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ABSTRACT

The at-risk status of so many American children is not an accident, but rather a direct result of our social and economic history. This document briefly recounts the history of blacks in the United States and draws on the experiences of the author in his capacity as superintendent of an urban school district to substantiate this position. Reverse migration to the South has exacerbated the problems. Today the home, the court systems, and the schools are seeking means of rescuing our youth from a bleak and even violent present. There is no one solution, and educators must avoid the trap of semantic labels. Flexibility is required to save the at-risk children, for their own sakes and for the sake of the country. A list of ten references is included. (Author/JS)

Children at Risk

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Abstract

The at-risk status of so many American children is not an accident, but rather, a direct result of our social and economic history. Reverse migration to the South has exacerbated the problems. Today the home, the court systems, and the schools are seeking means of rescuing our youth from a bleak and even violent present. There is no one solution, and we must avoid the trap of semantic labels. Flexibility is required if we are to save the at-risk children, for their own sakes and for the sake of us all.

Children At-Risk

Because I grew up in the "olden days," I am steeped in some olden days sayings, and one that comes to mind is the jingle, "Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief." Choices we could make: the good ones were there as rewards for excellence and diligence; the bad ones--poor man, beggarman and thief--needed never to happen.

What about today's young people? Do they have these same visions of their future? No doubt there is a whole group who do. But unfortunately, there is a growing number, mostly from the minority segment of our population, who do not. Many of them realistically just forget about the rich man; forget about the doctor, the lawyer, and the Indian chief. But add "murderer, addict, loser" to today's list; that's the vision of the future for the at-risk child.

At-risk? At-risk of what? At-risk of dropping out of school, of being locked in to the circle of impoverished, dependent family life, of teen age pregnancy; at-risk of being peer-pressured into gang-delinquency, drug running, booze and drug addiction. Is there another sordid state conjured up by the term at-risk? Add it to the list, then, for the number of horrors is infinity, and the victims are

first the children, and ultimately all of us--society itself.

In order to understand what has happened, we must take a brief look back into the history of our country's attitude toward children. To quote from Mark Harrison Moore's book entitled From Children to Citizens (1987), "Throughout our history, society has seen children as dependents, not as rights-bearing, responsible adults." Yet he notes a view of ambivalence at present, in our attitude both toward children and toward their parents or surrogates, an uncertainty as to when to hold the child responsible, when to hold the parents responsible, when it is appropriate for society to intervene.

"Interest in children spawned the development of many specialized institutions such as schools, child protection societies, and welfare agencies," he says. As Moore points out, "From a young age, children were valued for their economic contributions. On colonial farms there were a great many household chores that 10-year old children could perform..." Yet in Massachusetts as early as 1647, there were beginnings of public schools. According to Moore, children of that day were "judged incapable of criminal offenses before the age of 7. Between the ages of 7 and 14, they were presumed innocent unless evidence of a criminal

state of mind could be presented. Punishments for crimes were draconian but rarely applied. Public humiliation was the most common sanction." Have we progressed from that devastating attitude?

To return to our historic overview: America experienced one of our waves of immigration--a phenomenon I believe that is entirely unique to us, among all the countries of the world. Five million immigrants entered between 1820 and 1860. These newcomers did not put the stamp of delinquency on the country, but the very stress of their influx had a staggering effect.

But the real problem, one whose effects may plague the country forever, was what was happening in the southern states. The social institution known as slavery has probably inflicted the most devastating blow of all to our country. While factories up North provided some economic relief and even some education for the immigrants, and social and religious institutions pressured industry in an effort to shield the child-workers, no attempt was made to provide education for the slave; there was no intervention in order to protect, let alone educate the child of the slave.

In the post Civil War period, with Emancipation, the

South's whole economy changed. Suddenly the lives of Blacks were transformed from slavery to freedom. Unprepared for their new status, they found themselves adrift in surroundings of economic chaos and personal hostility. In the North, Horace Mann's implementation of the Jeffersonian concept, the common school movement, began to equalize educational opportunities. The South added a bit of its own flavor to the concept: equal, but separate. And, as we know, the emphasis lay on the separate. Equal, over the years, got somehow lessened, and finally, lost.

The descendents of the slaves of America, the next few generations of Southern Blacks, "emancipated" by law, but abused or at the least neglected, by their erstwhile masters/owners, were the forebears of the new "immigration wave," this time an internal one. In the late 1930s and 1940s and 1950's, there was a mass movement of Blacks from the South to the North.

They knew what they were leaving behind--racial bigotry and degradation; they did not know what they were coming into--racial bigotry and degradation. Uneducated and deprived for all those generations, they were instantly ghetto-ized and easily targetted by whites who feared them for their difference and for their competition; they were easily

victimized by the sharpies and con-artists, whites and Blacks alike.

