

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### COMMENTARY

## Upending Stereotypes About Black Students

By **Leslie T. Fenwick**

There's a troubling undercurrent to the national conversation about the black-white gap in student achievement. The (mostly) unspoken belief about black students is tied to broader perceptions about black people. So, let's just say it: Some believe the gap is a function of weak family and community structures, male joblessness, drug use, and permissive cultural values—which they assert predominate in the black community.

Others believe that blacks constitute a community that is largely beyond intervention and that no amount of funding or special programs can fix what ails the perpetually troubled. An attendant assertion is that blacks who do achieve have outsmarted stereotype vulnerability and are outliers. Some say these blacks are exceptions and are successful because they embrace and actualize a white cultural-value system.

These erroneous and insulting beliefs persist because they are buoyed by a constant recitation of negative statistics about blacks in the research literature and unrelentingly circulated in news accounts. Such wrongheaded assertions negate accurate and meaningful portrayals of black people. Mostly, they misdirect formulation of educational and social policy and skew funding priorities in education and elsewhere.

Regrettably, Americans have been socialized by the scholarly and journalism communities to accept at face value negative data about blacks and been trained to be skeptical about and question any positive information about black people. This is so because little positive information of consequence about blacks is disseminated.

To understand what I mean, take this true-false test. How would you score?

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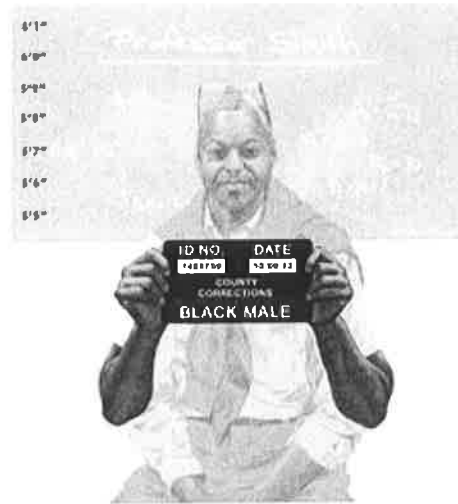
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**1. Black parents are not invested in their children's education and do not engage in school-affirming behaviors.**

**False.** The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2008 that 94 percent of African-American parents said their children did homework outside of school. The same percentage of parents reported setting aside a special time and place for their children to complete homework and having an adult in the household check it. This is the highest percentage of any subgroup of U.S. parents engaged in this critical school-affirming behavior.



—Jeff Dekal

**2. A much higher percentage of white parents than black parents attend PTA meetings and parent-teacher conferences.**

**False.** Comparable percentages of black and white parents reported attending school meetings, according to the same 2008 NCES study. Specifically, 90 percent of white parents and 87 percent of black parents said they attended PTA meetings. Seventy-eight percent of white parents and 77 percent of black parents reported attending parent-teacher conferences.

**3. Black parents are satisfied with permissive academic and discipline standards in the schools their children attend.**

**False.** NCES data show that fewer black parents than white parents report being very satisfied with the academic standards, order, and discipline in their children's schools.

**4. Most urban and center-city teachers and principals are black.**

**False.** According to surveys of schools and staffing conducted by the NCES, in 2003-04, nearly 90 percent of urban school teachers were white, and almost 71 percent of center-city school teachers were white. In the same academic year, approximately 88 percent of urban school principals and 62 percent of center-city school principals were white.

**“Let’s dump the litany of negativity and see where more accurate and nuanced research and reporting about black students and adults take the nation’s schools.”**

**5. White educators are more qualified than black educators.**

**False.** For decades, research has shown that African-American educators are the nation's most credentialed and experienced subgroup of educators. **As I wrote in Education Week in 2000,** they are more likely than their white peers to hold a master's or doctoral degree in education and possess more years of experience as a classroom teacher when they ascend to the principalship and more years as a principal when they ascend to the superintendency.

**6. There are more black men in prison than in college.**

**False.** In fact, Ivory Toldson, of the Howard University School of Education, has conducted research that shows that there are more black men in college than in prison. His research

indicated that, in 2009, 1.4 million black men attended college, and 840,000 black men were in prison.

**7. Black kids use more alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs than white kids.**

**False.** White 12th graders **use more alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs** than black 12th graders. According to reports from the National Institute for Drug Abuse and the Washington-based think tank Education Sector, use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs has consistently been found to be less prevalent among African-American high school seniors than their white peers. This finding also is true among African-American students in lower grades, according to a **2011 study** published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

**8. Most black men don't work.**

**False.** Although unemployment rates are higher for black men than for white men, the U.S. Department of Labor **reports** (as an employment-to-population ratio) that nearly 60 percent of black men and almost 70 percent of white men were employed in January 2012.

**9. More black people than white people attend church.**

**True.** According to the **2010 Gallup Poll** of Americans' Church Attendance, 55 percent of African-Americans reported attending church weekly. That represented the highest percentage of any U.S. racial or ethnic subgroup.

Well, how did you score? The question-and-answer sets above are not meant to be a "Jeopardy!" game of sorts ("Alex, I'll take African-Americans for \$600"). Nor are they about advancing a strengths-based or asset-based research perspective and good-news fantasy about blacks.

Rather, these data sets (and numerous others like them) urge a deep interrogation and interruption of the defamation of black people in research and media accounts. Such data should encourage educational practitioners, researchers, policymakers, journalists, funders, and everyday citizens to question the negative statistics we hear almost every day about black boys and girls, black men and women, black families, and black communities.

So, what can educators, researchers, and policymakers do about all this? Here are a few recommendations:

- For principals and teachers. The worst images of black culture have been manufactured and placed in broad circulation. As an antidote, educators must find, consciously elevate, and celebrate the best of black culture in schools and classroom. When schools put the best of black culture in broad circulation (through serious and ubiquitous curricular content and instructional materials), black students experience identity restoration, and all students learn meaningful cultural appreciation.
- For researchers. The hallmark of science is replication—replication of what works. Yet too much of the research about the black community is a litany of negativity. Researchers can counter this litany by publishing empowering research. For instance, rather than adding to the copious studies about black men in prison, why not examine the lives of black men who work and have intact families? The latter body of research is almost nonexistent—not because these men don't exist, but because researchers have seen little value in examining their lives. With

these types of studies, researchers will push beyond the veil of negative statistics and arrive at more accurate and stereotype-shattering data.

- For policymakers. Direct policy formulation and funding initiatives at empowering research and programs. For instance, historically black colleges and universities make up just 3 percent of the nation's colleges and universities. Yet, HBCUs like Howard University, where I serve as a dean, **prepare the majority of black physicians, engineers, and other STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) PhDs, and more than 50 percent of the nation's black teachers.** These irreplaceable institutions should be viewed by policymakers as engines of innovation worthy of deeper investment by federal, state, and philanthropic agencies.

Let's dump the litany of negativity and see where more accurate and nuanced research and reporting about black students and adults take the nation's schools and even the nation itself.

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*Leslie T. Fenwick is the dean and a professor of education policy at the Howard University School of Education. Portions of this essay are excerpted from the W.E.B. Du Bois Distinguished Lecture, which she delivered at the American Educational Research Association's April 2013 conference. The writer is a former urban school administrator, teacher, and legislative aide in the Ohio Senate.*

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