

## In Search of Minority Teachers

*Teachers who understand the culture and background of their students stand a better chance of helping them bridge the achievement gap*

By Joetta Sack-Min

While the classrooms of most inner-city schools are filled with students of color, there's a troubling shortage of minority teachers to lead them—and that's a policy issue needing more attention, teachers and administrators say.

Having a teacher of the same ethnic or cultural background as their students—a teacher who understands their experiences and lifestyle—can have a positive impact on the teaching that occurs in the classroom and on student learning, educators say. So, although many urban school districts are aggressively attempting to recruit minority teachers, some say even more effort is needed to attract minorities to the teaching field, keep them in the profession, and learn from their teaching methods.

"This issue is so critical," says Timothy Daly, president of the New Teacher Project.



For the nation's increasingly diverse student population, a minority role model at the front of the classroom is not as common as many urban educators would like. Here, elementary teacher Billie Jo Guthrie uses a prop clock during a lesson in this 2006 photo from Las Vegas.

"People will say, 'it's unfortunate,' but then it gets brushed under the carpet."

The numbers of minorities entering or working in the teaching field are at historic lows, according to statistics compiled by the National Education Association. In 2004, NEA reported that only 6 percent

of teachers were African-American and 5 percent were Hispanic, and those percentages were declining as more minority teachers retired or left the field. Some 38 percent of schools did not have any

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#### About CUBE

NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), the urban initiative of NSBA's National Affiliate program, addresses the programmatic, fiscal, and governance challenges of urban public education on behalf of its 116 member school boards and the more than 8 million students they serve. Through legislative advocacy, conferences, workshops, seminars, and publications, CUBE has been in the forefront of cultivating excellence in urban public schools for four decades.

#### About NSBA

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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## CUBE News

### CUBE membership hits high mark

Word about the benefits of CUBE membership must be getting around: Seven more school systems joined our organization in 2007, bringing the total number of members to a record 116 districts.

"The involvement of so many influential urban and metropolitan school

systems—and their school boards—can only strengthen our advocacy efforts for urban education," says CUBE Director Katrina Kelley. "It is a testament to the importance of board member collaboration—and recognition of the value of CUBE as a source of continuing profes-

sional development for urban policymakers."



### New CUBE climate report looks at parent perceptions

How parents view their children's schools is the subject of *What We Think*, CUBE's third major report on school climate in the nation's urban communities.

Scheduled for release later this year, the report surveyed parents in approximately 10,000 families in 25 CUBE-member school systems. Questions focused on parents' perceptions on issues as far ranging as bullying, school communications, and the concern of teachers for students.

Previous studies examined the percep-



tions of students, principals, and teachers—and sparked policy debates and community discussions in a number of CUBE school districts nationwide.

### CUBE Issues Forum set Feb. 2 in Washington, D.C.

To provide urban school leaders with an insider's view of federal policymaking, CUBE has scheduled an afternoon Issues Forum prior to NSBA's Annual Federal Relations Network Conference in Washington, D.C.

Although the FRN conference will run Feb. 3 to 5, CUBE will host its programming from 2 to 5 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 2. CUBE also will sponsor its Fourth Annual Congressional Luncheon on Tuesday, Feb. 5, on Capitol Hill.

Information is available on the CUBE Web site: [www.nsba.org/cube](http://www.nsba.org/cube).



### Urban school leaders recognized for achievement

Two notable urban school leaders with close ties to CUBE recently received recognition for their public service on behalf of urban schoolchildren.

Elizabeth Reilinger, chair of the Boston school committee and member of the CUBE Steering Committee, was awarded the Richard R. Green Award for urban education leadership by the Council of Great City Schools.

Meanwhile Rudolph Crew, superintendent of the Miami-Dade County school system and frequent CUBE presenter, was named Florida Superintendent of the Year by the Florida Association of District School Superintendents.

# Trends & Analysis

## Tackling high dropout rates is focus of initiatives

The headlines late last year were shocking but true. One in 10 high schools is considered a “dropout factory.” An analysis of U.S. Education Department data revealed that in 1,700 schools nationwide—many in urban and metropolitan areas—fewer than 60 percent of incoming freshmen made it to their senior year.

Such sobering news has inspired urban school leaders to employ even more innovative and creative ways to ensure students earn a diploma. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, officials are extending its anti-dropout efforts into cyberspace, radio, and neighborhoods.

“My Future, My Decision” is a comprehensive initiative that places public service announcements on a popular radio station, sends text messages through cell phones, and engages in dialogue and postings on MySpace and Facebook. The school district even sends counselors into homes to meet face-to-face with families and students.

“The message is come back, come back to school,” Superintendent David Brewer told the *Los Angeles Daily News*. “Do not stay out there and become a statistic in our society.”

Only a year into the program, it’s too early to tell whether the \$10 million strategy will pay off and change the paths of the



David Brewer, superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, talks with students in the “My Future, My Decision” program at David Starr Jordan High School.

roughly 17,000 students deemed at risk.

