

## ONE

# The Current State of Urban Middle Schools

---

---

### A RECORD OF FAILURE

THE MARKING OF the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, Supreme Court decision in May 2004 has led educators, analysts, politicians, and journalists to closely examine the current state of public education for black and other children of color in the United States. The prevailing view is that *Brown* failed to deliver. The quality of education for children of color continues to be inferior to that afforded most white children. With shameful gaps in achievement test scores continuing, concerned observers are searching for ways to provide all children with equal access to good quality education (e.g., Cose, 2004; Hale, 2001; Hendrie, 2004).

Most of the attention to issues of equal access and the racial gaps in achievement scores has been focused on the American city, in which public schools seem to be in considerable trouble. Noguera (2003) summarized the state of these schools in a single word—*failure*—and indicated that this failure is pervasive. He and others have cited low student achievement and attendance and unmotivated students and teachers among the problems faced by these schools. According to Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003), many schools, especially those in big cities, have neither adequate building leadership nor a critical mass of good teachers necessary to provide quality educational programs for their children. Lisa Delpit, in the introduction to the 2006 edition of her important work, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, described how the No Child Left Behind legislation continues to undermine efforts at urban school improvement. In addition, she challenged readers to recognize how the destruction from a hurricane exposed the racism and classism that has continued to keep those who are materially poor and those with dark skin poorly served and neglected.

Despite the fifty-five years of the opportunity for reform since *Brown*, the problems of American educational institutions continue to adversely affect non-Asian minority children and adolescents much more so than they affect white children (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Even among those with the same level of academic attainment, black and Hispanic students lag behind white and Asian students. Citing National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test results, Thernstrom and Thernstrom reported that by the twelfth grade black students on the average are four years behind white and Asian students in academic skills, with Hispanic students not faring much better. So dire is this situation that, according to these authors, employers who wish to hire people who are literate and numerate will be hard-pressed to find them among blacks and Hispanics with high school diplomas. In addition, black college graduates tend not to achieve the levels of prose literacy or quantitative literacy that whites do with less than two years of college. Adding to these concerns are the figures for the relatively high dropout rates for Hispanic and African American youth. For example, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2003), 27 percent of Hispanic sixteen through twenty-four year olds were high school dropouts in 2000, as were 10.9 percent of individuals identified as *Black, non-Hispanic*. Only 7.3 percent of whites and 3.6 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders in that age group were identified as dropouts. The high dropout rate for Hispanic young adults is explained, in part, by the 43 percent rate among non-English-speaking Hispanic immigrants, more than double that for first- and subsequent-generation Hispanic young adults (15 and 14 percent, respectively). The Alliance for Excellent Education (Joftus, 2002) indicated in its report on the state of secondary education that, while fewer than 75 percent of eighth graders end up graduating from high school in five years, this rate dips to below 50 percent in urban communities.

#### THE PROBLEM: INEFFECTIVE SCHOOLS AND DISENGAGED STUDENTS

Hale (2001) contended that the schools that most African American children attend—the urban public schools—teach a watered-down curriculum that fails to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to pass competency exams, achieve in college, or be competitive in the workplace. Limited English-proficient children and adolescents may be at an even greater disadvantage since they are approximately four years behind their peers in reading levels in eighth grade and approximately five years behind in twelfth grade (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003b). In addition, Greene and Forster (2003), in a working paper prepared for the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, concluded that the K–12 educational system carries much of the blame for the fact that black and Hispanic students graduate or

leave high school qualified to enter college at much lower rates than does the population as a whole.

Two decades ago, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), in its landmark document, *Turning Points*, sounded the alarm that showed that far too many young adolescents were being left behind and ill prepared for a productive future. The council estimated that one-quarter of American adolescents were in “serious jeopardy” with respect to the risks of school failure, substance abuse, and early risky sexual intercourse and reported that the critical reasoning skills of large numbers of young adolescents were “extremely deficient” (p. 27). It declared that a serious mismatch existed between middle schools and the developmental needs of their students and that risks faced by young adolescents are greater for those who are economically poor, members of minority groups, or recent immigrants, in part because these students generally attend the weakest schools.

