

Rethinking African American K-12 Education Policy

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Executive Summary

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 failed to adequately account for African American student K-12 academic performance. In fact, the NCLB policy has harmed the minority students it was designed to help. When compared to White K-12 students, African American students are more likely to drop out of high school. Of those that do graduate, a small percentage are considered career and college ready. The NCLB-driven overemphasis on testing has contributed to a persistent pattern of ethnic bias against African American students. As policy makers consider the potential reauthorization of the NCLB Act of 2001, they must redress the role of standardized testing and the negative impacts of those tests on African American K-12 students. Specifically, the reauthorization should include the appropriate role for testing; the appropriateness of testing instruments, and the results of testing on African American K-12 academic achievement.

Introduction

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, last restructured in 2002 as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was intended to increase accountability and close achievement gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Despite federal per student expenditures that doubled and a \$2 trillion taxpayer investment since the 1960s, American student academic accomplishment has remained flat and achievement gaps between White and African American students persist (Marshall & Burke, 2012). The NCLB policy required all public schools to administer state wide standardized tests annually to all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). While the NCLB policy outlined a variety of methods to reform American education, standardized test scores have been used as the main criteria by which student knowledge, teacher effectiveness, and K-12 school quality are assessed (Hightower, 2012). As Oakes (1989) asserted, high-stakes testing can lead most teachers to spend a great

deal of their time and energy focused on improving student test scores. This overemphasis on testing has harmed African American K-12 students. Thompson and Allen (2012) assert that the overemphasis on high-stakes testing damaged African American K-12 student academic performance in four major areas: instructional practices that resulted in lower test scores and higher dropout rates; student apathy instigated by educational material that was not presented as culturally relevant or applicable to the real-world; discipline policies in which the ratio of African American students that received punitive measures went up; and a narcissistic education system that is overly obsessed about the image associated with test score results. As the federal government looks to reauthorize the NCLB Act, the role of testing and the impact of those tests on African American students must be considered.

Instructional Practices

The NCLB policy has instilled a belief among many teachers that they have lost much of their autonomy and ability to tailor lesson plans to meet individual student needs. Teachers are often required to use specified curriculum and teaching guides that prescribe what to teach, how to teach it and how much time to spend teaching it (Kozol, 2005). The Independent Task Force of the Council on Foreign Relations concluded that African American students are harmed by the NCLB related instructional practices that have become prevalent in American K-12 schools (Klein & Rice, 2012). The continued focus on test preparation and NCLB-driven teaching methods have resulted in students that memorize the curriculum rather than experience, understand, and learn (Thompson & Allen, 2012).

Testing Instruments

Evidence of the academic disparity between African American and White American students continues to be displayed in the achievement scores on state assessment testing instruments. When compared to their White

counterparts, the achievement level of African American students lags far behind, especially in math and science (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Thompson (2007) found that African American students are more likely to identify issues regarding their ability to read and understand state-mandated testing instruments. Freedle (2006) identified a persistent pattern of ethnic bias on many standardized tests to include the SAT. African American students have consistently scored as much as 33% lower on the SAT when compared to White American students (Freedle, 2006).

Student Apathy & Culture

King (2006) found that African American culture is not well reflected in K-12 curriculum. The lack of culturally relevant education has resulted in many African American students who are apathetic. Student historical understanding can improve a student's motivation to learn and their perspective for a more positive future. Additionally, teachers need to understand the cultural backgrounds of students so that they can effectively engage and interact with those students (King, 2006). A Thompson (2007) study connected African American student apathy to a lack of culturally relevant K-12 curriculum. Seventy-five percent of African American students articulated a desire to learn more about their culture (Thompson, 2007). Variation theory supports the need for culturally relevant curriculum by explaining that students create meaning through their own experiences and connections rather than predefined meanings (Tan, 2009). As such, students who are not able to culturally connect with educational content are less able to create meaning from it.

High School Dropouts

Young adults who do not finish high school are more likely to be unemployed than those that do graduate from high school. In 2007, approximately 20% of African Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 years old had dropped out of high school. This compares to approximately five percent of White Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 who had dropped out of high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Additionally, high school dropouts have unemployment rates that are nearly two times higher than those students that attain some post secondary education (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

High School Graduates

Evidence is mounting that K-12 schools are not adequately preparing African American students who do graduate from high school for college or for a vocation. One recent report by ACT (2012), a not-for-profit testing organization, found that while 22% of White American high school students were properly prepared for college in English, mathematics, reading and science, that same study found that only five percent of African American students met those same standards. This lack of preparation for college equates to students using their first year of college on K-12 remediation rather than college level learning. Additionally, students who require K-12 remedial classes in their first year of college tend to struggle and dropout (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).

Conclusion

As the federal government looks to reauthorize the NCLB policy, the role of testing and the impact of the resulting test results on African American student education must be considered. Fowler's Six Stage Model (2013) states that the sixth step of the policy process is evaluation. Thompson and Allen's (2012) thesis that high-stakes testing harms African American students can be viewed as an evaluation of the NCLB Act. That evaluation provided substantial evidence of the NCLB Act's failure to account for African American student academic performance. When compared to their White counterparts, African American student achievement scores on NCLB policy driven tests trail substantially behind their White counterparts (Thompson & Allen, 2007).

Implications and Recommendations

Fowler (2013) notes the need for policy makers to consider demographics when developing educational policy because those demographics can constrain policy implementation. Rather than a constraint, policy makers should consider the reauthorization of the NCLB Act as an opportunity to redress NCLB 2001 policy issues as they relate to African American K-12 students. Specifically, the reauthorization should include the appropriate role for testing; the appropriateness of testing instruments, and testing results on African American K-12 academic achievement.

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About the author

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