

The "P.R.O.P.E.R." Way to Educate Black Students: 25 indicators of School Excellence
(*Editor's Commentary*)

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Ivory A. Toldson *The Journal of Negro Education*

We need to “shift the focus from ‘Why are young Black males failing?’ to ‘Why are schools failing young Black males?’”

That was the tweet I posted in 2014. In response, Cato June, a noted high-school football coach and former professional player, wrote: “Not sure that they are. Kids don’t show up. Schools can’t fail them if they aren’t there.”

Then ensued a Twitter conversation among us and Rhonda Bryant, author of the report, “Uneven Ground: Examining Systemic Inequities That Block College Preparation for African American Boys” (Bryant, 2013). Bryant and I contended that racial inequities in schools result directly in Black boys’ failing to live up to their academic potential. Specifically, we drew from our analyses of the “Civil Rights Data Collection (see ocrdata.ed.gov),” which shows that high schools with the largest percentage of Black students systematically omit advanced math and science classes, use more-punitive disciplinary policies, have higher student-to-counselor ratios, more often have teachers who are not qualified to teach their assigned courses, and more frequently rely on substitute teachers.

But June argued that Black boys need a system of strict accountability, and that making excuses for their failure is, itself, inexcusable. The school has the responsibility to teach the child, he said, and the child has the responsibility to seek education. Inspiring the child to want to learn is not the school’s responsibility. June also cited some common explanations for underachievement: disengaged parents, more interest in video games than in college readiness, and so on.

The exchange reinforced my skepticism of coaches becoming principals of inner city high schools. I am sure Coach Cato’s no nonsense/no excuses attitude works fine for preparing his football team. But I wonder if he would continue the same lines if he showed up to a football game with his team and the new rule was that the home team needs to go 50 yards to score, and the visiting team needs to go 150.

We can’t coerce, intimidate, bully, embarrass or even motivate children to learn in an academically inept learning structure. Coaches are only effective principals when they personally place more value on their ability to create robust learning experiences for their students, and less value on their ability to get defiant students to submit to the status quo.

The special focus of this issue of *The Journal of Negro Education* is “Research Methods, Cultural Narratives and Responsibilities in Education.” This issue is timely because, today, school districts’ perspective on the proper learning environment to Black students is devoid of good research and diminished by an excessive focus on meeting benchmarks established by standardized testing. School districts’ dependency on standardized tests is so pervasive that after I criticize state tests, school leaders often ask me, “If we don’t use state tests, how would we know how a school is doing?”

Based on the research, every school leader should know and improve upon the following information about their school:

1. Average student attendance.
2. The mean GPA of all students.
3. Number of students who participated in competitions, such as science fairs, spelling bees, foreign language and math competition.
4. Suspension rate.
5. Results of student satisfaction surveys.
6. Results of parent satisfaction surveys.
7. Results of curriculum reviews.

8. Teachers' total number of hours in, and content of, professional development.
9. Teacher's credentials and certification.
10. Number and percent of students participating in extracurricular activities.
11. Number and percent of students in honors and AP classes.
12. Dropout rate.
13. Graduation rate.
14. Postsecondary placement.
15. Number and percent of students advancing to 4-year colleges.
16. Frequency of home visits.
17. Frequency of contact with parents.
18. Counselor to student ratio.
19. Teacher to student ratio.
20. Administrative tenure.
21. Number of school-based enrichment programs, such as tutoring, mentoring and college/career fairs.
22. Age and quality of textbooks.
23. Time using technology.
24. Time spent participating in laboratory experiences.
25. Evaluative national assessments (not to be confused with high stakes).

In 2012, along with Dr. Chance Lewis, I published *Challenge the Status Quo* (Toldson & Lewis, 2012). The report provided key information to start a national campaign to support the academic success of Black children. The recommendations were based on research evidence that linked specific characteristics of the school to academic success among Black students. I reiterate and reframe them here, to elucidate the "P.R.O.P.E.R." way to educate Black students.

P—Principals, counselors, and teachers should have mandatory trainings and resources to develop cultural competence, enhance empathy and respect, defense management, and classroom management.

R—Reduce suspensions. Replace rigid focus on discipline with a focus on academics and student agency. Have a clear and transparent suspension policy, with a process for students to appeal.

O—Offer a culturally aligned and academically enriching curriculum that, at a minimum, meets the admissions requirements for the most competitive public university of your state. Schools and their governing school districts should provide a disclosure statement to students' parents and guardians, which specifies any courses required for admissions to the most competitive public universities of the state, which are not available in their curriculum.

P—Parents should have support from the school by way of: (1) information about how to help children learn at home, (2) information on community services to help their child, (3) explanations of classes in terms of course content and learning goals, (4) information about child development, (5) opportunities for parents to volunteer, and (6) updates on student progress between report cards.

E—Eliminate biases, stereotypes, and misinformation from school staff. Schools should operate under the philosophy that all Black students are capable of the highest levels of academic achievement.

R—Regularly monitor collective student progress. Good schools have: a collective GPA of more than 3.0; have near 100 percent of their students involved in an extracurricular activity; have at least 25 percent of their Black students in honors classes or some type of enhanced curriculum; and have less than 6 percent in special education.

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Ivory A. Toldson was appointed by President Obama as the Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). He is currently on leave from his post as professor at Howard University. He continues to serve as editor-in-chief of The Journal of Negro Education.