



Improving Your Child's Education

A Guide for African American Parents



An informed and engaged parent is a powerful parent

All children are entitled to a solid education in the United States. There's a good reason for this: For generations, education has been the most reliable path to a better life. A good education offers a better quality of life, including access to good jobs and careers. Getting a good education is even more important today than in the past as more and more opportunities require strong reading and math skills. Ensuring that every child gets a solid education will go a long way toward fulfilling America's promise of equal opportunity for all.

The African-American community has long recognized the central importance of education. That's why African Americans have fought so hard for educational opportunity throughout this country's history. More than 50 years ago, African Americans won the right to equal access in the public schools. But the struggle for educational excellence and equity did not end with the victory in *Brown v. Board of Education*. There is still a lot of work to be done to ensure that African-American children get the best education from our public schools. Schools serving African-American children often lack the money, qualified teachers, textbooks, and other instructional materials needed to serve their



students. Even when African-American students attend “better” schools, they often are not given the best teachers, not assigned to the most challenging courses and not educated to their full potential.

To make sure African-American children get the education they need and deserve, parents must get more involved. You have the right, indeed the responsibility, to go to your child’s school and ask questions — schools are public institutions and belong to us all. In this guide, we offer a number of suggestions to help you better advocate for the education of your children. We also offer information that can be turned into powerful tools for you to exercise your rights as an involved African-American parent.

High expectations for African-American youth: more than high school

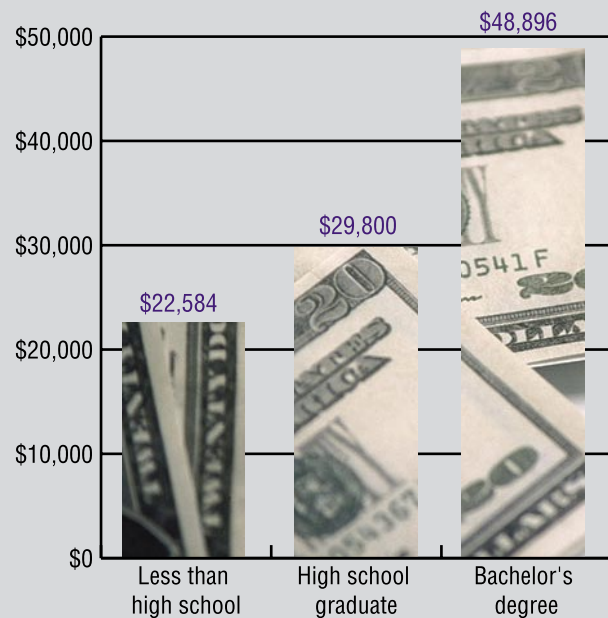
More education means more choices in work and in life. But too many African Americans are denied the full opportunities of American society because they lack an adequate education.

In today’s economy, a high school degree is no longer good enough. Yes, high school graduates have an edge in the job market over those who dropped out before graduation. But adults with only a high school diploma are twice as likely to be unemployed as those with a college degree. And unemployment is not the only problem: Jobs for people who did not go to college pay less than they used to. Young adults with a high school diploma may earn close to \$2,000 more annually than their peers who left high school early. But those with just a high school diploma earn nearly \$20,000 less per year than those with a four-year college degree.¹ Over a working lifetime, these dollars really add up. The first graph on this page shows the huge disparities in earnings between young adult workers who complete college and those who do not.



More Education = More Money

Annual earnings of adults 25 years and over by education level, 2002

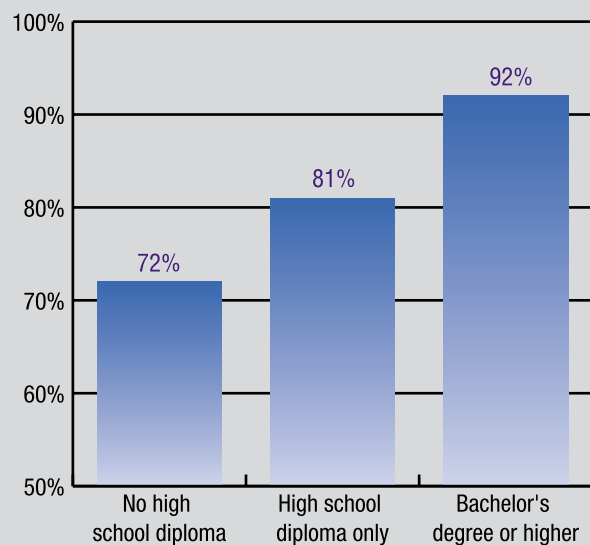


Source: Bureau of the Census; Bureau of Labor Statistics



More Education = Better Health Coverage

Percent of the population with health insurance for the entire year by education level, 2002



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2002; Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 2003. www.census.gov

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March 2002.

