presence in his son's life.

With more parents like Willie Bailey, someday schools might realistically talk about closing the gap between students' potential and their performance.

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