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Future:  
Educational  
Equity in the 1990s**

*By Michael L. Williams*



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# Back to the Future: Educational Equity in the 1990s

By Michael L. Williams

**B**lack historian and educator, Carter G. Woodson, encouraged America to set aside a week to focus on black achievement because he believed it was good for America to celebrate black America's past. Implicit in my remarks is the idea that to attain real education equity and enhance black student achievement in the future demands that we go back and embrace the values of the past.

I am very grateful to The Heritage Foundation for sponsoring this Black History Month series. Honest, frank, and robust discussion benefits us all.

Going back to the future means parents and education are indispensable.

Going back to the future means every child can learn and is responsible to meet the challenges of learning. The role of parents, teachers, and the community is to set high expectations for students, demand that they meet them, reward their success and correct their failure. And the role of government is to protect individual chances to compete.

So, if you will, travel with me back to the future.

*Brown v. Board of Education* is, without a doubt, the most significant education case in American jurisprudence. Black students and white students were legally required to be separated. Seven-year old Linda Brown was forced to cross the railroad tracks in a nearby switching yard and wait for a rickety bus to take her to a black school. Her father, Oliver Brown, was fed up with his daughter having to go to the other side of town when a good school was much closer to his home — a white school.

*Brown* outlawed state-sanctioned segregation. But let me suggest that underlying the *Brown* holding was a respect for Mr. Brown's right to make vital education decisions affecting his daughter.

**Quest for the Right Result.** That focus on how and who decides fundamental education decisions for students has over time been transformed by some into a quest to attain the right result or right racial mix of students. The strategies include busing, school attendance quotas, and the redrawing of school attendance zones. I don't have to tell you that school districts around the country have shuffled kids hither and yonder so that little black boys can sit in classrooms next to little white boys.

By and large these strategies have had questionable success. The demographics of many metropolitan areas render the elimination of predominantly single-race schools all but impossible. There are simply not enough white students to spread around. Imagine the battle for places like Detroit, Chicago, and Milwaukee with sizeable minority populations. Yet, millions of dollars and thousands of hours are spent each year transporting black students

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out of their neighborhoods in search of ever disappearing white students. All of this without significantly marked improvement in black academic excellence. The problem: We've forgotten the knowledge of the past. The solution: We've got to go back to the future.

The words of W.E.B. DuBois which I have quoted before are instructive.

... Theoretically, the Negro needs neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What he needs is Education. What he must remember is that there is no magic, either in mixed schools or in segregated schools. A mixed school with poor and unsympathetic teachers, with hostile public opinion, and no teaching of truth concerning black folk, is bad. A segregated school with ignorant placeholders, inadequate equipment, poor salaries...is equally bad. Other things being equal, the mixed school is the broader more natural basis for the education of all youth. It gives wide contacts: it inspires greater self-confidence; and suppresses the inferiority complex. But other things seldom are equal, and in that case, sympathy, knowledge, and the truth, outweigh all that the mixed school can offer.

What are the ingredients for good schooling?

Families are the building blocks of success. Commensurate with the parental rights recognized in *Brown* are parental responsibilities, parents directing and working with their children. Student achievement is not determined by race or how much money or how many parents are in the home. Learning can and does occur in black and poor and single-parent homes. Learning occurs where there are (1) parents who see themselves as the child's *primary* educator, (2) high expectations, (3) consistent discipline, and (4) complimentary messages.

DuBois was right. Students need education.

Parents are the key. Every day black students attend private schools that outperform public schools in the same neighborhood because private school parents send a strong message to their youngsters: LEARN. We have all heard the story about the parent that tells a child, "I'm paying good money for your education. Don't waste my money."

For that reason, we must expand parental power. School choice holds considerable promise for black students particularly coupled with financial packages for lower income students or those in segregated schools. The President's new budget includes a substantial number of programs and proposals that, taken together, form the basis of a beginning strategy to help empower parents.