Certainly, the problem of ineffective urban schooling adversely affects African American and Hispanic children and adolescents most of all and, among them, boys more than girls. In suggesting a model for improving education for African American children, Hale (2001) noted a number of ways in which black adolescents and young adults lag behind their white counterparts in educational and career attainment and called for schools to change the way they educate African American children. Inadequate elementary and secondary education for African American children, designed more for the learning styles of middle-class white children than for children of color, sets in motion a chain of events that threatens the economic and emotional health of the African American family. She contended that African American students tend to attend secondary schools that demand so little that too few of them are able to achieve a passing grade on competency examinations required for high school graduation (see also Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003a). In addition, African American and Hispanic children and adolescents are more likely than white students to be taught by teachers who are inexperienced and poorly prepared (Prince, 2002). Furthermore, according to Hale, African American adolescents who do enter college tend to enroll in two-year rather than four-year institutions, to graduate with a bachelor’s degree less often than whites, and to take several more years to complete the baccalaureate.

For a multitude of reasons, economically poor children, especially minority children living in conditions of economic poverty, have a more difficult time persisting through the high school years, much less experiencing the academic success achieved by middle-class and upper-class children (Rist, 2000). Living in urban poverty affects the quality of the education of minority children, in part because of their exposure to continuous and multiple threats to their physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being at home (Evans, 2004), as well as because of the schools’ failure to provide adequate

support for their academic development. In the introduction written for the republication of his 1970 article on inequities in urban education for the *Harvard Educational Review*, Rist (2000) wrote that very little had changed in thirty years in terms of the extent to which urban schools are ill prepared to meet the needs of the large numbers of black and Hispanic children living in economic poverty.

Identifying the problem of the failure of American educational institutions, particularly those in urban areas, to properly educate the nation's children of color is only one small step in moving toward solving the problem. Jawanza Kunjufu (1989) urged the educational and political communities to spend more time examining causes of the problem and identifying and implementing solutions. Citing the sound educational research of Edmunds, Rist, and others, Kunjufu suggested that the most important factors affecting the low levels of academic achievement of urban children and youth lie within the educational setting and include teachers' low expectations of students' chances for success, the use of tracking, the poor quality of school curricula, bias in testing, and failure to tailor teaching approaches to students' learning styles. He also included peer pressure and low levels of parental involvement as important contributors, along with students' low levels of self-esteem. Less significant, he wrote, are family or neighborhood socioeconomic factors or how many parents the child has in the home, an opinion that also has been expressed by Jencks and Phillips (1998).

Hale (2001) suggested that the root of the problem of schools failing to meet the educational needs of African American children and adolescents lies in their inability to adapt pedagogy and structures to African American culture and the kinds of challenges faced by African American families. Because the majority of African American families are headed by a single parent who has to work longer hours for less pay than whites earn, the structures for involving parents in the schools that work for middle-class white families cannot be applied. Also, because African American children tend to be more kinesthetic than white children in their learning styles and to have a higher level of motor activity, teachers need to adapt learning activities to these characteristics and provide instruction that is "variable, vigorous, and captivating" (p. 117). Since, as she contends, many African American children, especially boys, are not intrinsically interested in school, largely because the curriculum rarely provides a good fit for their learning styles and cultural background, they tend to drop out intellectually by fifth grade and drift along until they can legally extricate themselves from school at age sixteen. So serious is the failure of schools to educate African American boys that she declared the need to improve the outlook for these children as the "most critical issue facing the African American community and American society" (p. 37).

