

The New American

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Not Accepting Student Failure

For a brief period in January, the Internet and talk shows were abuzz with chatter about public schools: “Did Oprah Winfrey really imply that students aren’t learning because they don’t want to learn?” “Is it true Oprah is building a \$40 million school in South Africa, and she refuses to build one in the United States?”

Oprah did, in fact, disparage the efforts of inner-city school kids. She said in an interview with *Newsweek*: “If you are a child in the United States, you can get an education.... I became so frustrated with visiting inner-city schools that I just stopped going. The sense that you need to learn just isn’t there. If you ask the kids what they want or need, they will say an iPod or some sneakers. In South Africa, they don’t ask for money or toys. They ask for uniforms so they can go to school.” And for the record, Oprah is building a school in South Africa and not in the United States; however, she does give money to U.S. educational efforts.

For making that comment about inner-city kids, Oprah was (respectfully) chastised by her liberal peers. In their eyes, the main root of the problems in America’s schools is a lack of money and resources, not a lack of effort. Commentary by Patricia Wilson-Smith, on the website Black Women for Obama, was par for the course:

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First a point of clarification — I have been and will likely always be a *huge* fan of Oprah Winfrey.... I for one believe that history will one day portray her as a modern day saint not at all unlike the late Mother Teresa.... It is patently irresponsible for a woman of her broad influence to make such a sweeping statement in the media about a population of children.... The sad fact of reality is that when anyone in the media says *inner-city*, most Americans hear *minorities*, and the low-income minorities in this country are having a difficult enough time as it is keeping the money flowing into their public schools, and can at this point still only expect to get a second-rate education for their children at best.

Sorry, Ms. Wilson-Smith, but I taught in an inner-city school, and Oprah is mainly correct: most kids there don’t want to learn (though I would agree with Ms. Wilson-Smith that the schooling received by inner-city students is likely largely “second rate”).

Comedic icon Bill Cosby, who earned his doctorate in education from the University of Massachusetts, also agrees with this assessment. Cosby spoke at the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* Supreme Court decision: “Ladies and gentlemen, in our cities and public schools we have fifty percent dropout.... Ladies and gentlemen, the lower economic and lower middle economic people are not holding their end in this deal.” Cosby’s controversial comments have been defended by an array of black luminaries: NAACP President Kweisi Mfume, columnists Clarence Page and Leonard Pitts, Jr., and Judge Greg Mathis of the Judge Mathis Show.

My experiences in an inner-city school should help verify that many inner-city kids don’t want to learn. I fulfilled my student-teaching requirement by teaching for a semester in an inner-city school in Milwaukee. The year I was there, the school’s *goal* was to graduate 50 percent of its seniors. If my memory serves me correctly, in one class that I taught, more students were enrolled than there were chairs in the room, but a lack of chairs was

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never a problem. It was a rare day when even 50 percent of the students came to that class. Many students just wandered the halls until they were scooped up by the school's security guards during the guards' hourly tours of the school, brought to a central holding room, and then escorted to class midway through the class period. Many other registered students didn't come to school at all. On a day when it snowed between one and two inches, the school was practically deserted. Colleagues told me that the students were not at school because the kids refused to get their \$150 athletic shoes wet. At parent-teacher conferences, out of all of my classes, only two parents showed up to meet me — both parents of very good students of course.

Measuring Success

Many schools in the United States, but especially the inner-city schools, are failing to properly educate students and many, if not most, of the students actively avoid being taught. Incredibly, education professionals often defend students' efforts to remain ignorant.

Such a sweeping statement obviously needs corroboration because, without it, the literary equivalent of hit men will likely be quick to point out facts that would seemingly confirm that public schools are succeeding. For instance, according to the *New York Times*, "the traditional gaps in [SAT] scores between minority students and all test-takers had narrowed," even as the percentage of minorities taking the SATs reached an all-time high in 2007. Moreover, more whites are taking the SATs and scoring higher as well.

