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It's Time to End the Over-Representation of African-Americans in Special Education

September 01, 2010 by [Eric J. Cooper](#)

We know from decades of research that African-American males are labeled with emotional and behavior disorders and intellectual disabilities at rates that exceed their representation in schools. One often-cited National Academy of Science report from 2002 found that African-American students accounted for 33 percent of students classified as mentally retarded despite being 17 percent of the school-age population.

One reason such patterns have persisted is that the accumulated and widely distributed data on disproportionate special education placement is not driving the right changes in policy or practice – at least not enough to shift the tide that carries so many students toward diminished lives.

As another school year begins, we can and must take steps that can bring the aura of hope and high aspirations that so many of our students share to students whose race has put them on the fast track toward lower expectations and subpar instruction.

For starters, we must overcome the reticence among so many teachers and administrators to discuss race as an issue in terms of stereotyping students and expectations. Until we do this more effectively, many people will continue to see Nature's hand in low test scores of African-American children and children of color.

We must help teachers who feel unprepared to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged students – most of whom are students of color. Classroom behavior is especially challenging for many teachers, and cultural gaps and misunderstanding intensify these challenges. Many teachers perceive special education as the only resource for helping students who don't succeed in their classrooms.

When teachers are trained to use schools and classrooms to promote respect of culture and racial differences as student strengths, they improve student self-worth and motivation. This is the kind of good schooling that can lift students above the limits of low-expectations in the classroom and influence both academic learning and social development.

We know that all of this is possible because we are seeing it happen through the West Metro Education program, a desegregation initiative that buses students from Minneapolis to 11 surrounding school districts. Working with the National Urban Alliance, the initiative has used mentoring, peer coaching, classroom/community projects and other strategies to bridge racial divides and shape instruction. The results have been astounding: Students who were integrated into the suburban schools have tripled the achievement gains of students who were not.

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And when kids aren't playing the academic game well enough to stay with the team, help them get into the game by affirming the struggle they might be having with learning. Affirm those struggles through modeling, acknowledgement and engaging students to hear what they have to say, then reflect their voice in the classroom. All of these steps are essential to a change process that must be propelled by serious effort and passion.

As this school year gets underway, it is important to remind ourselves how blessed we are to have so many skilled and caring teachers who work tirelessly to help students succeed. Let's help them be even more successful by taking to scale the policies and programs – such as mentoring and peer coaching – that can elevate the expectations and achievement of every student. Let's narrow the outlets and widen the opportunities inside their classroom.

America doesn't give up on its people. That is common ground where all can firmly stand.

Eric J. Cooper is president of the National Urban Alliance. He can be reached at www.nuatc.org.

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