In New York City, officials are taking an even bigger gamble to help the 12,000 students on the brink of dropping out. Desperate to keep the students from giving up, the state’s Board of Regents approved a plan in late October that would place at-risk students in college courses, where they could earn college credit while still in high school.

While it wouldn’t be the first dual-enrollment program ever introduced—similar programs have found success in

school districts across the country—New York’s version would be one of, if not the first, to specifically target potential dropouts.

Risky? You bet, though most of the lawmakers and head honchos in New York City seem to think it’s a good idea.

“Especially with the expense of college being what it is, if you can get kids from disadvantaged families to complete work in high school, they would be saving substantial dollars,” Manhattan Assemblywoman Deborah Glick told the *New York Times*.

## Planting ‘signs’ of success for the Indianapolis Public Schools

Tired of negative perceptions about the city’s schools, a group of parents and the Indianapolis Public Schools have started planting yard signs promoting local schools.

After seeing signs promoting parochial and charter schools pop up on lawns every year, a group of parents decided they wanted to start a similar effort to promote public awareness about the academic programs at their children’s schools, says district spokeswoman Louise Bewley. School officials were more than happy to support the effort.

The first signs went up last fall, with some publicizing the application deadline for magnet programs, she says. Parents

**Discover IPS!**  
**IPS Magnet Programs**  
**Application Deadline: Dec. 14**  
Montessori • Medical Sciences  
Spanish Immersion  
Math, Science & Technology and more!  
**Call 226-4670 for more information.**

worked with their principals to organize a sign campaign for their schools, and the district put up the nearly \$15,000 for

printing costs.

To date, the signs have generated calls from some parents thinking they were calling private schools, Bewley says. If nothing else, school officials hope the signs will generate more community discussion about school choice options.

And working with parents has been its own reward. “It’s been a really invigorating thing to see parents want to promote their schools and put signs in their yards,” she says. “Today’s parents have choices, and they could easily take their children to a parochial school or charter school, so we really feel that if this is what they want to do,” the school system will support them.

## D.C. chancellor wins key power to fire

The head of the District of Columbia Public Schools, Michelle Rhee, won an important victory before the holidays when the D.C. City Council gave her more authority to fire non-union workers without cause.

The council also approved \$81 million in supplemental funding to cover a looming budget shortfall.

The vote was considered crucial to Rhee's chances of overhauling school system operations. Over the years, the district has been plagued by late paychecks,



Michelle Rhee

poor records, and delayed maintenance, and critics have placed much of the blame on a district bureaucracy that placed a higher priority on job security than effectiveness.

The victory for Rhee,

which came at a time when parents and city leaders were complaining about the proposed closing of 23 schools, was cited as a sign that political leaders recognize the need for dramatic measures if school reform is to be successful.

Although still getting her feet planted, Rhee already has proposed a number of initiatives, including more emphasis on early childhood education, improved special education services, additional programming in the arts and gifted education, and a new high-tech campus.

## HISD data system isn't 'flashy' but useful

If there's one thing school board members learn early in their tenure, it's that some of the best ways to improve student learning aren't "flashy"—or have a visible link to what's happening in the classroom.

Case in point: The Houston Independent School District is launching a new data management system designed to improve the monitoring of individual student progress and allow teachers to target instructional support more quickly to those students in need.

Tracking student grades and test results is nothing new, of course, and other urban school systems have put a similar emphasis

on high-tech data management systems. But Houston school officials believe their ASPIRE—Accelerating Student Progress, Increasing Results, and Expectations—system is a groundbreaking step forward for the 202,000-student school district.

"For the first time we are charting the individual academic growth of every child, and we're going to use that value-added data to design specific ways to help every child continue to improve," schools Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra said in December.

Plans include providing campus-level analyses to parents and the community, school officials say.

## Los Angeles targets 34 neediest schools

Now that the dust has settled from last year's titanic political battle for control of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), school officials are moving forward with plans to tackle the educational needs of their most academically challenged students.

The school board recently approved a plan by Superintendent David Brewer targeting 34 low-performing schools for a more rigorous academic program, additional professional development for teachers, and broader parental involvement.

Expected to cost \$4.6 million this year, the reform plan focuses on schools where anywhere from 42 percent to 75 percent of students score "below basic" on standardized test scores.

"The plan not only addresses our lowest-performing schools but begins to confront the truth about who this district has failed to serve," says school board Vice President Yolie Flores Aguilar.

At the same time, school officials and L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa have reached an accord on the mayor's Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, a

### GOOD MANNERS? THAT'S ELEMENTARY!

Ideally, home is where good manners are taught and model behavior is reinforced. But most school employees will tell you that along with mentor, counselor, and patron saint, they also assume the role of disciplinarian.

Besides being disruptive to class instruction and morale, bad behavior has taken on increasing significance in recent years, as issues of school security continue to make headlines. Metal detectors and school uniforms are just some ways educators are attempting to tamp down discipline problems and make schools safer.

But many districts are taking it one step further, by starting with the basics: explicitly teaching students what good behavior means and looks like.

