



Obama Fails the Black Underclass

The optimism and patience of the Congressional Black Caucus, after two and a half years of Obama-rule, has finally given out. They are now accusing the Obama administration of failing to adequately address a veritable epidemic of African-American unemployment.

“Can you imagine a situation where any other group of workers, if 34 percent of white women were out there looking for work and couldn’t find it?” asked Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, a Missouri Democrat and chairman of the caucus, in July 2011. “You would see congressional hearings and community gatherings. There would be rallies and protest marches. There is no way that this would be allowed to stand.”



Unfortunately for them, the first black American president has no credible answer for the caucus. The trouble is that for decades black leadership in and out of Congress has done nothing to tackle the problem of what might be termed “the black underclass.”

First of all, why is there a black underclass to begin with? Why, after over 140 years of freedom from slavery and the benefits of compulsory, universal education (albeit, for all the faults inherent in government education), do we find in every large American city thousands of African-Americans who live in poverty, are functionally illiterate, and engaged in drug trafficking, gang violence, and crime?

It is true that the black middle class is growing, and that many African-Americans have achieved great success in virtually every field of endeavor. Oprah Winfrey has become one of the richest women in America. Herman Cain, a self-made business success, is running for President. Black sports celebrities and Hollywood stars are millionaires. Yet, millions of African-Americans are stuck in life-long poverty.

Indeed, why is there such a phenomenon as a black “underclass” in today’s technologically advanced America, where so many people live without hope in this land of opportunity? Wasn’t universal education supposed to lift up the African-American to the same standard of economic prosperity as everyone else? Theoretically, that is what should have happened. But it didn’t. Why?

Census statistics on illiteracy provide some clues. In 1890, illiteracy among African-Americans over the age of 10 was 57.1 percent. In 1900, it was 44.5 percent. In 1910 it was 30.4 percent. And by 1920 it was down to 22.9 percent. Among white Americans only 2.0 percent were illiterate. In other words, great strides in literacy were being made among African-Americans from 1890 to 1920.

According to the 1920 Census, the percentage of illiterates among African-Americans ranged from 38.5 percent in Louisiana to 2.9 percent in New York. The Census of 1930 showed an even greater improvement in literacy among African-Americans. In 1930, illiteracy among African-Americans in the urban population was 9.2 percent; in the rural population 23.2 percent; in the rural non-farm



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on August 18, 2011

population, 20.5 percent.

That same 1930 Census revealed that 4,283,753 of a total population of 122,774,046 Americans, or less than 4 percent, were considered illiterate.

But if we move fast-forward 63 years to 1993 we find a U.S. Government report revealing that 90 million American adults can barely read or write! Indeed, it is estimated that 50 percent of African-Americans today are functionally illiterate! What happened in the interim to produce this literacy catastrophe?

Two things happened: (1) The rise of the Eugenics Movement which declared African-Americans racially inferior and relegated them to a non-academic, manual-type education. (2) The rise of the Progressive philosophy of education which denigrated high individualistic literacy in favor of dumbed-down socialization.

The great tragedy is that African-Americans had made great educational advances in the first half of the 20th century. But from 1950 onward began the great slide into academic failure for many African-Americans — as well as for their white compatriots.

The acclaimed film, *The Great Debaters*, dramatically tells the story of Black academic achievement in the racially segregated South of the 1930s. It reveals how education was stressed as the way out of poverty and ignorance. Indeed, the increase in African-American literacy and intellectual development during that period produced a vibrant culture of great writers and readers. But the film doesn't provide a clue as to why that process of educational advance was stopped and reversed.

Actually, it all started in 1898 when John Dewey, leader of the Progressive Education movement, advocated moving education away from individualistic high literacy in favor of social collectivism. He wrote:

“The plea for the predominance of learning to read in early school life because of the great importance attaching to literature seems to me a perversion.”

Indeed, he was able to get his fellow educators to accept a completely new educational philosophy based on collectivism and socialism. And it was understood among them that a decline in individual-centered literacy was essential in carrying out their plan for a new collectivist society in America.

And it was Professor G. Stanley Hall, a leading progressive educator and mentor to John Dewey, who wrote in defense of illiteracy in 1911:

Very many men have lived and died and been great, even the leaders of their age, without any acquaintance with letters. The knowledge which illiterates acquire is probably on the whole more personal, direct, environmental and probably a much larger proportion of it practical. Moreover, they escape much eye-strain and mental excitement, and, other things being equal, are probably more active and less sedentary.... Perhaps we are prone to put too high a value both upon the ability required to attain this art and the discipline involved in doing so, as well as the culture value that comes to the citizen with his average of only six grades of schooling by the acquisition of this art.

And 70 years later, in 1981, we find Harvard Professor Anthony Oettinger telling an audience of communications executives:

The present “traditional” concept of literacy has to do with the ability to read and write.... Do we, for example, really want to teach people to do a lot of sums or write in “a fine round hand” when



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they have a five-dollar hand-held calculator or a word processor to work with? Or, do we really have to have everybody literate — writing and reading in the traditional sense — when we have the means through our technology to achieve a new flowering of oral communication?

Ironically, young blacks have developed a new oral expression to compensate for their lack of high literacy. It's called Rap!

Of all Americans affected by this change in educational philosophy, African-Americans have suffered the most. They have had a much more difficult time adjusting to the new curriculum and teaching methods than any other group. As a result, a great negative gap has grown between the academic achievements of African-Americans and their white compatriots.

A report from the Massachusetts-based Schott Foundation, *The 2010 Schott 50 State Report on Black Males in Public Education*, paints a bleak picture of how young black men fare in school: fewer than half graduate from high school. And in some states, like New York, the graduation rate is as low as one in four.

The Report reveals that the overall 2007/8 graduation rate for black males in the U.S. was only 47 percent. Half of the states have graduation rates for black male students below the national average. The report highlights concerns that New York's graduation rate for its Regents diploma is only 25 percent for black male students. New York City, the district with the nation's highest enrollment of black students, only graduates 28 percent of its black male students with Regents diplomas on time. Overall, each year over 100,000 black male students in New York City alone do not graduate from high school with their entering cohort. These statistics point to a national education and economic crisis.

Frustrated and discouraged by their inability to learn to read, many black high-schoolers drop out and wind up on the streets. They form gangs and angrily take their revenge on society by anti-social, criminal behavior which lands them in jail.

The simple truth is that faulty teaching methods in our public schools deliberately prevent many black students from succeeding academically. The look-say method of teaching reading produces the symptoms of reading disability. It teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese, an ideographic writing system. Many children simply cannot learn to read by this method, yet the primary schools still persist in using it. Can this be changed? Can the process that produces the underclass be done away with? Yes! But only if an aroused and informed African-American community demands the kind of radical change that is necessary.

It has been shown that black children can learn to read very well provided they are taught in the proper phonetic manner. This is the way black (and white) children were taught before the decline in literacy began in the 1950s with the introduction of the sight method. What is needed is an insistence by African-American parents that their children be taught to read by the traditional method, which created high literacy among American blacks, and which Professor Oettinger denigrated. "Do we really have to have everyone literate?" he asked. If not, then why must everyone be forced to go to school? The basic concept of compulsory school attendance was to make sure that everyone learned to read, not just the elite.

But it would be foolhardy to wait for the reluctant public schools to change their philosophy of education. Indeed, the compelling need for better education may require an exodus from the public schools and the creation of private schools that can produce a new curriculum, one that advances high literacy and the same kind of academic achievement shown in *The Great Debaters*. Nothing less will do



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the job. That's the route Marva Collins took in Chicago, and she proved that it works.



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