The mass migration to the North has ended, just as the concentration of industrialization in the North has halted. In fact, both trends have, if anything, reversed. Now it is the cities in the South that are becoming the job meccas. Once again, there is movement of the underclasses, now expanded as a group to include Blacks and Hispanics. They have headed, predictably, to the urban centers where a chance for work and rootedness appear as possibilities.

Almost instantly, this newly transplanted group, and more particularly the most vulnerable among them, the children, are in trouble. Once again they are viewed with suspicion, distrust and dislike. Once again they are targets. But this is many decades later, and surely we have learned to anticipate these problems and to cope and even overcome. Or have we?

How have the law protection agencies responded? As Moore (1987) says, "Police departments, probation departments, adjuncts of the court itself, free-standing youth advocacy agencies, special case screening committees made up of representatives of welfare and law enforcement agencies,"

these are the intervention groups that sometimes become advocates for the lucky. Whether or not this was and is an appropriate role for public offices to play, it is a fact that they see no choice but to respond to the urgent signal that came to them for help.

The kind of treatment the youth in trouble receive is mixed. As Donald H. Smith, President of the National Alliance of Black School Educators, Inc., sees it (1984), what is wanted is equity, that is "justice, not sameness. Each person in our system must have an equal right to the total system of basic liberties. Social and economic inequalities must not be allowed to deny equal opportunity for access to the means for social uplift..."

Going on to comment on the schools' response to the particular needs of Black students, Smith's Task Force says, "The standards of quality of education provided for the masses of African Americans today still fail to meet even goals of adequacy, not to mention excellence. Moreover, nearly four centuries of brutality and inequity have left results that can be seen clearly in the lives of African American people. Patterns of gross inequity remain deeply ingrained in National educational and other social institutions--institutions that all citizens normally rely upon for support

and protection." Smith's group believes, "It is not the role of the school to function as a 'melting pot' for the purpose of enforcing cultural sameness. People have a right to their cultural past and to the political and economic freedom and privileges enjoyed by those in the more dominant streams of our society." Smith reminds us that "It took a special amendment to the original Constitution, the Fourteenth, to make Africans citizens. .... [Yet in 1984] more than 30% of African Americans live below the poverty line with nearly 50% of African American children living in poverty. Seventy-five percent of the African American families who live in poverty are headed by females."

We have examined the historic past, and even the immediate past, and the picture has been bleak. Is the present less negative? The New York Times as recently as September and October of 1988 takes a fairly negative view. For example, Lee Daniels, October 5, sees as a trend the loss of minority teachers. Daniels quotes from "The American Teacher 1988: Strengthening the Relationship Between Teachers and Students"(1988)--"Minority groups make up 11% of the teaching force, but 41% of the Black and Hispanic teachers surveyed said they would probably leave teaching in the next five years." Reasons ranged from troubles caused by administrative problems, drug and behavioral problems, to

enticement from industry. Well, what else is new?

Joseph Berger, in the same issue of the New York Times, claims that School Phobia is a problem to be dealt with. Yes, yes, Mr. Berger. That must account for some of our minority dropouts, and we're pleased to see that it is being identified and dealt with, but on a scale of 1-10? Be serious, please, sir.

While I was Superintendent of Schools at Richmond, Virginia, City Schools, I became deeply involved with the plight of the children--my children, as I thought of them--who were daily struggling to stay alive and alert in the hurly-burly world around them. Not only did they require the strength to hold their own, in their homes, on the street, in the schools; often they were leaned on to give support (emotional and sometimes financial) to their families. No time for phobias with these children. Just a desperate need for acceptance, for love, for nurturing, in every sense or the word. For them I wanted more than satisfactory environments and teachers. For them I wanted and tried to assure superior quality throughout.

We've been told that Blacks are the most victimized by Blacks, in an urban setting. Harrell B. Roberts, in the book The Inner World of the Black Juvenile Delinquent (1987), tells us that "Although Blacks comprise approximately 12%

of the U.S. population, they constitute 41% of the persons meeting death by homicide. Most of these victims are males between the ages of 15 and 44, with the younger males being at particularly high risk." He goes on to say, "Black lower class parents do not need this statistical information to realize that they must do all in their power to protect their male children from potential trouble. ... Not only may their sons be victims of crime, but they may also be easily involved in committing crimes. Crime is in the street, and the children are exposed to it constantly."

