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RACE AND GENDER IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

by Erin Aubry Kaplan

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Is there any more compelling proof of America's race problem than the state of its public schools? Touted as the nation's best tool for implementing democracy, public schools have been plagued by racial separation from the very beginning and in 2008 have yet to overcome that legacy. Nearly every measure of school success—test scores, graduation rates, college preparation rates—has a gap defined by a color divide, with whites and Asians on one side and African Americans and Latinos on the other. Researchers point to the growing significance of class in this divide, but poverty is now an almost inseparable characteristic of race; an affluent public school is almost by definition predominantly white or Asian, while a poor public school is predictably black, brown, or some combination of the two. Geography has also become code language for color, with suburban (white) schools consistently faring much better than those in the inner city.

We tend to think of this scenario as modern, but it is really the result of massive white flight from urban school districts, which started during the racial upheavals in the 1960s and never abated. Whites have more or less opted out of public schools; they rarely account for more than 15% of any urban school district anywhere and tend to be clustered in a few campuses in a corner of a city. And within the new racial isolation—called resegregation—there are also gender differences that exacerbate the problem. New brain research has shown that boys and girls learn differently, with boys falling behind in reading and writing and girls gaining in math and science.¹ Among blacks and Latinos, girls have significantly lower dropout rates and

higher college-readiness rates. This is potentially troubling for their male counterparts but particularly for black males, historically the most underperforming student group. Black males are disproportionately disciplined, tracked in special education, and labeled behavior problems; the academic performance gap between them and black females is the widest gender gap among all groups.

For California, a state where people have historically come to escape hardship and reinvent themselves, the picture is especially troubling. California likes to boast of its ethnic diversity, but diversity has hardly meant equity, particularly when it comes to schools. The good news is that more public officials are seeing this inequity as unacceptable. Last year, Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell made closing the racial achievement gap a major priority after Academic Performance Index (API) numbers at schools across the state in 2005–06 revealed the entrenched gap between whites and Asians on one side and blacks and Latinos on the other; the white-black difference in both base and growth API numbers was roughly 170 points. Latinos lagged far behind but outscored blacks, the lowest group, by 25 points. In an attempt to level the learning field, O'Connell launched an achievement gap initiative that convened a statewide council of educators, who will make recommendations to the state on what it can do differently to close the gap as well as advise local districts. It is a big and complex task, but O'Connell says he is determined. “The mission at its core is about doing what is right,” read an executive summary of the initiative published earlier this year, “not what is easy.”²

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Unfortunately, many factors are working against that mission. California is a wealthy state that invests proportionately little in public education—the sixth largest economy in the world, it ranks only 33rd in the nation in per-pupil spending.³ Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation’s second largest school district with 700,000 students, ranks near the bottom on many counts, including the ratio of staff to students. And though California has a reputation of being politically liberal and even radical, it is also racially conservative. That conservatism is clearly reflected in a string of propositions passed in the last 15 years, including Prop 187 in 1994 (banned public services for illegal immigrants, later declared unconstitutional), Prop 209 in 1996 (banned affirmative action in contracting and all public institutions, including university admissions), and Prop 227 in 1998 (banned bilingual education in public schools). Another proposition that has wrought damage over time to low-performing schools is Prop 13, a sweeping tax reform measure passed in 1978 that capped property tax rates and limited local revenue for education. That limited revenue has loomed larger and larger as state budget crises grow more frequent and education grows increasingly vulnerable to cuts. The budget crisis this year is a whopper, with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger poised to cut education expenditures by nearly \$5 billion—a disaster for any school, but especially disastrous for schools that are chronically under resourced.

Demographic Changes

All of this has developed at the same time that Latinos have dramatically reconfigured demographics throughout the state. In 2006–07, California public school students were 29.4% white, 8.1% Asian, 8.11% African American, and 48.1% Latino⁴ (up from 39.7% a decade ago). Nationally, Latinos have experienced sharply increased racial isolation since the 1960s, according to “Historic Reversals, Accelerating Resegregation, and the Need for New Integration Strategies,” a 2007 report issued by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. The report noted that while black and brown children experience double segregation of race and class, Latinos often experience triple segregation: race, class, and language.⁵

