

# Saving Black Boys

*"You see things and say 'Why?'  
But I dream things that never were, and I say,  
'Why not?'"*

— George Bernard Shaw

**D**efining moments generally do not come at a time of a leader's choosing but in the course of leading. Two early-morning radio programs stand out in my memory as different instances when I suddenly understood how to best explain and frame my professional mission regarding urban public education.

The first epiphany occurred when I was a guest on a live radio talk show that aired during morning drive time. The discussion focused on a recently published investigative report on Title I education in the Columbus, Ohio, Public Schools. As superintendent at the time, I was called to answer questions. Referencing the harsh findings of the report, the radio host suggested surely these must be the worst of times for me.

I told the host: "No, Bob, these are not the worst of times. These are the best of times. The worst of times would be if no one were talking about the challenges of public urban education. These are, in fact, the best of times because everyone is talking about our challenges,

## Unimaginable outcomes for the most vulnerable students require imaginable leadership

problems and possible solutions. These are, in fact, the best of times!"

### Existential Moments

Leaders cannot be fearful of bad news. They must embrace bad news as providing yet another opportunity to support difficult discussions. During that radio show, I came to understand in a different way that the community audits, the frequent investigative reports, the revealing curriculum management audit and the regular and boisterous visitors to school board meetings provided positive leverage for current and desired future work.

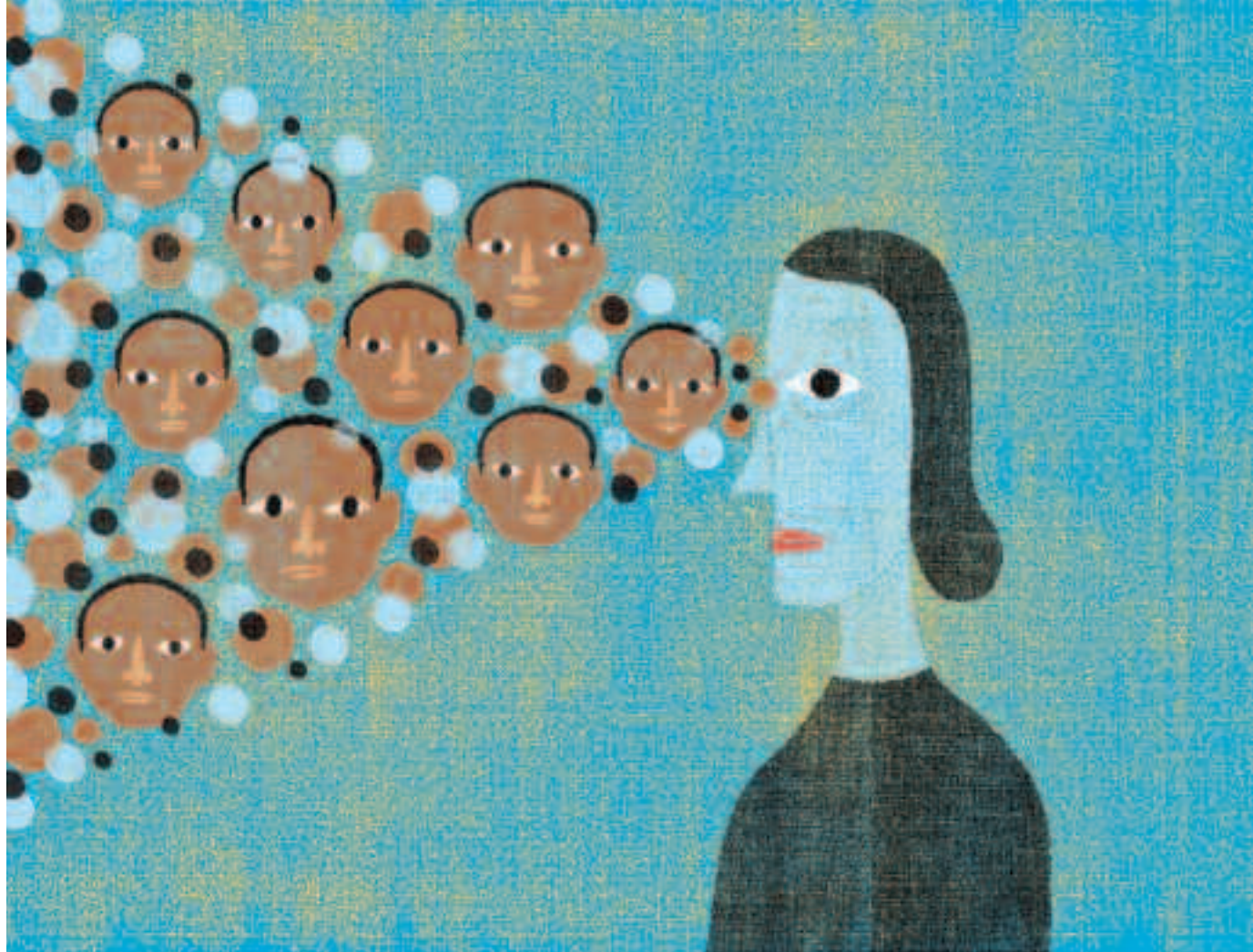
My second existential moment involving morning radio occurred as I awoke one day to a news program on the year 2000 report on juvenile incarceration. I listened carefully as they re-

