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ABSTRACT

Poor black young people in rural Mississippi contemplate their schooling with the same feelings as their friends who dare to jump the local ditches filled with alligators: the odds are against escaping the alligators, and the advantages of getting to the far side are not very apparent. Living in conditions of extreme poverty, these young people have few expectations for change in the future, and the school system reinforces their views. In Mississippi half the students attend schools that are on probation because they failed to meet the new accreditation standards. Some districts have financial difficulties. In others there is little concern for the nearly all-black public schools, as whites have set up their own private academies. There is a general attitude that the schools' job is to force kids to put in their time but to get rid of them if they cause trouble. The high school dropout rate exceeds 50% in one of every four districts and exceeds 75% in some districts. Students who get through to the end must pass a competency test to get a diploma. Only 20% of black graduates took the college preparatory curriculum; the rest find little opportunity for employment in small towns. They return to the shack they have called home and, like their parents, hope to get agricultural work. Giving these young people hope for the future requires: (1) attractive schools that foster students' self-worth and nurture their dreams; (2) public policy that improves family life, income, and housing; and (3) role models that help students see life as an opportunity to make something happen. (SV)

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JUMPING THE ALLIGATORS IN THE DITCH

As a kid, my friends and I would go out in the woods behind the house, where, on a typical day, one of the more athletic boys would jump across a big ditch and dare the rest of us to follow. If we made it, we felt a real high, a pride of accomplishment. If we missed, someone would kid us, but then hold out a hand to pull us from the bank to the top. The most lasting consequence of missing was a skinned knee or torn pants.

Now in rural Mississippi, there are alligators in that ditch. The consequences of missing are somewhat greater. That may raise the sense of pride in accomplishment, but it is guaranteed to discourage some from even trying. I could come up with at least a dozen "good" excuses for turning back, rather than taking the chance of being alligator bait. Besides, I'm not so sure that the accomplishment is really worth the effort; what's the big deal about being on that side of the ditch?

Being poor and black in the Mississippi Delta leaves many a young person feeling like backing away from the ditch. First, the odds are against you that you can escape the alligators. Second, the advantages of getting to the far side are not very apparent.

As I drive through the Delta, I see the clusters of rural houses that we call shotgun shacks: clapboard sides, tin roofs, three rooms, perched on concrete blocks for a foundation; no running water and an outhouse out back; down the road from the "big house" where the white folks live in comfort. This winter, during the rainy season, the creeks overflowed, surrounding these shacks with water and filling the holes in the outhouses so that the refuse floated in the yard. It seemed as if the alligators were right off the edge of the front porch, leaving no way to get to the road. The families huddled inside around a fire until the wood supply gave out, dumping their refuse out the back door, waiting for the water to go down. In the typical family of four, mom and dad use the front room as living room and bedroom, and the kids share the smaller middle room and the bed in it. Clothes are piled in a corner or hung on a nail in the clapboard wall. There is little light, even less heat, with room for only the bed and two straight chairs because part of the room is the hallway back to the kitchen. Life here leaves you growing up with somewhat of a disadvantage. Your adult role models work when they can,

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bringing home four or five thousand dollars a year, go to the rural store to drink beer and wine on Saturday and to Church on Sunday. With no phone or easy transportation, there is little to do, and little hope for a change in fortunes. Expectations are so low that you convince yourself that it is impossible to jump the ditch. Besides, it seems that only white folks can attain the high ground on the other side.

The schools often reinforce this world view, either in nearly all-black public schools (whites having set up their own private academies) or finding out in the First Grade that you are not a Bluebird and being shuffled to the lower Mockingbird track where lessons are boring and repetitive, taught at half-speed so that each year you fall further and further behind. Nobody is teaching you the skills needed to jump the ditch, only those that help you plod through the muck. If you get through to the end, under the new Education Reform, you will be told to jump the alligator ditch (a competency test), or you won't get a diploma. Before facing that hurdle, a majority drop out in many school districts (in one of every four districts), and in some districts over 75% drop out between ninth and twelfth grades. Of those who actually graduate only twenty percent of the black students actually took the college preparatory curriculum. The rest ended up in General Math and Consumer Science or Auto Mechanics and were able to only score a 12 on the ACT. In towns too small to have a fast food restaurant, there is little opportunity for employment after High School for these young people. They go back to the shack they have called home and hope to get some agricultural work like their father before them.

In Mississippi half the students attend schools that are on Probation because they failed the new accreditation standards (typically due to overcrowded classes or teachers uncertified to teach the subject). Some of these districts are on probation because they don't have the financial base to provide an adequate education. Others are in this condition because they just don't care about the students due to racial and economic differences. In some districts the schools are principally seen as a source of employment and job patronage, with little concern for what goes on in the classroom except that the schools' job is to keep the "little beggars" off the streets during the day.

There is a general attitude that the kids are to be forced to put in their time (in school) and to be gotten rid of if they cause trouble. Johnny was a year or two too old for Seventh grade, and six inches taller than

anyone else. Slumped over in the back row of his Social Studies class, he hears the teacher assign the homework for tonight, "read chapter six." Thumbing through his book, and finding that chapter six is thirty pages long, he mutters to himself, "Sh... I can't read that many pages before tomorrow." The girl in the seat in front of him waves her hand and says, "teacher, he said the S word." At which point Johnny is hustled down to the principal's office and given a three day suspension, from which he may or may not ever return. So kids are told to hit the streets when they don't fit in with the preconceived notions about behavior, or when they become frustrated, like Johnny, because they never learned to master the material that they need to advance in school.

There are thousands of dropouts, like Johnny, who come from those shack houses with little sense of self and little opportunity to gain the self-confidence in school, or the expectation that they will ever have a chance to make it over the ditch and escape the alligators. It is like life is in black and white, when the rest of the world has a color TV set. Faced with "rote" teachers in the early grades, they learned little more than to sit down and shut up, hold their water until recess time, and color between the lines. Never mind phonics from teachers whose dialect is so different that nothing makes sense, cursive writing on a grooved desk, or the subtle concept behind dividing fractions by fractions. (By the way, how many of you divided a fraction by a fraction this week?) For many of these students the expectations, both internal and external, are low and life in school seems to have little relation to anything out in the "real" world. Real life may be alcohol and sex before puberty, and violence in the roads. (I once had an eight year old pull a gun on me to protest my telling him to get out and go to school.) We are losing too many of these young people to a life stuck in the muck, unskilled and unable to improve upon the lot into which they were born.

We have got to make school an attractive place for these young people, a place where they find out that they "are somebody," a place where they can begin to dream and have those dreams nurtured. Then we have to drain the swamp, so that there are no ditches left with alligators to scare them out of trying to make the jump across. To accomplish this is a tall order, one which begins outside the classroom in the area of public policy that improves family life, income and housing, and then helps people take control of their lives so that they can make a difference. These kids need to see adults who don't see life as something that happens

to you, but adults who see life as an opportunity to make something happen. This means involving their parents in a meaningful way in the operation of the schools, that empowers communities to strive for better education related to the development of their communities (rather than merely an escape), and that presents hopes and aspirations for all the young people so that they will catch hold of a dream of a better world in the place where they are and want to work to become a part of its creation. Together we can overcome the barriers to a brighter future. Apart we can only slink off into the muck or get eaten by the alligators