

Ethnic mix in schools not as important as student success

Written by Fred Easter

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Nobody asked me, but there's a lot of hot wind blowing around about what ethnic mix is the best school setting Black parents should be considering for their children.

In my view, the importance of these choices is rivaled only by the importance of barring as many Republicans as possible from elective office anywhere in this country.

Black parents should be very wary of whose advice they take on what schools can best serve their youngsters. I returned to Minnesota 12 years ago. Since then, I have first hand knowledge that every candidate for office has promised our community that they will narrow the achievement gap. *Every* candidate for mayor, city council, school board, even governor has included this pledge in their platform. As I write, I can recall exactly zer
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actual, specific plans having been articulated for this important task. The last candidate to make the promise could do so because no predecessors had made much of a dent.

I, too often, find myself quoting the words of George Santayana, "A people who forget their past, are doomed to relive it." While I am not the oldest person I know, I do qualify as an "elder," so I will share with you some of the things I haven't forgotten.

I remember when the law of the land expressly permitted the separation of the races in the nation's schools. There was the concept of "separate but equal." I also remember that white eyes blinked when new textbooks were delivered to the white schools and the used texts were shipped to the town's Black schools. Those Black schools welcomed the used texts because the "old" used texts were falling apart. Not only were all the students Black, so were the faculty, the principals and assistant principals. The janitors and the folks who prepared and served breakfast lunch were also Black. Schools in southern cities and towns were self-contained Black communities.

In 1968, I joined the admissions staff at Carleton College. The principals and faculty of the Black schools I visited in the South went out of their way helping me to bring their students to Carleton. I could tell you heartwarming stories. In those days, the gap was in materials and money for the Black schools, not student achievement; and certainly not in the level of dedication of Black faculty and school administrators. Students came out of those schools ready

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and able to handle Carleton on its terms. In three years, "separate but equal" was on life support. The schools of the South were being integrated. Faculties were being scattered. Principals were being reassigned as attendance officers and Black students were being channeled into special education.

Here's one such story.

In Birmingham, Ala., I invited students and counselors from "schools out in the county" into a hotel ballroom after school because I couldn't reach them all in the days allotted. There were maybe 75 students and 15 or so adults. I used to tell all the kids I met that they should visit any college they were considering. In 1968, after the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, white colleges were combing the country for Black students. Carleton used to invite some Black prospective students to campus, for a weekend, at its expense.

I told the audience this. A faculty member asked me how many of the students in that room, that day I'd be flying to Minnesota. I explained that a student would have to apply, be admitted and be lucky because we would be bringing in no more than two students from every city I visited. It wouldn't be likely that more than two would come from the Birmingham area. After answering a few more questions, that lady's hand went up again. She said take nine. I started to go back over my answer. She interrupted me. "You fly nine of them up there, we'll fly them back." What could I say? "Sister, if nine of your kids are accepted, you got a deal."

I also remember my dad's 5th grade class photo.

In his day, they didn't have to segregate schools. They segregated communities and had "neighborhood schools." Think of it as residential gerrymandering. My dad liked to point out that his class of 28 neatly dressed ragamuffins produced three physicians, a surgeon and two dentists. The fruits of segregated schools were many and sweet.

I'm not suggesting that the faculty and administration of schools that serve Black students must be Black. I am saying these folks need to care about their students more than they care about their union. I am saying that the faculty needs to look upon parents as partners and all students as bundles of potential. Too many schools run from the benefit of the adults involved. There needs to be choices, since all students do not flourish in the same environments. Charters, like Higher Ground Academy and Harvest Prep and others are more than just viable alternatives. They are doing a great job. They deserve more financial support. They must flourish or no one will "remember" how to reach our students.