ported that 60 percent of the incarcerated juveniles under 18 years old were African American and mostly male. Thirteen percent were Hispanic, 8 percent were Asian and 19 percent were white youth.

I found myself doing the math in my head as I listened. Nearly 75 percent of incarcerated youth under 18 years old were African American or Hispanic. Eighty-four percent were youth of color. My head kept spinning with the whole mental picture: African American male students composed about 8.6 percent of the nation's public school enrollment, yet they comprised 60 percent of all incarcerated youth in America! I lay in bed that morning—in February 2001—paralyzed as the reality of this information consumed me.

This overrepresentation of black youth and men in jails was not new information for me. But somehow, on that morning, I heard it in a new way. While nothing in my job description as superintendent mentioned incarcerated black youth, I understood clearly that morning that this terrible statistic—60 percent—was, in fact, in large part the result of what these youth had experienced in schools, and this was all about my job and my leadership.

I was immediately reminded of some-



thing Secretary of State Colin Powell said when he was president of America's Promise during a taped appearance at the AASA National Conference on Education. Powell said, "The education of our children is a matter of life and death."

My mission and moral purposes were redefined that morning, redefined as not simply the three district goals, but as saving the lives of one of our most vulnerable groups of students: black boys.

### A New Vision

If school leaders believe they are in the business of saving lives versus simply managing a big organization involved in teaching and learning and keeping board members happy, they would be totally different leaders.

If leaders believe their job is to save Johnny's life, then under their watch:

- Johnny will not routinely and disproportionately arrive at kindergarten lacking social and educational school readiness.
- Johnny will not routinely and disproportionately attend the schools with the least resources.
- Johnny will not be routinely and disproportionately taught by teachers who are least qualified to create a posi-

tive learning environment for students most vulnerable to school failure.

- Johnny will not routinely and disproportionately be placed in special education classes.
- Johnny will not routinely and disproportionately be suspended, expelled or arrested in schools for discipline acts that principals and staff should manage.
- Johnny will not routinely and disproportionately be assigned to the lowest level of courses.

If school leaders believe their job is to save Johnny's life, leaders will support

he cannot read;

- Johnny's education is a matter of life and death, literally.
- It is about 8-year-old Johnny's ability to read at and above the 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade level in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and it is about what 28-year-old John will not be able to do because he could not read well as a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader.

### Lifesaving Measures

Had Bob, the radio show host, called me to talk about the 2000 juvenile incarceration report, I would have had to admit

## "Leaders cannot be fearful of bad news."

and demand that black boys experience reading success by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and not just because of NCLB targets this year, but because:

- Jails are full of Johnnys who cannot read;
- Johnny will find it impossible to land meaningful work if he cannot read;
- Johnny will be unable to participate fully in civil engagement if he cannot read;
- Johnny will be less likely as a parent to engage his children in reading if

that for black boys these are the worst of times because few policymakers, educators, business and community leaders and school boards talk specifically about this crisis. Even today I do not hear public outrage and outcry about the underlying facts: the overrepresentation of black boys in special education (black male students being three times more likely than white students to be relegated to special education programs) and the high suspension and expulsion rates of black males (being twice and triple

the rates of other students). In some major cities, fewer than 30 percent of African-American boys graduate from high school with their peers.

Given the scope of the challenge facing this vulnerable population, I do not believe that the dreadful trajectory of most black boys will change unless political, educational, community, business and faith leaders make the proper education of these students the litmus test for their personal leadership.

The solution does not require a degree in rocket science. It does take imaginable leadership.