Although the success of Hispanic children in U.S. schools depends in large part on their English language skills, schools could be doing much bet-

ter to educate children from various Hispanic backgrounds as well (Therstrom & Therstrom, 2003). Factors that provide obstacles to learning for these children include the fact that two-thirds of Latino children in the United States live with parents who are immigrants to the United States and are likely to be uneducated and unskilled, in addition to speaking little or no English. Accounting for one-sixth of the K–12 enrollments, Latino children, the majority of whose families are from Mexico, perform better in school and on standardized tests the longer their families have lived in the United States, although possessing adequate English language skills remains a problem for many third-generation students (Therstrom & Therstrom, 2003). The President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans (2003) charged that school personnel must help Hispanic American families understand the school culture for them to help their children succeed academically. The report also cited the low expectations that too many Americans hold for these children as a second obstacle to the academic achievement of Hispanic American children that schools must address. The commission also called for more research to better identify the diverse learning needs of the culturally and linguistically heterogeneous Hispanic American population.

Urban public schools, including middle schools, are beset with numerous problems, including poor-quality instruction, high levels of teacher and student absenteeism, insufficient teaching resources, and lack of professional development and coaching opportunities (Mac Iver, Ruby, Balfanz, & Byrnes, 2003; NCES, 1996). In addition, urban schoolchildren are more than twice as likely to be living at or below the poverty line and, related to the high concentration of low-income students in their schools, to attend schools with levels of student performance lower than in schools in suburban or rural areas (NCES, 1996). Students who attend urban schools are also more likely to be exposed to safety and health risks that mitigate against high levels of academic success (NCES, 1996). These children also tend to spend less time on homework and to watch television more than their suburban or rural counterparts (NCES, 1996).

The debate continues as to how much of an effect living in a low SES environment has on student achievement and whether effective schools and classroom practices can overcome social and economic disadvantage (Trimble, 2004). Surely, children who face the economic poverty, parental unemployment, and community disintegration found in many urban centers are more at risk for school disengagement and failure (George & Alexander, 2003), but such conditions do not render these children unable to learn or succeed. That the problem lies primarily with the schools is further indicated by a report from the Council of Great City Schools (2003) that revealed that more than half of urban schoolchildren attend schools where the per-child expenditures are below the average for their state. In addition, several reports

(e.g., Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003a; Prince, 2002) have shown that these same children and adolescents tend to be taught by less qualified and inexperienced teachers who lack adequate instructional support. As reported by the Educational Testing Service (Barton, 2003), more than one-quarter of black and Hispanic eighth graders, and 22 percent of economically poor children in eighth grade, in 2000, were being taught mathematics by teachers who lacked certification in middle level or secondary mathematics. Furthermore, these figures had increased by seven to ten percentage points from 1996 levels.

Yet, as schools struggle under the thumb of the No Child Left Behind requirements for continuous standardized testing, the education of so many of our urban children has become even more formulaic and removed from the real lives of children. As Delpit (2006b) pointed out, today's education continues to leave children unchallenged and to ignore the development of their character.

#### A SOLUTION: EFFECTIVE MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Despite the ills of urban public schooling and the risks faced by students who live with social and economic disadvantage, several recent efforts have shown that children and adolescents of color who attend some urban public and private schools, including those with high concentrations of low-income students, can and do experience educational success. Two successful urban middle school efforts include KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003) and Talent Development middle schools (Mac Iver et al., 2003; Norton, 2000). Common elements of these two models include the use of research and standards-based instructional programs, extra help sessions, a longer period for English instruction, a supportive learning environment, and student leadership development. Teacher development aimed at equipping teachers with classroom management and instructional skills appropriate for the middle school children they encounter is a key feature of the Talent Development model (Mac Iver et al., 2003). In KIPP schools, the principal, who has attended an intensive training session by KIPP directors, along with teachers set high expectations for student effort, achievement, and behavior. Instruction is of a high caliber and parents and students sign a contract to express their commitment to the demands of the KIPP school (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). On my visit to KIPP Ujima Village Academy in Baltimore, I observed an orderly environment in which student time on task was high and behavior problems virtually nonexistent.

