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Broken kids or broken schools?

The August 9 announcement on the new Edgar Evans Academy for “boys in trouble” is itself troublesome. Our courts concluded that segregated education was always inferior education. From this perspective, the past and present IPS alternative education policy of placing disruptive students in separate programs is questionable.

In the early 1970s, believing the cause of student failure were flaws in the educational system, alternative education meant innovative choices *to* the traditional model. In contrast, since 1986, IPS has created discipline-oriented alternatives for disruptive students designed to respond to so-called flaws within the student which needed rehabilitation. These alternatives *of* the system intend to keep students in school.

Facing unacceptable graduation rates, IPS viewed the failure of students to thrive as a systemic problem and went about restructuring its failing high schools. Now IPS chooses to view the failure of certain elementary children to thrive in terms of disruptive behaviors and opened a discipline school to “turn lives around.” Indeed, with the number of black males in jail, educational change is needed.

However, what is harmful, under almost every circumstance, is segregation. Segregation is particularly insidious when it is based on one’s status as “being in need.” The goals are noble, but misguided because the academy can further weaken these children by stigmatizing them as unfit.

Removing students who have defied social and academic norms, and putting them in uniforms under strict rules and punishment is just a more refined type of apartheid. Evans Academy creates the illusion of change, while actually perpetuating the status quo since it allows IPS to foster a belief that it is the children who must be fixed while its elementary schools remain the same. Criticisms of this broad-based system of exclusion and mis-education through which these children must traverse are ignored.

It is important to examine, within the greater social context, the function of these alternatives in the unequal social formation of a large part of society. With punitive alternatives, deep questions about the political relationships between race, class, culture, gender, poverty and school failure, and the present IPS elementary school system, go unanswered.

Evans Academy would be a good idea if the other IPS alternatives proved it could work. With years of very low graduation rates, obviously these “get tough” programs are unable to keep students in school. And IPS has no numbers to prove otherwise. Nor is there any proof the juvenile center’s “boot camp” New Directions Academy works. Township grad rates are not outstanding; our jails are full.

Is it politically easier for IPS to offer traditional elementary education while shipping away the disruptive than to remake the system? IPS has admitted it was responsible for its own failure

because its high schools are now smaller, more hospitable, inclusive and preventative climates, emphasizing individualization and relationships. What about IPS elementary schools?

IPS students having no choice but to go to high schools coined “dropout factories” implicates the elementary schools that feed these factories. If Jawanza Kunjufu is right about a conspiracy to destroy black boys, why blame the victims? Is the issue turning students or elementary schools around, or both? Indeed, students must be responsible for disruptions, but so must schools.

Black male children recognize the importance of learning, but some are unwilling to assume the submissive posture in rigid schools which routinely deny them a sense of curiosity, autonomy, culture, and self-worth.

Master teachers know that students who are involved in their learning have little interest in chaos. Experimenting with innovations that are appealing and well-suited to individual students, that assume children want to come to school and learn, and simply need the best environment for doing so is just as important as experimenting with “soft jail” alternatives like Evans Academy.

Many non-discipline alternatives of choice show difficult children thrive when given respect and options via personalized learning plans that focus on strengths and interests. Chicago’s Betty Shabazz School, Hank Levin’s accelerated elementary model, and the democratic Albany (NY) Free School are examples.

The 1954 dictum, “separate is inherently unequal,” applies to IPS alternatives. No one was surprised back then African-Americans wanted the same opportunities for their children they saw readily available to the children of the advantaged. If separate is inherently unequal based on race, then it would also be unequal based on a student’s at-risk status.

Why offer families Evans Academy, but not elementary schools with educators and a curriculum equal to the best in the country?

Ultimately, our community needs to examine why certain groups do not have the institutional access to acquire the cultural capital necessary to succeed in the existing IPS elementary schools. And why for the parents of these “boys in trouble,” a school like Evans Academy becomes their only choice.

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