



“Leading from the Black”: How Black Women Lead Even When Ignored
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Black Women and Girls in Education

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Education is a civil right. Even as we to acknowledge and honor the progress we have made as a country since *Brown v. Board* and since the origination of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), we are not where we should be --- by far. It is true that as a result of the passage of the reauthorized ESEA bill – *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, that today, more students than ever should be taught to college- and career-ready standards. Moreover, upon leaving the Obama Administration, dropout rates were at historic lows and the high school graduation rate was at an all-time high – at 82 percent. And, since 2008, a million more black and Hispanic students have enrolled in college. For Black women and girls, the good news is that despite the odds, Black women still graduate with degrees in higher education at a higher rate than all their counterparts, including White women, when compared to those in their same demographic. In fact, Black women earned 67 percent of the associates degrees and 65 percent of the bachelor’s degrees among Black students.¹ Furthermore, when Black girls are provided opportunities, they do enroll in STEM fields, and even exceed their male counterparts in degrees earned.²

While these are laudable gains, they can and should be better and do not make up for the continued lag in educational attainment when compared to the overall population.. The status of educational opportunity for Black students continues to lag their peers in almost every indicator of school achievement. Within this same

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2016* (NCES 2016-007), [Degrees Awarded](#).

² Black women have a higher percentage of degrees earned than Black men with 10.6 percent versus 8.7 percent respectively for U.S citizens. See U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall 2009 through Fall 2014, Completions component. (This table was prepared November 2015.)

demographic, the status of Black women and girls in education is particularly challenging and inequities and stereotypes continue to plague their ability to fully progress in the American educational system.

Currently, the majority of Black students attend public schools (approximately 15.6 percent of public school students are Black).³ Moreover, almost half of Black and Latino public school students disproportionately attend schools with high concentrations of poverty.⁴ Considerable evidence shows that poor and minority students are disproportionately concentrated in high-poverty schools. These schools with higher proportions of students from low-income families have higher numbers of inexperienced teachers in the classroom.⁵ And, within the schools, almost 40 percent of black students attended highly segregated schools, (i.e. 90-100 percent minority).⁶

From the beginning, before they even get to kindergarten, Black women face barriers in education as young black girls. Originally revealed in the 2011-12 Civil Rights Data Collection, and reaffirmed in the 2013-14 collection, Black preschool children are 3.6 times more likely to be suspended than are white preschool students.⁷ For Black girls, while they represent 20% of female preschool enrollment, they are 54% of female preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions.⁸ In kindergarten through the 12th grade, the data reveals that Black students are 3.8 times more likely to be suspended than are white students and nearly twice as likely to be expelled—kicked out of school with no educational services—as are white students.⁹ Contributing to this disproportionate and disturbing phenomenon, is the existence of law enforcement in schools. We know that 1.6 million students have no counselors, yet have a law enforcement officer in their school. The data reveals that Black students are more likely to be disciplined through law enforcement with Black students 2.3 times as likely to receive a referral to law enforcement or be subject to a school-related arrest as white students.¹⁰ Further, “literature suggests that Black girls face higher risks of suspension and expulsion for subjective behavioral infractions than their peers.”¹¹

³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education," 1995-96 through 2013-14; and National Elementary and Secondary Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity Projection Model, 1972 through 2025. (This table was prepared January 2016.)

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. (2014). *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 216.6. Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_216.60.asp?current=yes

⁵ Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls, A Call to Action for Educational Equity (2014), available at http://nwc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/unlocking_opportunity_for_african_american_girls_report.pdf

⁶ Clotfelter, C.T. (2004). *After Brown*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; National Center for Education Statistics (2014). *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 216.5.

⁷ Civil Rights Data Collection, U.S. Dep't of Educ. Office for Civil Rights, A First Look, June 2016, available at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ See also Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected (2015), available at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f20d90e4b0b80451158d8c/t/54d2d22ae4b00c506cffe978/1423102506084/BlackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf

¹¹ *Id.*

As this country continues to deal with the reality of an Administration that is hostile to public education, the Black community must continue to demand accountability by the federal, state and local governments that are responsible for ensuring quality and equitable public educational opportunities for our children. The first step to providing equality of educational opportunity MUST be to keep Black children learning in the classroom – not in the jail cells. The flexibility given to the States under ESSA is only beneficial if the States are held accountable for the equitable education of all children. Transparency of the data is critical in this effort and support for the investigatory and enforcement authority of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights is fundamental to this process.

Detractors of the public education system claim that money isn’t everything and have used this as an excuse to never fully fund the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and provide the necessary resources for all children to achieve. When children, particularly Black children, are forced to work at a deficit, disproportionately disciplined and removed from school, denied experienced and quality teachers and ultimately the ability to matriculate to institutions of higher learning, all should be ashamed. Children are our future and deserving of the equitable right to resources allocated through the federal, state and local level. Those extra dollars could be the difference between providing more culturally competent, experienced and qualified teachers in the classroom that helps a Black female student stay in school or out of trouble. Those extra resources could mean a school can offer AP Physics and expand that same student’s horizons to a career in STEM fields. Or, those resources could be the difference between a guidance school counselor encouraging a student to attend college versus a school law enforcement officer putting her on a path through the school to prison pipeline. Yes, money and resources do matter. This is an undeniable truth that reveals itself every day in our educational system. Removing limited resources from schools that fund the majority of students in this country is setting this entire nation up for failure. Education is the foundation for advancement in this nation and Black women and girls have overcome too many barriers to allow the clock to turn back now.

With the leadership of the Black Caucus on Women and Girls and with the continued support of organizations like the African American Policy Forum, we must prioritize educational opportunities for our children. Below are some suggested legislative recommendations:

Recommendations

1. Fully support the public education system where most Black girls are educated. This includes fully funding ESSA, particularly Title I that supports schools with a high proportion of low-income students and keeping the resources in the public education system,
2. Require the development of robust protocols that ensure that school personnel enforce all students’ rights to learn in an environment free of discriminatory discipline polices, sexual harassment and bullying,

3. Continue to fully support and encourage the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights to investigate the extent to which school discipline policies disproportionately impact girls of color and conduct compliance reviews of school disciplinary practices that specifically involve the intersection of race and gender discrimination or stereotypes, implicating both Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972.¹²
4. Fully support annual data collection and reporting of educational data, such as the Civil Rights Data Collection, and urge the U.S. Department of Education and other information gathering institutions to take the necessary steps to refine statistical reporting on disciplinary matters while disaggregating achievement data along racial and gender lines.
5. Continue racial and socioeconomic diversity and integration efforts through support of federally and locally driven strategies,
6. Improve STEM opportunities and achievement for Black girls,
7. Increase the maximum Pell Grant award to support higher education degrees for Black women and girls.

¹² Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls, A Call to Action for Educational Equity (2014), p. 39. Available at http://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/unlocking_opportunity_for_african_american_girls_report.pdf