Often employing the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program, developed by a federally funded consortium, schools clearly define the behavioral skills and focus on teaching, modeling, practicing, and reinforcing those skills.

"Basically this is a philosophical shift," says Jane Nethercutt, who oversees the behavior program for Austin Independent School District in Texas. "Instead of assuming every child has these behavior skills and waiting for the child to misbehave and punishing them, we front-load them with these skills."

For instance, teachers will define what respect is and what it means to be respectful on the playground and in the classroom. Of course, different strategies are employed at different grade levels.

"What works at the elementary level won't work at the high school, where sometimes you do things on a school-wide basis, but sometimes you need to provide more intensive support for individual kids who need more work on social skills," Nethercutt says.

school reform initiative that will put seven LAUSD schools under his control.

This initiative is a modest effort compared to Villaraigosa's earlier and more ambitious effort to take control of the entire school district.

# Charter competition fuels more enrollment declines in cities

The impact of the charter school movement continues to make itself felt—with Dayton, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., being the latest urban school systems where serious enrollment declines are attributed to charter school competition.

In Washington, D.C., more than 23,000 students—nearly one-quarter of all school-aged children in the city—are enrolled in charter schools this year. Since 1990, the school system's enrollment has dropped by 37 percent to its current 52,000, with much of that loss the result of transfers to 57 area charter schools.

Each lost student costs the school district about \$8,300.

The enrollment drain is even worse for the Dayton Public Schools. More than 30 charter schools serve the metropolitan area, drawing about 30 percent of the city's school-aged children. Only New Orleans, where nearly six in 10 chil-

dren attend charters, has a higher percentage of children being educated outside the traditional school system.

These numbers reflect the growing popularity of charter schools, which now number about 4,000 nationwide. This growth has affected numerous urban school systems, including Columbus, Ohio; Detroit; Indianapolis; and Tucson, Ariz.

Yet, despite their popularity, charter schools have opponents. In Ohio, a series of lawsuits, first by the state's teachers union, then by an individual citizen, contends that charter schools, specifically three in Dayton, do not meet state standards and do not deliver a quality education.

Dayton school board President Yvonne Issacs has said that in the nine years since charter schools were given the green light in Dayton, the district has had to transfer about \$283 million to charter schools.

"It would not have cost us nearly that much to educate 6,000 students," she said.



This 17-year-old student at Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter School expects to apply to several colleges this year. In Washington, D.C., Marshall has been ahead of other open-enrollment high schools in reading and math scores.

## WORST SCHOOLS ARE BEST HOPE FOR GAINS

A new study suggests that if school boards want to see big gains in academic performance, the first place to look is to their worst-performing schools.

The track record isn't good for making big gains in high-poverty, academically failing schools, reports *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America's Best Opportunity to Dramatically Improve Student Achievement Lies in Our Worst-Performing Schools*.

If the nation wants to avoid the failed reform efforts of the past, the report contends, local and state officials must recognize the scope of the challenge facing them and be willing to make a major investment in specialized assistance, training, and changes in school operations.

How big an investment? Perhaps \$1 million a year per school, the report concludes. But public frustration with low-performing schools is fueling a greater political willingness to invest in such costly reform.

Copies of the report are available at [www.massinsight.org](http://www.massinsight.org).

## Elections broaden school segregation

With urban school officials struggling to find ways to encourage classroom diversity, it's a bit dismaying when communities and lawmakers make decisions that harden the lines of segregation that exist in society.

Take, for example, the ballot initiative that switched seven of the most successful schools in Kansas City, Mo., to the neighboring Independence school district. The boundary change means the predominately black Kansas City school system will lose 30 percent or so of its white students.

What's more, many of the black students in those schools—who have Kansas City addresses—are expected to move to other city schools and leave the newest Independence schools with higher white enrollments.

It's unclear what role racial attitudes had in the vote. Local control was one issue, with supporters of the boundary change noting that the schools leaving Kansas City actually were within the city limits of Independence or neighboring Sugar Creek.

The push for change also was fueled by the poor academic showing of Kansas City, which was blamed for pulling down property values around the contested schools. Supporters also expressed confidence that the schools would perform better under the

guidance of Independence school officials.

Practical benefits also were cited during debate of state legislation that carved a new Central Community School District out of the East Baton Rouge Parish School District. Supporters argued the parish school system was too large and bureaucratic to meet the needs of their children, and with the establishment of Central City as the state's newest municipality, a smaller school system serving the city would be more responsive to parents.

Still, the decision also created a school system that is about 90 percent white—a fact that raised some suspicions about the motives behind the secession. Just prior to the legislature's vote last year, East Baton Rouge school board member Darryl Robertson put it plainly to reporters: "This is basically white flight."

Thankfully, such boundary changes are rare. But observers note that the issue is percolating in several communities across the nation, most recently in communities surrounding Los Angeles and Charlotte, N.C. And, whatever the true motives of those supporting change, the reality is that these proposals invariably would redraw school boundaries to separate more affluent and white communities from poorer and more minority neighborhoods.

## MINORITY TEACHERS

Continued from page 1

minority teachers on staff.