These school programs seem to put into action, with excellent results, the characteristics of effective middle schools that have been described in various research and research-based publications (e.g., George & Alexander, 2003; Lipsitz, 1984; Trimble, 2004). As George and Alexander (2003) and

others have pointed out, effective middle schools provide an environment that matches, or fits with, young adolescents' developmental needs. Lewis (2000) summarized these characteristics as follows:

1. The establishment of small communities for learning that include interdisciplinary teaching teams, a common planning time for teachers on the team, and teacher-led advisories for students.
2. A curriculum in core courses and the use of teaching and learning activities that are engaging, developmentally appropriate, and challenging for all students so as to maximize student learning.
3. Parent contact about individual student performance and information sharing with parents that encourages meaningful parent involvement in the school.
4. A school environment that values mutual respect and care and that also holds students and teachers to high behavioral expectations.
5. High-quality ongoing training for teachers in teaching techniques and interdisciplinary team functioning that will ensure a program that meets the developmental needs of the students and provides them with the challenge and support needed for them to succeed.

These very themes were endorsed in the 1989 publication of *Turning Points*. In addition, the *Turning Points* report called for alternative instructional strategies that involved the elimination of tracking and the use of cooperative learning, the promotion of health and fitness, and the establishment of collaborations within the community within which the school is located. In addition, Bradford (1999) called for teachers, especially those of minority middle school students, to guide student learning in ways that were authentic and meaningful to students and that met their individual learning needs. With respect to teacher qualities, Delpit (2006b) has emphasized the need for teachers of children of color to be direct and authoritative—that is, to take charge in the classroom, command student respect, and push students to achieve. Furthermore, Noguera (2003) found that schools that are successful in educating economically poor children are those that are guided by a coherent mission that is embraced by administrators, teachers, students, and parents.

A research summary on factors that improve student achievement published by the National Middle School Association (Trimble, 2004) provides more detail on the characteristics of effective middle level education. For example, the report detailed several classroom practices that have been empirically documented to improve student learning, including establishing a classroom climate that was task oriented, which involves focusing instruction on targeted outcomes, setting learning goals based on standards, and conducting periodic assessments of learning. With respect to effective teaching strategies,

Trimble addressed the importance of teachers setting high standards, along with being willing to give students the assistance they need to achieve, promoting higher order and critical thinking, promoting student engagement in the learning process, and providing students with meaningful learning tasks in an integrated curriculum. Also, enhancement of the curriculum in mathematics and language arts, particularly with respect to reading and writing, and offering students with extra support when needed have been identified in research as related to higher levels of student achievement. Trimble also underscored the need for teachers to be well trained and talented classroom leaders and for principals to be strong leaders who place a high value on student learning, effective instruction, and teacher support. Along with maintaining a strong academic focus, teachers and principals need to be caring individuals genuinely committed to the students. Not to be forgotten, George and Alexander (2003) underscored the need for middle school students to feel known and cared for.

Information provided directly by urban students underscores the importance of much of what the research data tell us. Having conducted interviews with over 360 middle school students from among the poorest neighborhoods and lowest performing middle schools in Philadelphia, Wilson and Corbett (2001) reported several consistent themes in students' reports. For example, they reported that students overwhelmingly preferred teachers who were strict but respectful, who explained material clearly and in multiple ways when necessary, and who were eager to help students, but not play favorites. The students felt that teachers needed to stay on the children who stepped out of line, address misbehavior strictly and fairly, continually motivate them to learn, and explain material to them in ways that they can understand.

The Nativity model schools included in the present study are examined in light of the qualities deemed important for effective middle schools, in particular urban middle schools that educate children of color. I collected considerable data, both quantitative and qualitative, from students, teachers, administrators, alumni, and parents. Variations in the extent of the schools' incorporation of the qualities associated with effective middle school education are presented along with the implications of these variations for student achievement and development. First, I will describe the Nativity model and the history behind its development.