

Reclaiming Our Past Values and Engaging Our Present Challenge: The Church's Charge in Helping Save Urban Education

By Brandon J. Perkins

Why do mothers and fathers across this country wake their children each morning and ensure that they make it to their assigned schools? What is it that makes high school juniors and seniors stress and fret over their ACT and SAT scores every academic year? Why is it that teachers across the country daily stay after school to ensure that the neediest students receive the instruction and guidance they need and deserve? The reason why these persons engage in these activities day in and day out is that they fundamentally understand that the hope for a better future greatly increases if one receives a good education. Parents also believe that their children can achieve equal and greater heights than did they through education. A good education gives first-generation college prospects the ability to believe that they will be more than what their society has dictated to them. It leads teachers to hold to the stubborn belief that all children are gifts from God and have been given a unique gift for the betterment of humanity.¹

This hope that we have in education is not a new or uncommon construct, yet we are living in a time when the song lyrics of the late James Weldon Johnson have come true. We live in a day, “when hope unborn ha[s] died.”² In 2001 when No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was introduced and signed into law, many Americans rejoiced in the hope that the dark night of educational inequality had ended. Many hoped that this legislation would truly ensure that every American student would receive the highest quality education possible and that no child regardless of gender, race, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and/or disabilities would ever fall through the cracks of our educational system again. Yet, ten years after this historic national legislation was signed into law by former President George W. Bush, I weekly encounter and tutor eighth graders who do not understand the fundamental building blocks of grammar. So, do we simply call NCLB a failure and blame our students' plight on a failed piece of legislation, or do we individually and collectively become proactive agents of change for our neighborhood, city, state, and national schools?

If we are choosing to become proactive agents of change, it is first necessary for us to reclaim some of our past values. As African Americans, our history bears witness to the fact that in order for us to receive good educational training, it took an extended village to make it possible. We also know that at the center of this village stood the Black Church. The late Reverend Dr. C. Eric Lincoln and Dr. Lawrence H. Mamiya state in their landmark work, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, “No other area of black life received a higher priority from black churches than education. Despite the fact that teaching a slave to read and write was illegal during slavery, one of the most persistent desires of the slaves was to be educated.”³ Under the threat of being lynched, whipped, or sold, Negroes who were enslaved across this country voraciously strived for the fundamentals of an education—literacy. Lincoln and Mamiya suggest that this literacy offered the enslaved Negro two crucial things: first, this literacy would enable the slaves to read the Bible for themselves; second, it would prove that the adversarial American stream of thought that suggested the enslaved Negro was less than human and thus incapable of learning and mastering the master's language was completely without

merit.⁴

The Black Church's proactive charge towards the attainment of educational equality for Blacks during the 18th-early 20th Centuries was instrumental in propelling us forward as a people. The Black Church saw education as a tool of economic advancement for a disenfranchised race. The late Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman records in his classic work *Jesus and the Disinherited*, "There is one overmastering problem that the socially and politically disinherited always face: Under what terms is survival possible?"⁵ As African Americans wrestled to survive and longed to thrive in this country, they knew that possessing the ability to read and write was one of the best ways to obtain opportunities beyond serving as the master's labor mule.

As we continue to reclaim some of our past values and engage our present challenges, we must look at how our churches engaged the problems of education during and after the Modern Civil Rights Movement. The 1950s and 1960s were a time filled with many trials, tears, and triumphs. We were forced to encounter a society that sought to refasten the cruel and bitter chains of slavery and leave us once again as a socially and politically disenfranchised people. Yet the zeitgeist dictated to us an attitude of social change. Our charge to seek equality during this era was exhibited fully in the educational realm. This zeitgeist gave us groundbreaking federal legislation such as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, which legally desegregated schools. It was also exhibited when across the South young seminary, college, and high school students stood up and protested, sat-in, and rode in Freedom Rides to seek justice and equality for all people. The era was alive with change. Yet, after the euphoric triumphs of the 1960s ended, we still were forced to encounter too many disenfranchised people.

We have long understood that the worst schools in terms of esthetic upkeep, current and engaging resources, and quality of teachers are found in communities where there is a disproportionately high population of children and families of color with low socio-economic means. This fosters a school climate that the groundbreaking documentary *Waiting for Superman* calls creating schools that become "dropout factories." Consequently, we understand that many of these "dropout factories" are in communities where there is no shortage of churches.

However, the response from our churches has not been what it should have been in the last thirty or so years. Dr. Anthony B. Pinn states, "Most of the black denominations with financial resources have been involved in the development of colleges and seminaries."⁶ These allocated funds provide young people with the opportunity to achieve great heights and receive bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees, yet what do we as the Black Church offer to our students in urban schools who may or may not make it to their high school graduation? There must be a shift in our priorities when it comes to the funding and developing of programs that support our students and their education. With the denominational resources that exist in our denominations, the Church must begin to fund and support programs that benefit our elementary, primary, and secondary school students at a higher rate than that of our college and seminary students!

With no disrespect to those collegians that are supported through our black denominations, this change should be made for one common-sense reason: We must be an early active presence

in our schools so that children do not mentally and physically drop out. My professor, Dr. Stella Simpson, this summer at Trevecca Nazarene University in Nashville, Tennessee, gave a transformative lecture in which she commented that teachers must be active and compassionate practitioners because we do not want to pass through the system students who mentally dropped out in the second grade. The reason we have so many black students who never attend college is that they were left behind in the second, third, and fourth grades. We must change the way we allocate funds because if we truly see an education as an economic weapon that will propel our students into colleges, trade schools, and careers, we must provide as much support at the formative levels as possible so that students can get into colleges and trade schools and succeed.