Although there tends to be higher numbers of minorities in urban schools, those aren't enough to satisfy many. Thus more districts are looking at ways to specifically recruit minority teachers, targeting both recent college graduates and career changers.

Alas, many school district recruiters have found that good candidates have their choice of jobs both in education and the higher-paying corporate sector. That's led some districts to experiment with "grow-your-own" programs, while others have turned to outside groups to handle recruitment needs.

"There just aren't enough individuals coming into the field, and this has become a real problem," says Marsha Smith, a member of the NEA's Executive Committee and a middle school teacher in Montgomery County, Md.

### A different approach

The difference a minority teacher brings to the classroom is hard to quantify. Student test scores have yet to show gains that can definitively be attributed to having a minority at the head of an urban classroom. Still, administrators generally agree that just their presence can prove inspiring to students.

At the very least, minority teachers show students that they, too, can succeed in a career. Some say the influence of minority teachers goes much further, in that they have higher expectations for students and a different approach to teaching that is more effective for student achievement.

Rushern Baker, executive director of the Community Teachers Institute, observed teachers in urban schools as part of the National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, a coalition of teaching and research groups including NEA. He has no doubt that many minority teachers approach the job differently.

"When students of color were taught by teachers of color, especially teachers that were culturally connected and came from the same neighborhoods, there was an ability to get students more interested in learning and increase the attendance rate," Baker says. "While test scores may not go up, what goes up are graduation rates and wanting to go on to college, and that's very important."

Baker notes that minority teachers who

## WANTED: MINORITY TEACHERS

Your school system is facing tough competition in its efforts to recruit minority teachers to serve an increasingly diverse student population. So what can you do to boost your success rate?

Quite a lot, actually. And while the following strategies aren't new, your school board could put a higher priority (and more resources) behind them:

- Build close relationships with historically black colleges.
- Partner with urban and minority teacher development programs at state universities.
- Implement a program to help classroom paraprofessionals earn an education degree.
- Develop teacher career programs for high school students.
- Recruit far and wide—both across the nation and overseas.
- Take full advantage of alternative



certification programs—and reach out to non-traditional sources for teachers, such as laid-off workers in high-tech industries.

- Finally, look at your retention rate for new teachers. Without adequate support, you'll find hard-to-recruit teachers leaving your district—and undercutting your recruitment efforts.

### THE FACE OF URBAN TEACHERS



White: 70.5%  
Black: 15.1%  
Hispanic: 10.4%  
Other: 4.1%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

### THE FACE OF URBAN STUDENTS



White: 36%  
Black: 28.4%  
Hispanic: 28.9%  
Other: 2.2%

## 7 WAYS TO SABOTAGE MINORITY RECRUITMENT

Take a hard look at how you recruit teachers, and there's a good chance you'll find your school district's hiring practices have flaws that guarantee you'll lose out when recruiting minority teachers.

Here are some common bad habits of urban school districts:

- Delay hiring decisions until the last minute, while other school systems offer contracts to high-need teachers as much as a year in advance.
- Ignore your top candidates. File away all job applications, and don't look at them until you're ready to start hiring.
- Never confirm that resumes and job applications have been received, and don't consider calling minority applicants to make them feel wanted.
- Assume your teachers union

doesn't care about minority teacher recruitment—and don't engage them in a discussion on joint recruitment initiatives.

- At the same time, don't ask your union to consider changes to your collective bargaining agreement and any provisions that undermine your efforts at minority recruitment. (Such as seniority rules that give teachers until the end of summer to make transfers.)
- Cut your teacher recruitment budget to the bone. You don't want district employees advertising across the country, recruiting overseas, or attending job fairs in other states.
- Most important: Ignore the issue entirely. After all, what do school boards care about the people who teach your children?

had grown up in the neighborhoods where they taught understood the students' backgrounds and the issues they faced outside of school. But they did not accept excuses from students or anyone else about why students could not perform at the same levels as more privileged peers.

"The difference was the expectation of the children," he says. "They tended to take students on an individual basis and move them along, and not teach everybody the same."

Those teachers, he adds, also seemed less likely to "teach to the test" and used more creative ways to communicate, such as hip-hop music or slang language.

The New Teacher Project, which helps districts recruit and train new teachers, has found that many minority applicants choose teaching as a second career because they have a sense of mission—and they often feel a drive to close the achievement gap and provide a more equitable education to high-poverty students, Daly says. The group uses those themes in marketing to minority audiences.

"One of the things that's very effective in recruiting teachers of color is appealing to their ideas of equity," Daly says. "Teachers who come from communities where they grew up in are often extremely motivated, and they have seen firsthand it is possible to move up from this community."

It's also a sense of ownership—not just of the community but of the children, says Jason Irizarri, an assistant professor of education at the University of Connecticut.

"To many teachers of color, that is their kid—these are kids they identify with, these are not other people's children," he says.

### Teaching cultural competency

Minority teachers are not the only ones who take this approach—and "cultural competency" can be learned. Indeed, researchers agree it's more important for teachers to have an understanding of a community and an experience living or spending time in that community than to be of the same or a similar ethnic group.

