It takes a community to pave the way

by Marc_H._Morial

In a speech at the National Urban League's 2006 annual conference, Time-Warner Chairman Dick Parsons said the reason why he pursued higher education was that it was expected of him - by his friends, parents and the community as a whole.

There was no question in the matter. He was just brought up that way.

Parsons' personal anecdote is something all black families should embrace and aspire to in light of an increasingly global economy requiring high-tech skills to thrive and survive these days. If we demand that our children - especially our boys - make something of themselves and instill in them the value of education to achieve their goals, we'd have fewer behind bars or wandering the streets failing to live up to their potential.

But it's so much easier said than done. With more black men behind bars than in college, it's difficult for young black males, especially those from one-parent households, to find adequate role models to inspire them and steer them on the path of college education and away from the streets.

More than half the nation's 5.6 million black boys live in fatherless households, more than 40 percent of which are impoverished. They are educated in school districts where 21 percent of teachers have less than three years of experience - more than twice the percentage of inexperienced teachers in majority-white districts. They live in a world where 18 percent less is spent for their education than for whites.

"Too many absent fathers leave too many poor and minority children in families headed by single mothers struggling financially and straining to hold their households together," noted Marian Wright Edelman in her essay in the National Urban League's The State of Black America 2007. "With frayed or sundered extended family networks, few single working mothers have the time, supports or energy to nurture and guide their children, read to them at night, help with their homework, take them to a health clinic, or advocate for them at their schools. They are too busy merely trying to survive."

Since the mid-1960s, much progress has been made by blacks on the college education front. In the past decade or so - 1993 to 2003, black enrollment climbed nearly 43 percent to more than 1.9 million students, according to the American Education Council. Black men, however, made up 38 percent of this population in 2005, according to Census Bureau data. White men, on the other hand, made up slightly less than 50 percent of white college students.

The decline in numbers of black men on campus - even at historically black colleges and universities, where at least 60 percent or more of students are women - has set off alarm bells among educators and politicians

alike. Earlier this year, the Presidents' Round Table, a group of black community college presidents, joined forces with the Congressional Black Caucus to study the issue and make recommendations to reverse the trend.

But much of that needs to start at an early age with the help of effective role models. The reason why fewer black men are going to college is that they think it's unattainable or that they're better off on the streets. With the odds so stacked against them, it's a miracle that any of these at-risk black men get into college - let alone finish.

Where we need to focus our efforts is on these boys at an early age when they perform fairly well compared to white boys, according to most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, otherwise known as the Nation's Report Card. Since 1992, the performance gap between black and white boys has narrowed. In reading, black boys at the age of 9 lagged their white counterparts by 28 points in 2004, up from 32 points in 1992. In math, they trailed by 22 points in 2004, compared to 25 points in 1992, according to the NAEP.

Progress has been made in the early years in closing the achievement gap. However, a major disconnect occurs by high school: by age 17, black males are further behind their white counterparts than they are at age 9. In 2004, black teenagers actually lost ground on white teenagers in math at least: the gap in scores widened to 30 points, up from 26 in 1992.

In Maryland, an education task force characterized school as "an at-risk environment for African-American male youth" and recommended that the state take steps to fix the situation "whatever the costs," according to a recent New York Times story.

That solution, as I recommended last month in my remarks during the release of The State of Black America 2007, could come in the form of more all-male schools such as New York City's Eagle Academy that features mentoring as well as longer school days to remove some of the distractions and obstacles standing in the way of the education of black boys.

Eagle Academy for Young Men has a school day that ends at 5:30 p.m. and requires students to attend on Saturdays for half a day. In Ossining, N.Y., education officials discovered through a districtwide analysis of high grade-point averages that black males performed far worse than any other group, including black females whose performance compared favorably with their peers.

So, in 2005, the area's school district began a college preparatory program for black male high school students and recently began offering voluntary mentoring services for black boys in second and third grades, in which they are paired up with black teachers for one-on-one guidance outside of class and extra homework help.

While it's too early to assess the effect of these programs on test scores, Ossining officials point out that the percentage of black students in the 11th and 12th grade enrolled in college level courses doubled in 2005 over 2004. And discipline referrals of black male second and third graders have fallen 80 percent, the New York Times reported.

Even in college, black males at times require special "intrusive counseling" by very committed mentors to stay on the course because they tend to "come to the academic environment with incredible degrees of distraction and more often than not, not with the tools" that they need to succeed, Malcolm B. Williams, a manager for student support services at all-male Morehouse College, told the magazine Diverse Issues in Higher Education.

Somewhere down the line a growing population of black males began to deem a college education as unattainable or just not worth the investment. This is exactly the attitude we must reverse in light of an increasingly high-tech economy.

In the past, unskilled Americans could find themselves secure relatively high-wage jobs in the manufacturing sector but those jobs are few and far between these days. Without a college degree, black men face bleak prospects. It's either flipping burgers or the street, which eventually leads to prison. Without successful black men to help lead the way for this vulnerable group, we can only expect the situation to spiral out of control and fail to tap our nation's greatest source of untapped potential - young black men and boys.

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