Sounds impressive, doesn't it? But using test scores, especially from the SAT, to evaluate what is being learned in schools can lead to faulty conclusions — alternately showing U.S. educational attainment to be both better and worse than it really is. Until 1995, all SAT test scores were scaled against the SAT scores from a group of test-takers from 1941. However, in 1995, that scaling stopped and the test scores were "recentered," essentially to offset a growing number of low test scores. Thus in 1995, the bulk of scores on both the verbal and math sections of the test were artificially raised, according to a report entitled "The Recentering of SAT Scales and Its Effects on Score Distributions and Score Interpretations," created by the College Board Corporation, which administers the SAT.

The recentering of the test had another side effect: the gap between minorities and whites tended to appear to close. In 2005, the test was changed again.

On the other hand, tests that purport to show that U.S. students lag behind students from around the world generally have methodological flaws and tend to understate U.S. achievement. In an article in *Scientific American* entitled "The False Crisis in Science Education," the authors conclude: "The fact that U.S. 12th-graders fall behind on international [science] tests does not mean that Americans know less about science than adults in other nations do. In fact, U.S. residents have consistently demonstrated a firmer grasp of basic science facts than have the denizens of many countries that outperformed the U.S. on TIMSS [Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study]." Moreover, the fact that Asian Americans tend to do very well on national math tests, including the pre-1995 version of the SAT, shows that the opportunity to get a good mathematics education is available in most schools, but that most students are not putting in enough study time to master the material. Asians, by the way, don't shine so brightly as a group verbally because for many English is their second language.

In reality, comparing the results from yearly tests only weakly indicates how well students and schools are achieving — unless students take identical tests from year to year, which could not be done from a practical standpoint because students would cheat. But these tests do show an important fact that should be examined — the gap between how white students are doing as compared to minorities. Notably, the knowledge gap remains.

If test scores don't reliably indicate how well schools are doing, how can it be claimed that schools need improvement — let alone that education professionals are helping the students fail?

We can make an educated guess based on observable phenomena:

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- By the number of children deemed to have learning disabilities. (The numbers are skyrocketing.)
- By how many parents are turning to tutoring services to help their children succeed in school. (In just the first quarter of 2006, one education-service company, Educate, Inc., made \$92.9 million, an increase of 13 percent over 2005.)
- By dropout rates. (Low estimates place the overall dropout rate at 18 percent and the dropout rate for blacks and hispanics at about 25 percent. Inner-city areas tend to have much higher dropout rates: Detroit's dropout rate was estimated as high as 78.3 percent last year.)
- By the percentage of students who begin college who actually finish college. (A 2002 study done by ACT News showed that the percentage of college freshmen attending four-year public institutions who graduate within five years has dropped seven percentage points between 1989 and 2002 — despite the fact that most colleges offer remedial classes, tutoring, and mathematics and writing centers where students can go for one-on-one help.)

Indefensible Defenses

We can also ascertain that many education professionals are aiding students to fail. We know this by both statistics and firsthand accounts by those in the schools. College Board Corporation President Gaston Caperton indicated that “a full 41 percent of the 2001 college-bound seniors reported grade averages of A+, A, or A-. Ten years ago, the figure was just 28 percent.... According to the College Board, these findings point to grade inflation over the past decade.” In other words, teachers are not holding their students to high expectations and pushing them to excel. The U.S. Department of Education reports that of college students whose families make less than \$25,000 a full “20 percent were minimally qualified” to be there. Of families with incomes above \$75,000, 12 percent were minimally qualified — more than one out of 10.

In schools, we find accounts of teachers such as Rabbi Nachum Shifren, who worked in Los Angeles City Schools. Shifren was literally fired merely for trying to enforce rules against “blatant disruptions, harassing of students by bullies, and crude abusive language,” according to his book on his experiences entitled *Kill Your Teacher*. He makes clear that “the dean’s office is a revolving door. Students sent for brazen defiance, insulting the teacher or preventing others from learning are sent back with a note saying, ‘student counseled.’” During his tenure there, a student also threatened to kill him, but was still allowed to run for school office immediately thereafter. Some students burned down Shifren’s wing of the school because they didn’t like his standards. The students felt no repercussions after the burning. Shifren, however, was sternly told that he was insensitive “to the needs of a diverse student population.”