"The identity that I think teachers need to get is in communities—not in some genetic code, not in their ethnic or racial identity, but in our experiences, and all of us need to have more experiences that are



Black male teachers, such as this Wichita, Kan., math teacher, are particularly sought after by urban school districts looking for more male and minority representation in their school faculties.

culturally connected to urban youth," Irizarri says.

"Effective urban educators of any background are those who can make the curriculum relevant to the students they teach."

Baker says his group's research found examples of white teachers who immersed themselves in a community, either by living there or attending church or other events, spoke the same language, and knew parents and community members.

The term "culturally responsive teaching" is often used to describe the efforts and adaptations teachers make to reach minority students. The City University of New York is one of many institutions that attempts to instill culturally responsive strategies in teachers to compensate for the lack of minorities entering the teaching field. In CUNY classes, instructors discuss issues such as values, language, and home experiences, and encourage teaching candidates to visit students' homes and meet with their families during the school year.

"It's not enough to say we're going to recruit more [minority] teachers, we have to get white teachers to be more successful," says Nicholas Michelli, a professor of education at CUNY's graduate school. "It is so important that teachers understand the culture of kids, and they should know a

lot of cultures."

In Memphis, Tenn., cultural awareness trumps race as a hiring factor. LaTasha Gentry Holmes, the city school system's director of recruitment, says the district's first priority is to hire highly qualified teachers, but that the recruitment office also probes applicants on their handling of issues such as parental involvement and discipline to see if they are prepared to work in a predominantly minority, urban district. Applicants also visit a school and meet with a teacher and the principal during the interview process.

Once teachers are hired in Memphis, they participate in an induction program that addresses cultural diversity, and the district hosts ongoing professional development classes that help teachers deal with cultural differences that may arise.

While there are shortages of teachers in just about every minority group, African-American male teachers are particularly rare,

much-coveted recruitment targets for urban schools. The presence of a black male authority figure can make a critical difference in schools with high populations of African-American students from low-income families, because many come from fatherless homes.

The main reason so few minorities from urban schools, particularly males, enter the teaching field is that high school dropout rates are so high, and so few of those who graduate go on to earn a four-year college degree, Michelli says.

"Despite all of our efforts, the dropout rate is too high in urban schools," he says.

### Finding and keeping talent

But there are many disincentives for minority college graduates, particularly 20-somethings, to enter teaching.

Pay is one of the biggest issues, Smith said. Students from disadvantaged communities usually have student loans and often want more than the no-frills lifestyle provided by a teacher's salary. Further, she adds, in comparison to other professional pursuits, teaching requires college students to invest more time and money for exams and graduate classes to receive their license and certification.

Also, businesses often compete to hire bright, well-educated minorities, and some



Marsha Smith, a teacher in Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools, reads Dr. Seuss to students. As a member of NEA's executive committee, she is working to find strategies to recruit more minority teachers.

say the better-paying jobs are viewed as more prestigious in minority communities.

"We hear that when you are a very high-achieving person of color in college, there is a lot of pressure not to go into fields that are lower paying, and teaching is looked down upon," Daly says. "But what we've found is that people should not stop recruiting those people at 22."

CUNY, Michelli says, has tried to recruit minorities to teach math and science, but he's had little success because they have better job opportunities in other sectors.

Another obstacle to recruiting is the licensure exams, particularly the Praxis tests, which are the predominant teacher-licensure exams. According to NEA, less than half of minority candidates pass both the subject-matter and basic skills test on the first try, and retaking those tests becomes expensive and discouraging for applicants.

The Educational Testing Service, which administers the test, does not keep national data on the minority passage rate because individual states set their own pass score, but ETS is concerned because minorities generally have lower scores, says spokesman Thomas Ewing. It is offering free test-prep materials to minority candidates and working with some colleges to train faculty and offer test preparation classes.

Retention is yet another issue. Researchers have found that relationships with school administrators can be the biggest factor in whether a minority teacher stays—so it's imperative for retention rates that the principal be supportive and understand the teacher's approach.

In Memphis, Holmes is working to recruit more teachers locally by giving out

her card to businesses and friends, and she even has a magnet advertising teaching jobs on her car. The district also is working with city leaders to publicize their efforts.

"When people come back home or have family ties, we've found we're more apt to hold on to those teachers for a greater amount of time," she says. "We want to make the community a de facto recruiter."

### On the job

The New Teacher Project trains its career-changers in the communities where they will be working, so that they will have support while they are working in classrooms with the students they will be teaching, Daly says. But while minority teachers may have an advantage in understanding the students' culture and background, they may find other obstacles in their jobs.

Smith says that at times she has been the only African-American teacher at the schools where she has taught, which can feel like a burden.

"I think teachers of all ethnic backgrounds feel camaraderie because they are teachers," she said. "However, as the only minority in a school, sometimes you feel you are representing the entire culture. You make a special effort to share your experiences, but it can be stressful."