Black students have suffered the most severe effects of segregation, simply because they suffered them so systematically and for so long. The separate-but-equal doctrine that kept blacks in inferior schools was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1954, but inequality persisted long after that; integration of public schools, including those in California, failed to happen as whites

simply moved away from schools and neighborhoods that became too “colored.” The desegregation issue is still a contentious one, as the Supreme Court demonstrated last year. In its first education equality ruling since *Brown*, the court decided that school assignment programs in Seattle and Louisville that were attempting to desegregate their public schools could no longer use race as a criteria, because to do so was inherently discriminatory. The idea that racial consideration is the same thing as racial prejudice sounds enlightened, but it actually impedes goals of racial balance. Harvard law professor Mica Pollock says the push to eliminate racial categories altogether is not being colorblind, but “colormute”—not giving voice to the racial reality we know is there. The term was the title of a book Pollock wrote about her experience teaching at a California high school in the post-Prop 209 era. She called the Supreme Court decision retrogressive and one lawyer’s assertion that the nation’s schools are now equal “grossly misinformed.”⁶

Black students remain the greatest casualties of the misinformation. Though at the core of the attempts to desegregate and equalize schools, they have not reaped nearly enough benefits. The “colormute” attitude toward race, declining interest in desegregation, and the fact that black student populations in urban areas have been shrinking for years as Latino populations have grown, means that their crisis gets little special attention even in big cities such as Los Angeles, Oakland, and Long Beach, where they are concentrated. The “State of Black Los Angeles” report issued by the Urban League and United Way in 2005 painted the grim picture wrought by such neglect: in an “equality index” that took into account median income, graduation rates, and other factors, blacks scored lowest of all ethnic groups. In 2005–06, black high school students in California had a 4-year dropout rate of 24.6%—again, highest among all groups.

And they are overrepresented in special education. A Schott Foundation report card on public education and black male students found that in LAUSD in 2000–01, black male students were disproportionately represented in three special ed categories combined: total mental retardation, emotional disturbance, and specific learning disabilities. The “emotional disturbance” ratio was 5 times higher than their enrollment ratio.⁷ All these designations are directly tied to graduation rates and other measures of school success.

The few special measures created with black students in mind have fizzled, mostly for political reasons. A reso-

lution to facilitate black student achievement, proposed by the Oakland school board in 1996, got lost in a storm of controversy about the whole idea of “ebonics” as a racially different approach to learning standard English (although this is not a controversial idea for English Language Learners, a classification for anyone whose first language is not English but which overwhelmingly applies to Latinos). In Los Angeles, the African American Learners Initiative, meant to specifically address the needs of African American students in LAUSD, was passed in 2004. But implementation was erratic, and its stated purpose of helping black students was eventually diluted. The lack of follow-up has meant that African American students remain the most beleaguered, with the fewest prospects for improvement.

Magnets and Diversity

One of the better-known desegregation efforts still going is magnet schools. Magnets have evolved in Los Angeles Unified as specialized, small-school settings that are popular among parents as alternatives to big, dysfunctional (read: black and brown) campuses. It is easy to see the appeal; teachers have more latitude and test scores are generally higher than in regular schools. But the desegregation goals of magnets have clearly not been achieved since they were launched 30 years ago. Certain magnets are well integrated, but many are not; they reflect patterns of resegregation, and magnets in black and Latino neighborhoods are overwhelmingly black and Latino. Moreover, within magnets, there are still achievement gaps along color lines. Despite this, many schools are dissolving desegregation efforts, saying they are no longer necessary; Pasadena Unified, which was one of the first districts in Southern California ordered to desegregate, jettisoned its program last year. By contrast, a Los Angeles Superior Court ruled last year against a suit brought by the conservative Pacific Legal Foundation, which argued that magnets were violating the “colorblind” spirit, if not the law, of Prop 209. Though this was a victory for advocates of desegregation, the conservative fight against race consciousness in California education is very likely not over.

But wherever people fall in the race argument, few would argue the benefits of school settings that are economically, ethnically, and educationally diverse. Black and brown students at Beverly Hills High School, though relatively few in number, had API numbers of over 750 last year.⁸ Taft High in the west San Fernando Valley, which has far more black and brown students who tend to be bused in, had lower APIs of around 620.⁹ By contrast, the numbers

for these same students at typical inner-city schools in Los Angeles are nothing short of dismal. Dorsey High reported an API last year of 522 for black students, while Latinos had 503.¹⁰ Jordan High in Watts posted 538 for Latinos, 476 for blacks.¹¹ It is both encouraging and distressing to note that Latinos, despite the challenges faced by its many English Language Learners, consistently outperform African Americans as a group. For the school year 2006–07, Latinos scored 665 statewide, while African Americans scored 643; English Language Learners outscored blacks slightly at 646.¹² The pattern held in individual districts, including Los Angeles, Pasadena, and Oakland.¹³

Accountability for Whom?