We must create a professional culture that encourages, causes and creates meaningful research, federal, state and local enabling policies, networks of diverse leaders acting on this issue, a sense of urgency and an active movement for a positive future for black boys. To this end, the Schott Foundation published a state report card on the public education of black male students; a resource intended to energize federal, state and local conversations and activism about black male students.

This report card may provide the impetus and courage for current and fu-



ture superintendents to lead from the position of the student group most vulnerable to school failure on the following indicators: reading and math achievement, advanced placement and gifted and talented participation rates, retention rates, discipline referrals, in-school and out-of-school suspension rates, expulsion rates, in-school arrest rates and cohort dropout and gradua-

tion rates. Whatever group of students, by race and gender, has the greatest frequency in these categories should be the accountability litmus test for everyone in each school district.

### Reconsidered Actions

So, after three years of reflection and study on this and other subjects related to school success and failure in public education, what would I now do differently if I were to re-enter the superintendency? What would I recommend to future superintendents about ensuring equity of resources and achievement for America's most vulnerable students?

My strategies would include these:

➤ Create a public broad-based community reciprocal agreement with

the community, the hiring authority (board of education or mayor), chamber of commerce, teacher organization and public policymakers to establish agreed-upon expectations concerning how we will move together on behalf of students. To reach these collaborative goals, I would hire an expert futurist strategy firm. For example, the Global

*continued on page 21*

## Black Boys: The Sad Facts

**T**he most compelling case behind the vulnerability of black boys in school comes from these selected findings collected by the Schott Foundation.

**Expulsions and Suspensions:** Consisting of only 8.6 percent of public-school enrollments, black boys represent 22 percent of students expelled from school and 23 percent of students suspended.

**Dropouts:** Between 25 percent and 30 percent of America's teen-agers fail to graduate from high school with a regular high-school diploma. That figure climbs to over 50 percent for black male students in many U.S. cities.

**Special Education:** Studies have

found that black students nationwide are 2.9 times as likely as whites to be designated as mentally retarded. They also have been found to be 1.9 times as likely to be designated as having an emotional problem and 1.3 times as likely to have a learning disability. Since twice as many black boys are in special education programs as black girls, it is difficult to blame heredity or home environments as the root causes for these figures. In some metropolitan districts, 30 percent of black males are in special education classes, and of the remaining 70 percent, only half or fewer receive diplomas.

**Graduation:** While 61 percent of black females, 80 percent of white

males and 86 percent of white females receive diplomas with their high school cohorts nationally, only 50 percent of black males do so.

**Juvenile Incarceration:** One hundred and five of every 100,000 white males under 18 are incarcerated. That figure is three times as high for black youth at 350 per 100,000. Also, more black males receive the GED in prison than graduate from college.

**Unemployment:** Nearly 25 percent of black youths 16 to 19 were neither employed nor in school, according to the 2000 census, nearly twice the national average for this age group and six times the national unemployment rate.

— Rosa Smith

*continued from page 18*

Business Network can conduct a community future conference to generate the expectations and measurement benchmarks for each stakeholder group and publish semi-annual progress reports to the community.

➤ Secure financial support from the business and philanthropic communities for gathering needed data, establishing reciprocal community and district accountability systems and implementing long-term transparent internal and external communication strategies. Partner with the chamber of commerce or area community foundation and broker with a national funder as a model pilot for imaginable leadership.

➤ Build partnerships across the state to influence state leaders by increasing their understanding of the disparity in students' academic results and secure policy commitments for supporting students most vulnerable to school failure.

➤ Building on NCLB, create and establish an accountability system that requires improvement of the factually determined most vulnerable student group as the litmus test for improvement in all categories. Ask the Education Trust in Washington, D.C., to monitor developments and report results.

➤ Conduct a district policy audit and, based on the findings and recommendations, create school policies that support a focus on the most vulnerable and address academic and equity realities within the district. Hire Phi Delta Kappa in Bloomington, Ind., to conduct a thorough curriculum management audit and make quarterly progress reports to the board and the public.

➤ Conduct a separate disciplinary and special education audit and provide annual reports to the public with a five-year goal to reduce by 50 percent the actual number and need to place black male students in special education classes. Hire the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University to conduct the audit, recommend practices and staff development activities and report semi-annually on the progress of recommendations.

➤ Convene quarterly public meetings to listen to the concerns and recommendations of students. Twice each year listen and talk specifically with black male students.

➤ Conduct a financial audit to determine and report what, where and how resources have been historically spent and implement a student-weighted formula for future allocations. Publish an-

nual "follow the money" reports of school and district spending to parents and public.