The following provisions in the budget will fund an aggressive empowerment agenda:

- ◆ **Federal grants to local school districts implementing educational certificate programs.** The Administration seeks \$200 million per year to support local educational agencies that have qualified certificate programs.
- ◆ **Magnet schools.** \$110 million is requested for magnet schools related to desegregation plans.
- ◆ **Increased parental choice in compensatory education.** The Administration seeks legislation permitting Chapter 1 funds to be used in choice programs.
- ◆ **Greater state/local flexibility in use of federal funds.** Legislation is proposed allowing grantees to waive certain legal requirements restricting selected programs.

- ◆ **Choice demonstration program.** The Administration requests \$30 million to fund and evaluate nationally significant educational choice demonstrations.

Some say that black parents are not sophisticated enough to make the right decision. I have one response to the naysayers: I have faith in parents. Black parents decide where to live. Where to worship. What car to buy. But they allegedly cannot decide where to send their children to school. I do not buy it.

I have faith in grandparents like mine. When the local colored school ended in the seventh grade, my mother and uncle were sent to boarding schools several hundred miles away from home to get a high school diploma. Hundreds of other Southern black youngsters were sent to live with relatives in the North so they could obtain a superior education.

I have faith in the thousands of parents like Robbie Nelson. Ms. Nelson is a divorced mother of four with a high school education. She has worked more than 30 years as a domestic. Her 16-year-old son is a sophomore at a local public school. Until last year, he attended private schools — chosen and paid for by his mother.

Some say school choice will siphon off the best and the brightest. That is already happening with the increasing number of black students now attending private schools and the significant out-migration of middle class black families. The question is, do we use existing funding for transporting the kids that are left behind or for educating them?

In some communities around the country a parent of a fourth, fifth and sixth grader could have children assigned to three different elementary schools. It's hard enough for parents to get to one PTA meeting, let alone three. Can you imagine any parent making such an inefficient choice? Just think about the burden on single-parent families.

Some say that school choice will destroy the public school system. I am amazed at the number of public school teachers whose own children are in private schools.

**Parents' Role.** Some say that large numbers of parents have not taken the option to transfer their children in the school choice plans now existing around the country. I say, the pyramids were not built in a day. I have no delusions that school choice alone will resurrect public school education. It is a main ingredient.

School choice notwithstanding, parents can influence education. All parents can set goals for their children, take their children to church, discipline and punish their children, know their children's friends, get them in bed at a reasonable hour, review homework, take them to the library, and visit the school.

Parents can surely exercise greater control over the disc-player and VCR. I still remember an afternoon in my parents' house when I was a teenager. I had James Brown blasting on my stereo. "Get up. Get on up. Get on the scene like a sex machine." All of a sudden my mother ran in the room and snatched the album off the record player and left. "Get on the scene like a sex machine" was too much for my mother. Momma didn't play that.

She and I are lucky I am not a teenager today. I would recite some of the lyrics of today's music but I've caused enough controversy for a while. But take it from one of the groups, "parental discretion" is advised. We had better start finding out "what's going on" so that our youth learn about relationships and sexuality in a way that is consistent with our family values.

The U.S. has the highest teen pregnancy rate among Westernized nations and the problem is growing. Babies making babies. Both the number of births to young women under twenty and the teen birth rate increased in the last ten years. Of particular concern is the birth rate among teens aged 15 to 17, which rose 10 percent between 1986 and 1988. Media accounts are replete with stories of the economic hardship of teen parents. Fifty-nine percent of the women who receive AFDC payments in 1988 were 19 or younger at the birth of their first child. Among children aged five or younger who were in poverty in 1988, nearly half lived in families headed by mothers who began having children when they were teenagers.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, teen pregnancy occurs among all racial and ethnic groups and in all classes of this society. Nevertheless, it is most devastating for those of disadvantaged backgrounds.

Federal law makes clear that a student may not be discriminated against based on that student's pregnancy. It is unlawful to:

- ◆ Channel pregnant students into specific courses of study or not allow them the same freedom as others to enroll in any course of study;
- ◆ Not allow excused absences from school for parental care or for problems associated with pregnancy;
- ◆ Not reinstate students, at the end of leave for pregnancy, to the status they held when the leave began.