We know that ghetto dwelling does not automatically result in delinquency. Roberts points out: "Only a small percentage of ghetto youth are arrested and jailed for delinquency.... Moreover, there are many middle-class youth who come from distinctly favorable backgrounds, but also commit antisocial acts (often considered 'just pranks') and usually avoid being punished, almost never going to jail." Further, Roberts says that some claim that the ghetto community somehow consider delinquent activities normal. Forget that. As he says, "Black parents do not condone delinquent behavior...[regardless of] the enormous odds they struggle against. ... Although they cope with ...low-paying jobs, high levels of unemployment, welfare dependency, racism and racial discrimination, vermin and rat infested run-down

neighborhoods, dilapidated dangerous housing, deteriorating public services, poor schools and crime, the majority of families almost miraculously keep their children out of serious trouble...."

I mentioned the dual role some children find themselves called upon to fulfill. The obvious one that leaps to mind is that of the young adolescent female who finds herself a mother before she has ceased to be a child. But the adolescent male also does not escape this problem. When either because of emotional upheavals or because of economic pressures, there is no adult male present in the household, the male youth finds himself in a bind. On the one hand, he has lost the support and identification with his father and resents his mother's attempt to take over this role and to discipline him; on the other hand, he feels her need and finds breaking the mother-hold difficult and painful. Gang membership often provides the substitute answer to fatherlessness.

All these negatives we are sadly familiar with. And yet, there are positives at work all around us. For example we read in City Schools, A Recognition of Progress (1984), the Ford Foundation admonition to "remember that schools 'keep.' That is, they carry on. Each day. schools open,

teachers teach in them, and students learn in them." The Ford Foundation, in this 1984 report, took pains to remind us that desegregation has been a fairly recent event, in the scheme of historic time, and that it was white flight that struck a very real and very telling blow at the stability of the structure of public education. Now, they seem to be saying, given time, we might very well be not only satisfied but perhaps even surprised and pleased by the ultimate outcome. That phrase, "schools keep" is one to hang on to.

I have not dwelt on my experience as Superintendent of the Baltimore City Schools for the obvious reason that my actual presence there began only in August of this year. That does not mean, however, that I have not been studying--doing my homework, as the saying goes--in preparation for tackling the big job of dealing with yet another southern urban school system. My aim as always is for excellence, just as it was in Richmond. Imagine my delight when I found that the Baltimore School System was a recipient of awards for three--not one, not two, but three--high schools. The Ford Foundation saw fit, in 1982 and 1983, to grant us $20,000 for projects as follows: Edmondson High School, to upgrade the curriculum in mathematics, foreign languages, and biology, and to improve

student performance on aptitude tests; Northern High School, for a peer counseling and tutoring program for students from Nothern and its feeder schools; Walbrook Senior High School for a computer-based attendance system, remedial and advanced instruction in mathematics and language arts, and Saturday review classes in aptitude testing taught by volunteer medical students. Talk about pride of belonging? My cup runneth over.

We're not making light of the problems of southern urban schools. Neither, however, are we discouraged nor defeated by the mammoth--let's call them challenges, rather than problems. We agree with the 1988 hot-off-the-press report from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, entitled An Imperiled Generation - Saving Urban Schools, "An urban school will be successful only as teachers, administrators, and community leaders have confidence that all students can succeed." We do not necessarily subscribe to each suggestion the Foundation has made, but we take them seriously enough to want to discuss them and weigh them for possible use or adaptation for our own setting.

One trap we wish to avoid is that of labels. Will our teaching staff bristle at the word "accountability?" Perhaps they will not object to searching for "goals," and then

agreeing on tools and standards of measurement.

Will our administrative board and our community object to "career ladders" and "participatory decision making?" Perhaps in recognizing the need for enhancing the opportunities of the teachers to advance and have input, they will come up with other names and variations more suitable and more acceptable.

I am not suggesting euphemisms, but we must not allow semantics to get in our way. We must each design plans uniquely suitable to our own city; in our case, we would arrive at a Baltimorian plan. The point I am making is that we must remain open and we must continue to search and to be flexible.

No more will we accept humiliation, that ultimate degregation that the forefathers designed as punishment. No more must our children forego the "rich man, doctor, lawyer and Indian Chief" dream. Rather, they must add to that positive end of the jingle, "astronaut, computer whiz, Nobel Prize winner," and on and on. The infinity we referred to in the beginning of our talk, on the negative side of the jingle, must be transferred to the positive side.

Conferences such as this, bringing together fertile minds to share legions of ideas, are certainly an important part of the answer. Whatever suggestions emerge for a "Changing South," whatever "New Policies, Patterns and Programs" result from this remarkable gathering of experts on the issues, we will, I feel confident, leave with renewed fervor for the fray. The Changing South is our new challenge. We accept it with confidence.

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