➤ Initiate and support an early childhood education business and community engagement effort to implement a phase-in plan for creating a school system that begins at age 3. Secure federal and state grants to support the first years of the project and then place in the district budget.

➤ Use aggressive, progressive and persuasive marketing and communication strategies to engage the public about the report findings, the vulnerable student groups, the manner in which all vulnerable students will benefit when

management and academic systems are improved for the most vulnerable students.

➤ Work with the teachers' organization and agreed-upon leading experts with the goal of having all students reading at or above grade level by grade 3. Develop all teachers to be excellent K-6 reading teachers or adept as reading in the content area instructors.

➤ Develop algebra teachers in Title I-eligible schools using the leadership of Robert Moses of The Algebra Project.

➤ Find, hire, support and promote excellent black, Latino and other male teachers of color.

*continued on page 23*

**Page 21 (must run consecutive with other Sodexo ads)**

**SODEXHO**

**1/2 PAGE ISLAND**

**4 color**

**1/2 rule on base negative FPO**

**POSITION: 2ND OF 3 CONSECUTIVE ADS**

**MUST RUN ON RIGHTHAND PAGES**

# A Latino Perspective: Better Teachers and Administrators

BY FERNANDO R. ELIZONDO

**D**uring a school board meeting last spring in the district where I worked at the time, a board member asked, “How are we going to decrease our students’ achievement gap?”

He raised the question after our district’s newly compiled scores on the state tests and our adequate yearly progress data under No Child Left Behind appeared prominently in the local newspaper. Sound familiar?

As superintendent, I shared what our district was doing to align the curriculum with state standards, how we were now emphasizing more effective classroom use of test data and how we were working to recruit outstanding teacher candidates through a new program while trying to better retain our experienced classroom teachers.

My response was an accurate and a fair assessment of the situation. But as a veteran superintendent, I realize the real solutions to decreasing the achievement gap between children of color and white students is going to take stringent and courageous strategies.

## Two Strategies

The achievement gap among our student subgroups is very real and challenging for most of our nation’s school districts. This is especially true in districts serving the nation’s fastest-growing population: Latino school-age youngsters.

The key to serving these students well is twofold: More bilingual teachers and administrators and a more inclusive and challenging curriculum.

These two basic strategies can positively affect the teaching and learning of Latino children in addressing the linguistic diversity and competencies of English language learners.

First, it is no surprise that teacher qualifications make the greatest positive impact.

But a second critical element for sustained improvement is the assignment of more bilingual educators in policy development positions and high-level administrative roles.

## Teacher Development

The heart of the teacher qualification



*Fernando Elizondo, executive director of the California Latino Superintendents Association, with students*

issue is the recruitment and retention of qualified bilingual teachers. Teachers who deliver both the first language and English as a second language are the centerpiece of the instructional program for Latino children.

Recruitment can start in the early identification of bilingual teachers in our universities and colleges. As superintendents, we should start earlier conversations with those in higher education to identify the best candidates and help us incorporate them into a school district’s classrooms. This can be completed through university service credit requirements or their graduate credentialing programs.

Once identified, the school district may need to provide signing bonuses

result would be a career ladder and a cadre of Latino bilingual educators who also serve as role models for Latino children.

And, certainly, the recruitment of experienced bilingual educators in Mexico, Central and South America and Spain needs to be considered.

## Administrator Cadre

The second issue is the need for a larger share of Latino administrators at all levels. This is one of the major goals of the California Latino Superintendents Association, whose leadership I assumed last fall.

What’s needed is a structured administrator-mentoring program for Latino educators—essentially a career ladder

**“What’s needed is a structured administrator-mentoring program for Latino educators ...”**

for bilingual teachers to commit them for a defined number of years. The school district ought to support the brightest and best bilingual Latino teachers by providing release time for them to complete their state teaching credentials.

The district’s more experienced teachers should have opportunities to work with other district staff members to enrich bilingual instruction. The re-

for talented bilingual educators to move into school and district administration. The research is clear that Latino educators at all levels today—from the classroom through the superintendency—are vastly underrepresented given the growing population of Latino youngsters in many communities.

In California, 7.3 percent of the state’s superintendents are Latino with a 47 percent statewide Latino student

population. Nationally, the disparity is even more dismal with only 1 percent of our nation's superintendents being Latino.

The need for a formalized process that identifies and supports a top cadre of bilingual educators through an enriched mentoring program will result in a pool of ready candidates for administrative positions. This type of program would promote formalized professional opportunities through the different career chairs.