No student will need a quality education more than that pregnant teen. Their future rests squarely on their young and inexperienced shoulders — on their ability to grab hold of the opportunities available to people who opt for hard work, discipline, and self-control. Personal responsibility has its place.

**Legal Obligations.** But pregnant teens need not confront the future all alone. That's why I advised the country's chief state school officers of their legal obligations to pregnant students under federal civil rights law. We cannot afford to give up on them. This fiscal year the Office for Civil Rights will also conduct compliance reviews at selected school districts to determine whether educators are complying with federal civil rights law.

Despite our prayers that each newborn enters this world strong and healthy, approximately 375,000 newborns, or eleven percent of all children born in the U.S. annually are born addicted to the drugs of their mother. These children have a variety of neurological, physical, and emotional disabilities. And none test educators more than those children born addicted to crack. I've spoken a lot about expectations today. We cannot presume these students to be failures on their first day of school. In October I reminded the nation's educators about their responsibility to identify, evaluate, and place these students in appropriate education settings.

Schools employ any number of student grouping practices — the bluebirds, the redbirds, honors, advanced placement, gifted and talented, special education, and the like — that sometimes result in predominantly one-race classrooms.

Racially identifiable classrooms raise important equity issues, particularly if black students are assigned to low-track classes or have limited opportunity for advanced placement. The concern is not simply that the classes are single race but whether there is an educationally justifiable reason for assigning a student to the particular class.

We need to teach kids to achieve their full potential. American business will create new managerial and high technology jobs in the future. Generally, lower-track students receive less demanding courses, including, in particular, math and science courses. They have considerably fewer opportunities to take the critical gatekeeping courses necessary for science and technology study after high school, such as calculus, and even have limited opportunities for the necessary gatekeeping courses at the junior high level – algebra and geometry – that are prerequisites for advanced math training in high school. The future demands some math and science proficiency.

**Rising to Expectations.** Students have proved time and time again they will rise to the level of the expectations set by parents and teachers. We don't have to search far to explain why low trackers never seem to catch up with their peers if grouping practices suggest they are dumb or worthless. Because we believe each student is capable of learning, the Office for Civil Rights is developing policy guidance for school districts and our investigators that outlines the requirements of federal civil rights law in this area. And we look forward to completing the investigations of pending complaints that have been filed alleging that black students have been improperly grouped or tracked.

Once assigned to the proper classrooms it's up to them to achieve.

An issue that adversely affects student achievement is negative peer pressure. Education consultant Jawanza Kunjufu in his book, "To Be Popular or Smart: The Black Peer Group," describes conversations with black high schoolers on this subject. Kunjufu found that if you spoke black English, listened to rap music or rhythm and blues and hung out, then you were considered black. If, on the other hand, you spoke standard English, listened to rock or classical music and studied hard, you were deemed to be white. Kunjufu interviewed bright and talented black students who made conscious decisions to take less challenging courses, perform at less than full potential, assume the role of the class clown rather than the class brain or avoid extracurricular pursuits like debate and speech and swimming – all to escape racial ostracization.

Many of us in this room can identify with that dilemma. Few pressures are greater than the desire to belong. Few charges hurt more than the allegation, "You think you're better than we are." The fear of being called "white," or a "nerd," or the worst indictment of all, "an Oreonegro," is powerful.

**Private Activity.** There is an important lesson in this story. Oliver Brown did not take the Topeka School Board all the way to the Supreme Court so black kids could aspire to mediocrity. Racial uniformity is effective in confronting a common enemy that affects each group member similarly. When black students were segregated to inferior schools by law, Mr. Brown and other black parents banded together to knock down the wall of racial discrimination. But racial uniformity alone cannot achieve racial group betterment. Learning is a private activity conducted in a public setting. In the end, Linda Brown like any other student had to take her own midterms, finals, and college boards. Black uplift depends upon each student one by one by one mastering the coursework.