Irizarri began his career teaching middle school in a predominantly minority neighborhood in New York City, near where he'd grown up. While he was comfortable with the students he taught, he says the biggest struggle was the lack of resources at the school—books were in short supply, and he was forced to be creative when trying to reach some of the students who had fallen far behind their grade level.

## FASHION HEADACHES

### Exposed Underwear Is No-No in Atlanta

Ripped jeans, short skirts, tank tops, Nehru jackets, short shorts, bandanas, hats, baggy pants—you name it, and school boards have found themselves asked to respond to such fashion trends.

Yet, how many have been asked to set a dress code for underwear?

The Atlanta school board is one. Well, technically, it simply modified the wording of its existing dress code.

Baggy pants already were banned, but students, being who they are, tried to circumvent the rule by wearing "sagging" pants that sometimes slid down to reveal some tidy whitey. So sagging pants got banned as well.

It was just one of those tiny administrative changes school boards get asked to make on occasion, but the media loved it. "Every television station in town was here," says district spokesperson Joe Manguno. "But where were they when we announced our great NAEP results?"

### No Surprise: Artists Oppose Conformity

Staying with fashion issues, it appears school uniforms don't sit well with the artistic mind—at least that was the contention of students and parents at Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts in Akron, Ohio.

It's not often school boards find a 13-year-old jazz drummer standing outside on a cold fall day protesting plans to enact a school-wide uniform policy for elementary and middle schools.

It's said that artists are non-conformists, but school board members weren't too impressed, even when parents took up the protest at a board meeting. The measure passed by a 5-2 vote.

"The general consensus was not to make an exemption for just one school," says Karen Ingraham, executive director of communications, adding that the policy would save costs for parents whose children transfer among schools.

"I inherited kids who made it to the sixth grade and didn't have the ability to read," he said. "I struggled, but my struggle was not that in which I couldn't relate to students."

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# Best Practices

## Keeping It Real

*Career academies are helping districts make learning relevant to high schoolers—and helping keep students in school*

By Naomi Dillon

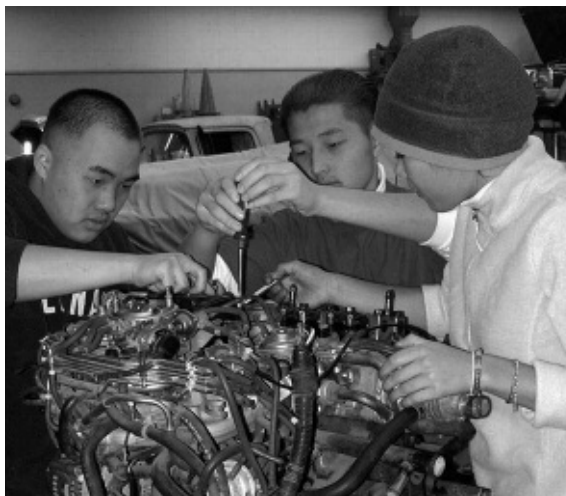
Make it relevant—and use real-world examples. It's a mantra and strategy that schools have employed with increasing frequency to keep students engaged and on track academically. In high school, where students are more likely to disconnect from learning, a growing number of educators are building the entire learning environment around real-life applications.

The practice isn't new or radical. Career academies have been around since 1969, when business leaders and district officials in Philadelphia joined forces to open the Academy of Applied Electrical Science at Edison High School.

Since then, more than 1,500 career academies have opened across the country. Among those are a number in the Sacramento (Calif.) school system, which six years ago embarked on a high school reform effort to reduce its dropout rate. Besides breaking up large school campuses into smaller "learning communities," the district allowed schools to set career-oriented themes and infuse more job training and skills into the curriculum—all hallmarks of a bona fide career academy.

From fire science and business, to international studies and technology, Sacramento has not only provided a path of learning that students can follow straight into the workplace, but the district also recruited five people from the private sector to help light that path by establishing internships and similar learning opportunities for students.

"That model has been a real help to us," district spokeswoman Maria Lopez told the *Sacramento Bee*. "They not only bring mentors, they bring contacts for teachers, new resources, partnerships, field trips. All kinds of things that are valuable for students."



### REAL LIFE EXPERIENCES:

Working hard at the stove (above) is a Sacramento, Calif., high school student enrolled in an internship program at the Sacramento Sheraton Hotel. At left, students work on an engine at the school district's Automotive Technology Lab.

Just a little southwest in the Oakland Unified School District, officials opened MetWest High School in 2002. Students at this small alternative school in the city's downtown district take traditional college prep courses three days a week, but they spend the rest of the week in mentored internships with outside groups ranging from the Bay Area Legal Aid to the Chabot Space & Science Center.

The students customize their own schedules and conclude their high school career not with final exams but projects. After researching one subject, one student created a brochure about the Canine Parvovirus for the city's animal shelter. Another student crafted an authentic map of the nearby city of Piedmont, which is sold in local stores as a fundraiser for the League of Women Voters. And Huber Trenado, who was profiled in *American School Board Journal's* ([www.asbj.com](http://www.asbj.com))

August 2007 issue, followed an internship with a city council member with a final project that built upon the political leader's key policy endeavor: increasing home ownership.