Our association launched one such program in the past year. The goal is to create a pool of qualified administrators who are grounded in strong bilingual and language acquisition instructional strategies. These Latino educators then would be ready to fill important policy positions, while serving as important role models for Latino children.

### **Rigorous Coursework**

Better representation of well-trained Latino teachers and administrators in K-12 education alone cannot close the gap in achievement between Latino students and others. All students need access to a strong challenging curriculum that starts at the elementary grades and continues through high school. Such a curriculum provides the building blocks for more Latino students to succeed in gatekeeper courses such as algebra and the sciences. National data indicate Latino students are significantly underrepresented in high-level courses required today for admission to colleges and universities.

These strategies will take courage and passion. Yet failure to do so will only serve to continue that never-ending dialogue about equality and equity without really making much impact on the students with the greatest needs in our elementary and secondary school classrooms. ■

Fernando Elizondo, who retired last year after 14 years in the superintendency, is executive director of the California Latino Superintendents Association, 19635 Redding Drive, Salinas, CA 93908. E-mail: trinityotr@aol.com

*continued from page 21*

### **Building Trust**

The superintendent has a special role in all of this by using the above analysis to create a "can-do" culture, organizational capacity and will for achieving a continuous and significant improved academic performance by black boys. The top leaders must build hope, trust and confidence in the district and in the leadership by making themselves available to listen to the concerns of black male students and their parents. This relationship must be nurtured with sustained attention and care.

The superintendent must lead from

an understanding that education is a matter of life and death and that school leaders are in the life-saving business.

Finally, the superintendent must try to develop a governing board that embraces its role as one of lifesavers and to help the board define its role to evaluate progress and increase public support for the most vulnerable students. Failing that, the superintendent may need to find another place to do this life-saving work.

These are unimaginable times for about 60 percent of black boys who fail to graduate from high school. Their current realities scream out for imagined, skillful, committed and courageous

*continued on page 25*

Page 23

SODEXHO

1/2 PAGE ISLAND

4 color

1/2 rule on base negative FPO

POSITION: 1ST OF 3 CONSECUTIVE  
ADS

MUST RUN ON RIGHTHAND PAGES

# A Foundation's Plan for Black Boys

**O**ne reason I was persuaded to join the Schott Foundation for Public Education team in 2001 was the board's commitment to address the most vulnerable students in public education and make key decisions based on research and evaluation and its promise to support me in doing something I always had dreamed of doing for students.

At Schott, we have begun promising work on behalf of black boys and other vulnerable students. The



Rosa Smith

school-related data we have collected on black boys is shocking. At the same time, it provides enormous opportunity to generate a revolutionary response to this largely ignored American tragedy.

Through our work on behalf of black boys, Schott seeks to support, encourage and imagine the best strategies and possible policies to help superintendents, educators at other levels, parents, civic leaders and others who want to redirect the school success trajectory for black boys but feel overwhelmed by the scope of the problem.

To this end, Schott seeks to:

- Support public policies that make school success possible and probable for students who are poor;
- Support public policy for equitable funding of public education to ensure properly resourced schools: quality teachers, materials, staff development, facilities and accountability systems;
- Support public policy for universally accessible high quality early childhood education for 3- to 5-year-olds to enable poor children to arrive at kindergarten positioned for school success;
- Support the development of representative public policy leaders committed to influencing policy for vulnerable children and families;
- Raise awareness and support

strategies to redirect the K-12 public school achievement trajectory of black boys and other vulnerable students;

- Tell the truth in ways that leverages the work of boards of education, superintendents, principals and teachers and the activism of parent and community leaders; and

- Advocate for great public schools for every child every day and everywhere.

— Rosa Smith

*continued from page 23*

leaders—often found at the school level but not yet found often enough at the district and board leadership levels.

School success for black male students and other students most vulnerable to school failure depends on leaders willing to distance themselves from business as usual by thinking differently, talking differently and behaving differently. For these students, it is a matter of life and death. ■

Rosa Smith, a former superintendent, is president of The Schott Foundation for Public Education, 678 Massachusetts Ave., Suite 301, Cambridge, MA 02139. E-mail: [rs@schottfoundation.org](mailto:rs@schottfoundation.org).

Page 25

SODEXHO

1/2 PAGE ISLAND

4 color

1/2 rule on base negative FPO

POSITION: 3RD OF 3 CONSECUTIVE ADS

MUST RUN ON RIGHTHAND PAGES