My father was a high school football coach for over forty years. A former college all-American and Texas High School Football Coach of the Year. As a teenager I spent hours in front of a movie projector watching football game films. Every position has a specific assignment on every play. The players have to know it and be able to execute it. If they do, the team wins. If they do not, the team fails.

Coaches are masters at developing team spirit that gets the best out of athletes. Athletes run hard so the team can win. They play tired so the team can win. They sacrifice free time

to practice so the team can win. They work their butts off to get stars on their helmets and patches on their letter jackets. If the quarterback has a great game, the tackle works even harder so he can get the game ball the following week. Team mentality spurs each player to his personal best.

**Group Orthodoxy.** Kunjufu's students imposed a group orthodoxy that diminishes individual performance. Rather than prod each student to new heights, it forced them to conform their academic performance downward. Punishment for breaking the law was expulsion. No game ball. No letter jacket. No stars.

Great football coaches call on winning a tradition to continue winning. Freshmen learn the records of the guys that preceded them. How fast they ran. How many tackles they made. How many points they scored. Knowledge that motivates.

We have failed to tell the story of black intellectual challenge and triumph. Students can't draw upon that history as a source of intellectual power when they don't know it. They know the pursuits of athletes, entertainers, and maybe even drug dealers; but not the determination of slaves who took to learning like thirsty men to water, learned to read despite the threat of the slave masters' whip, and the thousands of black Americans that excelled academically since then.

When that happens they'll understand that racial pride demands academic excellence. That the color of learning is black... and yellow and white and brown. Until then we'll have to be satisfied with a few Steve Erckle's here and there. That day may not be far off. I commend the many parents, big brother/big sisters, mentors, tutors, and other volunteers that dedicate their time to giving meaning and shape to the lives of today's youth.

**Salad Bowl.** That brings me to diversity. It is important to know, understand, and appreciate the wide variety of cultures that comprise America. Traditional American pluralism values difference. It has been stated many times that American pluralism is much more like a salad bowl than a melting pot. The intense heat of the melting pot destroys the individual character of each ingredient thus producing mush. On the other hand, the green lettuce, the yellow cheese, the red tomato, the white onion, the brown bacon bits each in their own way provide color for beauty and different flavors for taste.

Education prepares all Americans for tomorrow. The test is to know, appreciate, and celebrate our cultural differences without elevating them to a plateau higher than the national community. Lettuce is only part of the salad.

In the quest to celebrate America's rich diversity we are cautioned to draw the myriad of American groups into a common American culture. There's a fine line between celebrating diversity, which expands understanding and knowledge, which engenders a free flow exchange of ideas on the one hand, and encouraging separation and privilege on the other.

Despite our best hopes and dreams, racism and discrimination still exist. In early December I announced the National Enforcement Strategy for the Office of Civil Rights. The Strategy represents the first time in OCR history that we established a comprehensive civil rights enforcement program.

In 1990 we received more than 3,300 complaints alleging violations of federal civil rights law. Complaint receipts have increased so significantly over each of the past three years that complaint investigations consume almost all of our non-discretionary resources. That increase shows no sign of tapering off. And complaint receipts now exceed any previous level in OCR history. We have been unable to devote as much attention as we would like to con-



cerns regarding the diminishing of educational opportunity of America's minority and women students. The Strategy attempts to redress that imbalance.

During the current fiscal year, we will give special attention to eight issues, three of which I have discussed this afternoon – ability grouping, educational opportunities of pregnant students, and crack babies. The others are as follows:

- ◆ Equal educational opportunities for national origin minority and American Indian students who have limited-English proficiency;
- ◆ Racial harassment on college campuses;
- ◆ Identification for special education and related services for homeless children with handicaps;
- ◆ Discrimination in athletics programs based on sex;
- ◆ Discrimination in college admissions and financial aid programs.

We will be focusing much of our discretionary resources on these issues.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to participate in this lecture series and discuss the relationship between traditional values and education equity.