Trenado's housing symposium, which was tailored to teachers, was so successful one faculty member actually purchased a property based on what she learned from Trenado's presentation.

"I think internships are great opportunities to put learning into practice," Trenado told *ASBJ*. "Having a hands-on experience is very important to noticing patterns and different learning styles. Personally, I feel like, without internships, I would have been much [more] closed-minded about trying different things."

Naomi Dillon ([ndillon@nsba.org](mailto:ndillon@nsba.org)) is senior editor of *American School Board Journal* and contributing editor of *Urban Advocate*.

## Integration boosts NCLB test scores—but only if done right

*Encouraging racial diversity in elementary schools has biggest impact on education*

Del Stover

Educators have known for decades that integrated schools offer very real social and educational benefits to minority students. But did you know that research now shows that racially diverse schools can boost those standardized test scores so important to meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals?

That's the conclusion of Douglas N. Harris, assistant professor of educational policy studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who used disaggregated data collected under the No Child Left Behind Act to compare test scores and the racial mix of schools.

His findings bolster the argument of many educators that racial diversity in schools is not simply a “feel good” goal. “African-American and Hispanics learn



New research reinforces a long-held belief that segregated schools are detrimental to minority students. But how school boards promote racially diverse schools will determine their success.

more in integrated schools” and “minorities attending integrated schools also perform better [after high school] in college attendance and employment,” states *Lost Learning, Forgotten Promises: A National Analysis of School Racial Segregation, Student Achievement, and “Controlled Choice” Plans*.

The report was published a year ago by the Center for American Progress.

Exactly how much “more” do minorities learn in a diverse school environment? Harris found that black students, in elementary schools where they account for only 10 percent of enrollment, learn about 0.04 standard devia-

### THE REALITY: SCHOOL INTEGRATION EFFORTS FACE IMMENSE OBSTACLES

Urban school boards are struggling to make sense of the dilemma before them: The courts have placed strict limits on their ability to promote racial diversity in the classroom, while research shows the very real educational value of such diversity.

The latest wrinkle to this issue came when the U.S. Supreme Court last year struck down student attendance plans in Seattle and Jefferson County, Ky. Early media accounts suggested race-conscious school policies were no longer possible.

But the reality is more complicated, Arthur L. Coleman, an attorney with Holland & Knight LLP, told urban school leaders at the CUBE Annual Conference in Atlanta last September. The high court ruling, he said, really sent two different messages to school boards—largely due to the “swing vote” of Justice Anthony Kennedy.

“Justice Kennedy joined in the majority in striking down the plans on very narrow terms, but he . . . joined with the four dissenters in saying that achieving the benefits of diversity is a compelling interest of the state, and avoiding the harms associated with racial isolation is a compelling inter-

est for the use of race-conscious policies.”

So race is not off the table when school boards discuss how to encourage racial diversity in the schools, he said. But school boards will need to defend their policies with evidence that school diversity is a compelling goal for their schools, and that the school district's policies advance that goal in a narrowly tailored way.

How to do that is really a conversation that school boards should take up with their attorneys. Some are going to suggest avoiding the issue entirely and seeking diversity in schools through other means, such as redrawing school boundary lines, creating more magnet schools, or by using family income and other demographic criteria in attendance policies.

“We're going to see, over the next few years, a whole series of different ways of addressing diversity in school districts,” says NSBA General Counsel Francisco Negrón.

Some school systems might opt to use race and accept challenges to their policies. At CUBE's annual meeting, San Francisco school board member Jill Wynns said her district had that option. If the school board opted to use race in its

tion more per year than those in schools with a 100-percent minority student population. In layman's terms, that equals about 5 percent of the national achievement gap between whites and blacks. The achievement benefit is even greater for Hispanic children.

That improvement might not sound like a lot. But Harris cites other research suggesting that if such gains were sustained from kindergarten through 12th grade, it would close about 80 percent of the achievement gap. That's almost certainly an overly optimistic figure, he concludes, but what's notable is that significant academic gains are possible—simply by changing the mix of students in the classroom.

Over the years, various reasons have been offered to explain the educational advantages of school integration, and Harris touches upon many of them. Some evidence suggests schools with more economically advantaged students—which in our society usually translate as white students—have better teachers and facilities, because their parents have more political influence in the distribution of resources.

Evidence also suggests majority-white schools tend to be smaller—with educational benefits that today are fueling urban initiatives for smaller schools or smaller learning communities organized within schools. Higher expectations and more rigorous academic programs at white-majority schools also seem to have an impact on minority achievement.

With the U.S. Supreme Court limiting the ability of public schools to use race-based policies in student assignments, Harris acknowledges that some school board members are looking for alternative approaches to diversify their schools. One strategy is to use socioeconomic factors in place of race in school assignment decisions.

