

Forum

Teachers Fear Physical Harm, Seek Cultural Understanding

Approximately 37 percent of the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools' population is African-American, yet the number of minority students disciplined in our schools, even excluded from our regular school program, is disproportionate to the total student population. As I personally wrestle with the reasons for and possible solutions to this situation, a lot of things tend to run together, and the growing complexities of being in charge of a large school district weigh heavily on my shoulders.



GUEST COLUMN

By LARRY COBLE

It may be that the highest form of neglect is to deny or even fail to recognize that there is a problem when students have their education interrupted because they can't make it in the "regular" school program. Try as I might, I just don't see how the "establishment," in this case the school system and the community, can deny that those being excluded are still children and that the grim reality is that the system (all of us) are failing them.

It is our collective responsibility to take the students where they are, and necessity dictates creative approaches to keeping the young people in school. The student group taking the "big hit" in this situation is the group composed of black males. Our most severe critics might suggest, when taken in the extreme, that we are behaving as if the black male population is regarded as expendable. As a student in a school in East St. Louis said, "It's like a terrible joke on history." This situation is particularly troubling to me because I know that our schools are not extraordinarily unhappy places

and that the people who work there are not bad people. On the contrary, most of our people are highly competent and dedicated. School by school, our staffs are doing more to try to better respond to the ever-growing needs of all of our students, including efforts toward multicultural understanding.

Speculation on my part suggests that the

absence of African-American male teachers in significant numbers reinforces the problem of too few strong role models. At the same time, I suspect that many members of our white teaching population find some of the actions and the language of black males offensive as these students attempt to demonstrate their "maleness." I believe that we fear that which we don't understand and frankly there is also, in my judgement, an element of fear of physical harm from students. Fear of losing control of the classroom or the school, as well as trying to determine when one student's behavior infringes upon the rights of others to learn, are all factors that impact on discipline issues.

Intuitively, I believe that we are making some progress and I know that if we pair improved teacher-training programs with smaller classes and caring environment, we will make more progress.

(The writer is superintendent of the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools.)

Gifted Programs Lead to Separation, Elitist Attitudes

As a parent of three girls in the Forsyth County School System and as a participant in a school PTA, I have learned that the subject of race is an important factor in the politics of school administration, the nurturing and the



GUEST COLUMN

By PHILLIP S. BANKS III

lack of nurturing inside the classroom and the perceived need of African-American parents to protect their young from negative attitudes. Through my personal experience, I have met and discussed the problems of black children in two schools and have learned that there are good teachers, parents and children of all types.

Yet, there are certain fundamental trends that cannot be ignored. Parents of black male children in elementary school have consistently complained that their children have been victims of suspect conduct by some administrators and teachers that is unrelated to the conduct of their children. This complaint is not universal and does not apply to all administrators or teachers who are not African American.

Yet, African-American parents of male children have consistently reported that their children are demeaned, disparately treated with respect to discipline, perceived to be incapable of learning, perceived as having no need to learn, perceived as having criminal aspirations, perceived as dangerous and sometimes demonized to the point where their young men become so frustrated that they fight back in language or anti-social behavior. When anti-social behavior is observed, teachers with racially insensitive perspectives start rumors among other like-minded teachers and develop strategies to get those children out of their classrooms. It is not unusual for these male children to be expelled or sent to Petree Middle School. Interestingly enough, the majority of students at Petree are African American.

Second-class citizenship is the second most common complaint. Many of these parents have told me that the "so-called gifted program" is designed to create by the third grade a segregated environment within the classroom. Students who are not in the program often say that they feel like second-class citizens. Many African-American parents believe that the gifted program is the first step toward creating a sort of second-class citizenship from which students sometimes do not recover. Some parents whose children are in the program feel guilty when they are singled out for meetings about the program. It is felt to be an unnecessary form of segregation, albeit well-intentioned. Because of these conditions, many innocent white teachers and administrators have been wrongfully lumped into the same categories as those who have willfully

perpetrated these negative acts on African-American children. While this is an unfortunate difficulty, it is my impression that the solution is in the hands of the teachers. When teachers learn that one of their own has

engaged in this type of conduct, they need to report it to the principal for disciplinary purposes. African Americans do not want to have adversarial relationships with teachers. These parents have decided that they will not permit this generation to be deprived of its education, even if that means lawsuits and massive political action.

Some parents believe that this conflict regarding race and learning is related to the desire to keep one group uneducated such that the economic power of the community will remain with the historically advantaged group. They believe that the consistently better statistics for other groups is directly related to the destruction of African-American pride in academics at an early age. In order for Winston-Salem and Forsyth County to be successful, we need every citizen to be a strong taxpayer, feeding from the same community of risks and opportunities. Until the educational system and the people in it understand their relationship to the creation of successful citizens or criminals, we are doomed to repeat these problems.