As the political will for desegregation wanes, there has been an increased focus on improving school quality. Much of that focus has been on improving test scores. The school accountability movement of the last decade, combined with the federal No Child Left Behind Act, has instituted a battery of standardized tests and performance-measuring mechanisms to California students—high-school exit exam (CAHSEE), Standard Testing and Reporting System (STAR), Academic Performance Index (API), Achievement Test (CAT6), and High Priority, an intervention program for low-performing schools. While some schools have improved as measured by such testing, many more are stagnant or suffer consequences (i.e., students don’t get diplomas) for failing them. For schools with poor children already at risk, this is obviously problematic. A 2003 working paper by the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) evaluating California’s elaborate testing system found that it is missing one important standard—an “opportunity to learn” standard to track whether resources to facilitate learning are sufficient at each school. Such standards are theoretically guaranteed by the 2004 settlement of *Williams vs. California*, an educational equity lawsuit brought against the state by the American Civil Liberties Union that featured black and Latino students as plaintiffs. But the impact of the settlement, related to similar lawsuits around funding equity that go back 20 years, is too recent to assess. The PACE study found that after experiencing some test-score gains in elementary grades, California students have made little progress since 2002, based on the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP). It pointed to an analysis by UCLA’s Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing warned that “the state’s current accountability system, in the absence of adjustments, will likely show diminishing signs in student achievement.”¹⁴

Losing ground is exactly what students can't afford to do, especially low-income students of color who comprise so much of the public school system. But the good news is that big improvements are more than possible—if public sentiment and policymakers make them a priority. “Why is there still not equity? Because we allow it,” LAUSD board president Monica Garcia declared at a recent public forum on the black student crisis. “There is an absence of change. We have called for change, but not enough.”

Conclusion

The danger of racial and gender inequality in public schools—besides the obvious—is that it has been with us so long, it almost feels normal. Breaking the lethargy of status quo is critical, and not just with a single well-intentioned program or policy but with a multifaceted approach that constantly evaluates the system as a whole. We need to be creative in joining assessments and proposed solutions of the past with those of the present. This sounds like a tall order, perhaps overwhelming. But not insuring our children's future to the best of our ability will be far more overwhelming than that.

With that in mind, here are some recommendations for consideration:

1. Develop and incorporate an “opportunities to learn” standard in state testing. To achieve this, we need to develop a coalition of administrators, parents, local youth advocacy organizations, and local elected officials to create and measure standards for equitable distribution of resources. This needs to be followed with an annual report that tracks the progress of resources allocated and the impact made on students' success. As a part of this effort, particular attention should be given to continued desegregation of our schools by race, ethnicity, and class.
2. Develop programs that target African American students and their particular academic needs in the same way the English Language Learner program target the language needs of Latino and other students. For example, several charter schools in California have addressed such needs by incorporating an individualized learning plan, tailored for each student, with regular academic curriculum.

¹ DeFao, Janine (June 18, 2007) “Single Gender Education Gains Ground as Boys Lag,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

² www.closingtheachievementgap.org, p. 2, Executive Summary, Report of Supt. Jack O'Connell's California P-16 Council, Jan. 2008

³ <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/Navigation/fsTwoPanel.asp?bottom=%2FArticles%2Farticle%2Easp%3Dhow%2520California%2520Compares>

⁴ <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/Navigation/fsTwoPanel.asp?bottom=%2Fprofile%2Easp%3Flevel%3D04%26reportnumber%3D16>

⁵ Orfield, Gary and Lee, Chungmei (Aug. 2007) *Historic Reversals, Accelerating Resegregation, and the Need for New Integration Strategies.*, The Civil Rights Project at UCLA, p. 6.

⁶ www.gse.harvard.edu/news_events/features/2007/06/28_pollock.html

⁷ *Public Education and Black Male Students: A State Report Card* (2005) The Schott Foundation for Public Education, Second Edition, pp. 20-21.

⁸ <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/Navigation/fs/twoPanel.asp?bottom=%2Fprofile%2Easp%3Flevel%3D07%26reportnumber%3D16>

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Venza, Andrea and Maxwell-Jolly, Julie (2007) *The Unequal Opportunity to Learn in California Schools: Counting Standards to Track School Equality*. PACE, University of California, Berkeley, pp. 1, 6.