That certainly is a practical option, and Harris makes clear that much of the minority achievement gap can be attributed to the economic and academic advantages of more affluent students. But he warns that local policymakers should not expect to find socioeconomic factors a perfect substitute for race. In another work, *Educational Outcomes of Disadvantaged Students: From Desegregation to Accountability*, Harris notes that some studies, for example, show that income-based programs don't necessarily lead to racial integration. Also, there is evidence that interaction with white students better prepares minorities for dealing with a racially mixed work environment.

"Clearly," he concluded in that report, "there are holes in our understanding of how methods of assigning students to schools influence students' outcomes."

And, given the evidence of desegregation's impact on academics is stronger than evidence for other major systemic reforms, "another way of looking at this is that desegregation is an educational reform, just like looking at a new curriculum or a new

policy about teachers," he says.

During his research, Harris came to some conclusions with practical implications for school boards. For one, implementing school integration programs are more effective in the elementary grades. "By the time students get to high school, if they've grown up in a highly segregated setting—an ineffective school setting—then it's going to be really hard for them to catch up socially and academically."

What's more, academic tracking is a reality in the high schools. Although school boards can make efforts to make all courses more rigorous and encourage minority students to enroll in Advanced Placement courses, he says, the reality is that many minority students already are behind academically—and they will be segregated (or segregate themselves) in their choice of courses.

Transportation issues also are a practical concern in diversity efforts, Harris says. If voluntary desegregation plans and carefully formulated school boundaries result in students traveling long distances, the academic advantages of a diverse classroom will be outweighed by the negative consequences of tired children.

*Lost Learning, Forgotten Promises and Educational Outcomes of Disadvantaged Students* are available at [www.education.wisc.edu/eps/faculty/harris.asp](http://www.education.wisc.edu/eps/faculty/harris.asp).

*Del Stover is a senior editor of American School Board Journal and editor of Urban Advocate.*

policies, she argued, her district could very well survive a challenge because it was documenting the benefits of student diversity in its schools and modifying its formula for school assignments as data showed the ability of its policy to promote diversity.

These were issues the Supreme Court found lacking when it struck down the Seattle and Jefferson County plans.

No matter how school boards deal with this issue—or even if they try to avoid the issue entirely—the reality is that litigation is a very real possibility, legal experts say. In December, for example, the Los Angeles Unified School District overcame a challenge to its use of race in its magnet school admissions policy because of a 1981 court order still in effect.

Indeed, some school districts could find themselves challenged in court for failing to take into account the benefits of racial diversity in its policies. A school board conceivably could be sued, for example, for failing to address the lower academic performance in high-minority schools, while white-majority schools perform better.

"We just don't know," Negrón says. "I think all of that is

in the future."

That's why CUBE is working with NSBA's Council of School Attorneys (COSA), along with other education groups and Holland & Knight, to create a "brain trust" to discuss today's legal environment and the challenges that might lie ahead, Negrón says.

Already, this partnership has published practical advice for school boards. *Not Black and White: Making sense of the United States Supreme Court decisions regarding race-conscious student assignment plans* is available at [www.nsba.org/cube](http://www.nsba.org/cube).

Meanwhile, urban school leaders might want to consider rethinking their views about what diversity means, Negrón says. Times have changed in the half century since *Brown v. Board of Education*, and school integration isn't just a black-white issue any more. Indeed, Justice Kennedy raised that issue when criticizing school plans that failed to address the needs of Asians, Hispanics, and other student populations.

"If the real concern is the educational value of diversity, and we're not talking about past [segregationist] wrongs, why are you limiting your definition of diversity to white and nonwhite?"

## Don't miss CUBE's Programming at the 2008 NSBA Annual Conference...

Renaissance Orlando Resort at Sea World  
6677 Sea Harbor Drive  
Orlando, FL

### Thursday, March 27, 2008

8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Site Visit to Orange County (FL) Public Schools

### Friday, March 28, 2008

8:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m.

Welcome, Keynote Address, and Breakfast  
Keynote Address by Salome Thomas-El, principal at the Russell Byers Public Charter School in Philadelphia

11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

CUBE Annual Business Meeting and Lunch  
CUBE members meet to consider nominations, elect new Steering Committee members, and discuss issues of concern to the membership. CUBE members, as well as non-CUBE member registrants, are encouraged to attend.

1:30 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.

Urban Public Schools Gang Prevention and Intervention Strategies  
Join this session to learn which gangs are prevalent nationally and regionally, recent trends and projections in gang activity.

### Saturday, March 29, 2008

2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.

CUBE Annual Issues Forum  
Urban Schools, Families, and Community Engagement  
Join this compelling session to discuss how model urban school districts have reframed their district's approach to family and community engagement.

### Monday, March 31, 2008

11:15 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

CUBE School Climate III/Parent Survey  
In the third phase of this project, CUBE surveyed the perceptions of school climate held by the parents and guardians of students in the urban context. Join this important session to hear the results of this school climate series.

CUBE Issues Seminar  
June 19-22, 2008  
Four Seasons Hotel  
Miami, FL

CUBE Annual Conference  
September 25-28, 2008  
Renaissance Hotel  
Las Vegas, NV

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