

Give black youth school alternatives

Star editorial writer James Patterson's column on alternative education (April 26th and May 3) raise issues of concern to the Indiana Commission on the Social Status of Black Males.

Social issues facing many young black males make it difficult for them to adapt to traditional learning styles within local school corporations. The commission suggests Indiana pass legislation allowing school corporations to operate Type-I alternative schools, which provide learning alternatives and allows students to choose to attend as opposed to being sent.

According to the 2002 Official Enrollment Reports of the Indianapolis Public Schools, more than 75% of the students enrolled at New Beginnings Alternative High School are African American. This percentage is mirrored in the enrollment numbers of alternative programs and other national urban districts. It is mere coincidence, or is it a sign that the traditional urban schooling approach is not meeting the academic needs of our youth?

The commission recommends the small, proactive, research based alternative public schools of choice be available to all of you.

These programs assume kids want to come to school and learn and that they simply need the best environment to do so. Segregating, stigmatizing and sentencing black youth to transition alternatives because they are failing in the traditional system and because the traditional system is failing them are not the answers.

We also recommend students be allowed to stay and graduate from the schools. Since the schools are small, learning can be personalized; there is no one best way to learn. Students can share a sense of family as a community of learners. Along with traditional testing, alternative assessments such as portfolios, multimedia presentations and graduation by exhibition can be options.

The programs will have teachers who are prepared to teach black male students. Finally, the curriculum should not only transmit the history and values of the dominant culture, but also provide an education that teaches the cultural uniqueness of African and African Americans to this generation. This approach would bring respect to our black youth, many of whom reject the assimilation tendencies of public schools.

Many Indiana African American males are unsuccessful in school. School success is their responsibility. Yet, other societal, family and school related factors contribute to academic failure. Districts are not powerless. They have the ability to change the conditions of their encounters with disruptive youth by changing themselves. If the system changes in the proper ways, it can generate positive changes with students in a way that is favorable to all. Let's create proactive, Type I alternative schools that will provide a better student-school match for all children. There are several local and national models. Indiana's present reactive alternatives that intent to "fix" our black youth and return them to the same traditional settings in which they have failed are not the answer.

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