In his book *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Dr. Anthony Pinn gives us several historical models of engaging our present challenge and being proactive agents of change for the improvement of our schools. The three models he presents form a tiered response system in which the work in the first tier can be achieved by any church and where the third tier represents a response that should be undertaken only by a financially strong and stable church or network of churches. The first tier of the adopt-a-school model was historically present in such churches as the Metropolitan Baptist Church of Washington, D.C., where the Reverend Dr. H. Beecher Hicks, Jr. serves as pastor, and also by the Apostolic Church of God in Christ of Chicago, Illinois, where the Rev. Dr. Byron T. Brazier serves as pastor. This model is still useful to us because it places the church as a constant presence in local schools. With the presence of the church in the local school, parishioners are able to see and respond firsthand to the needs and opportunities for service in their local schools.⁷

The second model and tier that Pinn lifts for our consideration is the model of the Church seeking to mend the problems of American education through tutoring initiatives.⁸ This model was used by The Montgomery S.T.E.P. Foundation housed in the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Organized in 1986, the S.T.E.P. Foundation provides tutorial programs in local housing developments and in local elementary schools in Birmingham.

The tutoring model of educational reform is one in which I have personally participated for four years, and I have seen tremendous success in students' academic lives. During my years at Fisk University, the Fisk Memorial Chapel Assistants and the Collegiate 100 Black Men of Fisk University provided tutorial services at local churches in the Nashville community. As college juniors, sophomores, and freshmen, we would weekly carpool and spend one to two hours with elementary and middle school students in the local community. Through our Project Bridges Initiative we would spend time assisting and educating the students on principles such as multiplication tables, cause and effect, and successfully writing a summary of what they read in class. This program was beneficial to all parties. The students received the benefit of one-on-one educational assistance, and the college students received the satisfaction of empowering and equipping the next generation of leaders.

Churches should capitalize on this model of tutoring now more than ever. One of the benefits of NCLB is that it places an emphasis on tutoring as a supplement to the instruction that our students receive in their classes. Through Supplemental Education Services (S.E.S.), tutoring companies can work in local schools several days throughout the week providing small group instruction to students who have demonstrated academic needs. Churches can take advantage of

this federally funded initiative and form companies that would in turn be able to target some of the neediest students in our communities. Churches can start by recruiting certified teachers and other qualified persons from their congregations to stand in the trenches and help students who may be at risk of falling through the cracks of the education system. Once a successful tutoring company has been started, it can expand and serve more schools and in turn serve more students. This model of educational service can be implemented by any one church or networks of churches as long as all tutors involved have non-criminal backgrounds, are competent, and adhere to all school district rules while in a school.

The last historical model and tier of response that Pinn lifts for our attention is the model of churches establishing their own schools that provide a curriculum that is both academically intensive while being Christian-driven and Christian-centered. While this model is being seen in more and more non-church settings, there are several notable churches that have implemented this model. In Jamaica, Queens, New York, the Greater Allen A.M.E. Church, pastored by Rev. Dr. Floyd Flake and his wife, Rev. Dr. Elaine Flake, operates a private school with an enrollment of 750 students. It exists as a solid model of private Christian education.

Using the Allen Church School model as an example, it is possible for churches to successfully run and fund their own schools to educate and equip students. To accomplish this task it first takes a great deal of institutional financial stability and administrative capacity. It also requires knowledge of how to write and teach a curriculum that combines required academic courses with a Christian component for maximum student engagement and success. Last, and importantly, it requires a person or team of persons who understand the federally mandated laws and policies that govern private and charter schools so that private church schools maintain accreditation through their local accrediting body. These considerations should be carefully and thoroughly addressed before any church endeavors to implement a private church school. Another possible idea that would allow churches to operate successful church schools would be for local congregations in communities to pool their resources to achieve maximum effectiveness of a private church school without placing the entire burden on one local congregation.

The late Bishop of the A.M.E. Church Daniel Alexander Payne wrote, “In abandoning the school-room am I not fleeing from the cross which the Savior has imposed upon me? Is not the abandonment of the teacher’s work in my case a sin?”⁹ After reading this article, we must ask ourselves, if we choose to sit idly by and let the task of educating black students in our broken educational system go by the wayside, are we guilty of sinning before God? The African American parishioner, pastor, and church since we began organizing churches in America, have been charged to help a disenfranchised race achieve educational equality and reach great educational heights. Our notions of Christian Education must be expanded to include what our ancestors understood was vital. Our emphasis must include the foundational academic building blocks of reading, writing, and arithmetic so that our students can remain academically engaged in an ever globally interconnected world. We must also use the historic and current models of adopt-a-school, tutoring, and private church schools to address the educational inequalities that are present in our schools.

The Black Church cannot abandon our charge to serve the students and schools in our communities when the climate of this era desires to re-enslave our students in the bitter chains of

ignorance. If we say we love the Lord and the Church we cannot ignore the harvest that is plentiful in our nation's educational realm. I ask you today, are you and your church one of the laborers who will stand with me and feed God's sheep and be proactive agents of educational change in America?

Notes

1. Sheenan, Kevin and Kevin Rall. "Rediscovering Hope: Building School Cultures of Hope for Children of Poverty." Phi Delta Kappan Nov. 2011. pp. 44-47.
2. Johnson, James W. "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Online location: <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/l/i/liftevry.htm>
3. Lincoln, C. Eric, and Lawrence H. Mamiya. The Black Church in the African American Experience. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1990. p. 251.
4. Ibid., p. 252.
5. Thurman, Howard. Jesus and the Disinherited. Boston, MA: Beacon, 1996. p. 20.
6. Pinn, Anthony B. The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002. p. 81.
7. Ibid., p. 82.
8. Ibid.
9. Farrar, John, ed. Recollections of Seventy Years. New York: Arno, 1980. p. 22.