In response to the allegations leveled against him, Shifren went to almost superhuman efforts to make the classroom work. He spent many hours nightly sending home student progress reports and calling parents — and he logged both his efforts and the parents’ responses. Many parents and students appreciated his efforts, but not the ones who mattered. When Shifren fought the injustice, with the backing of California Congressman Dana Rohrabacher and community activist Reverend Jesse Lee Peterson, still no one in the school administration would stand up for him; they instead, without fail, stood up for the disruptive and violent students. Shifren was fired.

In too many instances, school administrations defend the indefensible and attack the teachers who are trying to solve the problems. Former teacher and now public-school critic R.C. Murray has learned the hard way that administrations will enforce low standards and then “harass teachers about failing rates and class averages.” In his book *Legally Stupid: Why Johnny Doesn’t Have to Read*, Murray amply illustrates the harassment he faced because he insisted upon high standards. When he was teaching, Murray had students who slept in class, who did almost no homework, who had low test scores, and who were frequently absent or tardy. Yet he was the one taken to task because these students failed. Murray’s administrators especially disapproved of the fact that he required that the students read their own assignments and do their own class work, instead of doing group learning — the administration wanted the good kids to prop up the unambitious students so that everyone could pass, whether they learned anything or not.

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Perhaps the most egregious example of defending the indefensible comes from educators who defend illiteracy and poor behavior by making excuses for the illiteracy and poor behavior. From past personal experience, I can safely state that many education professionals deal with students who don't learn quickly or who exhibit poor behavior by insisting they be labeled Behaviorally or Emotionally Disabled. This mentality makes excuses for unacceptable behavior instead of remedying it. I can say without qualms that though I know there are some students with true learning dysfunctions — such as one high-school-aged boy in a school where I taught who had a nearly photographic memory, but couldn't read a word — the majority of labels are excuses.

For one school year, I worked as an all-day tutor and mentor for a very bright, athletically gifted sixth-grade boy who was being mainstreamed back into public school after being kicked out of school in second grade for beating up his classmates and female teachers. When I started working with him, he attacked someone almost daily. The last month of school, he didn't attack anyone. I was told by a fellow teacher (but do not know for a fact) that he graduated high school with honors with few further difficulties.

What was the boy's major malfunction? He attacked people when he felt embarrassed by them, a fact I discovered after a few months when I noticed that he would glance my way to see if I was looking before he attacked someone — indicating to me that he could control his behavior if he wanted to do so.

Whole schools have apparently had similar success with behavior problems merely by enforcing a zero-violence policy. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that in 2005-2006, Shoemaker Middle School “reported 66 serious incidents, including 12 assaults on students, four on teachers, and one on a school police officer.” The next year, with more students enrolled, “There were four minor fights, mostly involving shoving and pushing.... No one was injured but all eight students were forced out for violating the nonviolence pledge.”

A learning disability, by definition, is evident when someone has difficulty learning that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. In other words, there is nothing identifiably wrong with a person's brain, eyes, ears, or overall health that contributes to *not* learning, yet the person still doesn't learn at what would be considered an acceptable pace. “Learning Disability” is the fastest growing handicapping condition in the United States says Dyslexia Online. Those classified as Learning Disabled jumped 119 percent between 1976 and 1982 and continued to trend upward at a speedy pace.

Learning disabilities are shockingly high, yet they don't need to be! In 1993, the National Adult Literacy Survey found that 25 percent of adults “were plainly unable to read.” According to Dyslexia Online, “In 1935, a survey of the 375,000 men working in the Civilian Conservation Corps — a government-sponsored work project to provide employment — found an illiteracy rate of 1.9 percent. And this was among men primarily of low socio-economic status.” A major part of the learning-disability problem is that schools still refuse to return to teaching reading through the time-tested and effective phonics method that prevailed in 1935, and insist on sticking with the whole-language (memorizing words) method popular since the 1950s.

Phonics instruction works so well that the famed inner-city instructor Marva Collins guarantees that every child who enrolls in her school in September will be reading by Christmas. The children start as young as 3½, and she has kept this guarantee since 1975.

These examples barely begin to uncover the problems in the schools, but the potential solutions are many. But most solutions will never happen because, if for no other reason, students are confined to the public-school system. Entrenched bureaucracies in these schools and various activist groups defending the status quo will halt most progress. We need to allow students to choose where to go to school and spend their school monies wherever they are accepted. This will force schools to make changes or close. Our children are worth it.

Photo: David Shankbone