

Education Chief: Schools Failing Black Students

Written by George E. Curry
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Instead of being the traditional ticket to success, many of our nation's troubled schools hinder opportunity for upward mobility, especially for students of color, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan told Black publishers in a private meeting last week.

“The hard truth, the brutal truth, is that in too many places, our education system is falling short of being the engine of mobility, the prized pathway to the middle class,” Duncan told members of the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA). “Instead, tragically, these schools often perpetuate inequality and restrict opportunity.”

In a White House meeting with Black newspaper publishers, Duncan described what he calls the paradox of progress.

“The good news is that after the Brown decision, school segregation declined dramatically in the South. The bad news is that our schools today are as segregated as they have been at any time since the death of Dr. King.

“The good news is that many more Black students today are graduating from high school and enrolling in college than ever before. The bad news is that Black students are still less likely than their peers to receive equal access to top-notch teachers and the college-prep classes they need to succeed in today's globally competitive economy.

“The good news is that there are now many more Black men in college than in prison. The bad news is that not enough of those young men are staying in college to get their degree—and far

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too many of them are losing their lives as a result of gun violence and our unwillingness to do what is necessary to keep our children safe.

“The good news is that by 2010, the on-time graduation rate for Black students had risen to 66.1 percent. Two-thirds of Black ninth-graders now graduate on time. That is an increase of almost six percentage points from 2008—and it is probably the highest high school graduation rate for Black students in our nation’s history... The bad news is that one-third of Black students are still not graduating on-time— and we know those numbers are even higher in many inner-city neighborhoods.

The good news is that Black enrollment in college went up by about 15 percent from the fall of 2008 to the fall of 2011. Nearly 400,000 more Black students are in college today than when the president took office. The bad news is that Black enrollment was essentially flat between 2010 and 2011. And enrollment is not increasing nearly as fast as it should.”

Duncan said while there is much public debate about the achievement gap between people of color and Whites, he is worried about another gap.

“In 2013, children of color in America not only confront an achievement gap, they confront what I call an opportunity gap that, too often, is unacceptably wide,” he told the publishers. “...The scope of the gap today—and the reasons it persists—is spelled out in the recent report of the Equity and Excellence Commission and in the data we gathered as part of our Civil Rights Data Collection Project.

“This opportunity gap is deeply troubling. It is painfully at odds with the American creed—that if you study hard and play by the rules, you get a fair shot at the future, regardless of your zip code, skin color, or the size of your bank account.”

According to Duncan, nearly 40 percent of Black and Hispanic students attend schools that are more than 90 percent White. Consequently, at a time the U.S. is growing more diverse, its classrooms are becoming less diverse.

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“Think about that for a moment,” Duncan said. “The data are clear: A decrease in diversity and an upswing in racial isolation are one reason that the opportunity gap is not ending.”

To tackle the problem, Duncan said he and President Obama believe 1. Every student should have access to a world-class education that includes access to rigorous, college- and career-ready coursework; 2. Every student should have an effective teacher; 3. Schools must be accountable for the needs and performance of all students; 4. Schools must work in partnership with families and communities and 5. College must be accessible and affordable for all students who are qualified to attend college.

“For too long, educators and members of the public often shrugged their shoulders in the face of persistently poor performance in our lowest-achieving schools. Too many school leaders wrote off poor children and children of color,” Duncan said. “President Obama and I refuse to accept that fatalism. Both our life experiences working in the community tell us that with supports, opportunities, and guidance, our children can and do achieve at high levels. We just have to meet them half way.”

Duncan said violence has to be reduced, especially in urban areas, if educational programs are to be successful.

“I hope you will work together with the nation’s responsible gun owners—including police officers and members of the clergy and the business community—to enact the common-sense restrictions that President Obama has proposed on the sale of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.

“I hope you will join in the fight to expand background checks and close the gun show loophole. For if there is even one step we can take to prevent a child from dying unnecessarily, we must take it.”

In an attempt to personalize gun violence, Duncan told publishers about a picture a student had drawn for him.

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“It was a picture of him as a fireman. And the caption that he wrote to go along with it was: ‘If I grow up, I want to be a fireman.’ That’s a deep statement about the reality of this young man’s world. Think about what this means for so many of our young kids today, who think about if I grow up. If, not when.”