The solutions are simple. As to disciplinary matters, administrators should involve parents in serious matters before the result is imposed as to eliminate the need for after-the-fact misunderstood confrontations. As to programs that achieve disparate participation, they should be eliminated, modified or reclassified as not to teach the notion of second-class citizenship in elementary school. There must be a greater attempt to prevent second-class thinking in people while they are young so as not to hamper their desire to dream and have high aspirations. The academically gifted program adds to this perception.

Racism is like a cancer that eats a society up from the inside out until it destroys the body. It is curable if caught in its early stages. We need to stop leaving in place the conditions that causes the cancer of racism to grow in Forsyth County. While it has not been discussed, there is a perception among many white parents that disparate treatment occurs among the economically disadvantaged people of all races in the county. In the words of Rodney King, "Can we get along?"

(The writer is a lawyer and parent of three elementary school children.)

Doonesbury

BY G.B. TRUDEAU

DUKE! LONG TIME, BABE! MAKE ME HAPPY I TOOK THIS CALL!

GOT A BIG ONE FOR YOU, SID! A TRUE STORY! MADE-FOR-TV CITY!

PITCH ME, BABE! HUM IT IN!

AN AVALANCHE BURIES A COLORADO MAN IN HIS CABIN FOR 12 DAYS. MIRACULOUSLY HE SURVIVES. INTERESTED IN PEDDLING THE RIGHTS?

INTERESTED? IT'S A KILLER! WHEN DID THIS HAPPEN?

IT HASN'T YET, BUT IT COULD, IF YOU FOLLOW MY MEANING.

I DON'T, BUT TALK TO ME, BABE! PUSH MY BUTTONS!

IT'S CALLED "PRESUMED DEAD." I'M THINKING NICHOLSON AS ME, OKAY?

LAY IT OUT FOR ME, DUKE! TALK TO PAPA SID!

I'VE ALWAYS HAD A TUNNEL OUT OF MY CABIN HERE, OKAY? SO HERE'S THE PLAN...

I START AN AVALANCHE AND BURY THE PLACE. EVERYONE THINKS I'VE BEEN BURIED ALIVE. FOR 12 DAYS, RESCUERS DIG FEVERISHLY TO REACH ME...

AT THE LAST MINUTE, I RETURN THROUGH THE TUNNEL. IT'S THE SURVIVAL STORY OF THE CENTURY! YOU SELL THE TV RIGHTS FOR \$2 MILLION! WE ALL LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER!

WHAT IF THE HOAX IS DISCOVERED AND YOU GO TO JAIL?

I ALREADY SOLD THOSE RIGHTS TO FOX. DON'T GET GREEDY, SID.

WHAT'S ALL THE DYNAMITE FOR, SIR? WERE NOT GOING FISHING AGAIN, ARE WE?

NO, WE'RE GONNA START AN AVALANCHE TO BURY THE CABIN.

WHAT ON EARTH FOR, SIR?

TO MAKE PEOPLE THINK I'VE BEEN BURIED ALIVE. WHEN THE RESCUERS FINALLY REACH THE CABIN, I'LL SNEAK BACK IN THROUGH THE TUNNEL!

WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO FAKE YOUR OWN NEAR-DEATH, SIR?

I'VE GOT MY REASONS...

JEEPERS... SOUNDS LIKE A MADE-FOR-TV MOVIE!

YOU'RE FINALLY STARTING TO THINK LIKE AN AMERICAN, HONEY.

HOW'S THIS GOING TO WORK AGAIN, SIR?

SIMPLE. I BLOW UP THE NORTH RIDGE...

THE RESULTING AVALANCHE BURIES MY CABIN. WE SIT TIGHT FOR A DAY OR TWO UNTIL AUTHORITIES ARE FINALLY ALERTED BY CONCERNED FRIENDS...

UM... AREN'T YOU OVERLOOKING ONE SMALL DETAIL, SIR?

LIKE WHAT, HONEY?

YOU DON'T HAVE ANY FRIENDS.

OKAY CONCERNED CREDITORS, THEN.

THREE... TWO... ONE... PAYDAY!

KA-WHOOM! RUMBLE!

HELLO, AVALANCHE. BYE-BYE, HOUSE!

WRONG HOUSE, SIR.

WHAT? GET OUTA HERE! NO WAY IT... IT...

DAMN. GO RE-SET THE CHARGES, HONEY.

DON'T YOU WANT TO GO LISTEN FOR FAINT CRIES FOR HELP, SIR?

DUKE! PUT OUR PROJECT INTO DEVELOPMENT YET?

IT'S A GO, SID. THE CABIN'S UNDER 60 FEET OF SNOW AND ICE.

THE RESCUE CREW WON'T REACH ME FOR AT LEAST A WEEK. SO I'M OFF TO KILL SOME TIME IN MEXICO. YOU CAN CALL MY BEEPER IF YOU GET A DEAL.

HOLD IT, DUKE, WHAT ABOUT... WHAT IF NO ONE NOTICES YOU'RE MISSING?

DON'T WORRY, I'VE GOT IT COVERED...

SAY, I HAVEN'T SEEN DUKE LATELY. I HOPE HE'S OKAY!

WHO THE HELL CARES? YEAH.

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