If your children do not get a college education, they will have a hard time finding jobs that pay a living wage or even provide benefits like health insurance, as shown in the second graph. And their jobs will be less secure.

Clearly, the more education your children get, the more options they will have in life. But while more and more young Americans overall are going to college, the percentage of African-American high school graduates continuing their education has increased only 11 percent in 30 years. Only about one-half of African Americans who graduate from high school go to college, and fewer than half of these students earn a degree.² This is a serious problem because this means fewer opportunities in the future for the African-American community.

We must educate African-American students at high levels so they can get more access to the best jobs. Consider this: Only 7 percent of science and engineering professionals are African American, while more than 75 percent are White.³

We can change these patterns. African-American parents must instill in their children the understanding that without a college degree they will not enjoy the same quality of life or be able to successfully compete with those who have one. And African-American parents must demand that schools prepare their children to succeed in college once they get there.

Data on African-American education⁴

Academic achievement for

African Americans is in crisis. The system has left most black students behind. This is not just a problem for the African-American community; it is a problem for the nation, and we must take action to change it.

In this country, academic achievement gaps exist among different groups of children. One important reason for these gaps is that not all students in American schools receive their fair share of public education's resources. The result for African-American students is that in all academic areas, their performance lags behind their White peers.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress—the nation's report card—shows that 61 percent of African-American 4th graders have not even been taught to a basic level in reading and 61 percent of African-American 8th graders do not meet basic levels in math performance. By age 17, African-American students have math and reading skills that are virtually the same as those of 13-year-old White students.⁵

African-American students receive fewer opportunities to learn

We need to be very clear that this achievement gap did not happen because African American students can't learn to the same levels as others. It happened because right now, African-American students get less of everything research shows is vital to learning: They get fewer qualified teachers, weaker curricula, and less money for their schools. As parents, you need to fight for your children to get what they deserve. A new federal law called the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) sets the goal for all students, including African-American students, to meet state standards in mathematics and reading by the year 2014. It also gives parents tools to monitor their



² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, various years; Berkner, He, Cataldi, *Descriptive Summary of 1995-96 Beginning Postsecondary Students: Six Years Later*, U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2002.

³ BEST: Building Engineering and Science Talent: <http://www.bestworkforce.org/>

⁴ For more information on data on African American education you can download our report and power point presentation on *African American Achievement in America*: http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/9AB4AC88-7301-43FF-81A3-EB94807B917F/0/AfAmer_Achievement.pdf and <http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/47501795-973A-490A-9345-A03110A9651E/0/AchievementAfricanAmericanveryfinal.ppt>

⁵ USDOE, NCES, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

school's performance and get involved in achievement efforts.

Teacher quality⁶

The evidence on teacher quality is clear: Good teachers help students make enormous achievement gains. In fact, one respected researcher has concluded that if we could provide five strong teachers in a row to our low-income students, we could catch these students up on reading and math tests.

The No Child Left Behind Act requires schools to take steps to make sure that all students are taught by qualified teachers and that all students get their fair share of experienced teachers. It also gives parents the right to know the qualifications of their child's teachers.

Ask your school's principal about the qualifications of your child's teacher and the teachers in the school. Schools have to notify you if your child is taught by an unqualified teacher for four weeks or more in a row. Find out what standards your state uses to decide if teachers are qualified. Most important, ask what's being done to help your schools get the teachers they need. This information may be difficult to get, but it is very important, so don't give up. Without pressure from parents and community members, some students will never get access to the best teachers.

Challenging curriculum and courses⁷

To be well prepared either for college or work, students need to be challenged with a rigorous curriculum from the first day of school. Unfortunately, too many

African-American students are put in less challenging classes where they don't develop the skills they need to succeed after high school, regardless of their goals for the future. For example, only 32 percent of African-American students complete advanced math courses in high school, compared with 47 percent of White students and 69 percent of Asian students.⁸

And because more and more jobs require a strong background in math, African-American students who do not take these courses in high school will not have access to the best jobs once they graduate.

The best way to prepare African-American students is to make sure they get a strong high school education that includes high-level math and science classes. Studies have shown that when students are placed in challenging classes in middle and high school, they learn more and fail less often. Even the students who haven't done well in school in the past do better when they are put in the tougher courses.

For instance, Algebra II is a very strong predictor of whether African-American students will succeed in college or not. That is why we must make sure ALL African-American students take Algebra II. Taking this course can help guarantee success beyond college; researchers have found a strong relationship between Algebra II and later earnings.

There are many ways to find out if your children have access to the classes they will need to succeed. Do all students have Algebra I by 9th grade? Are students assigned to a curriculum that prepares them for college or other opportunities after high school? Are there Advanced Placement (AP)



⁶ For more information on teacher quality you can download our report *The Real Value of Teachers*: <http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/5704CBA6-CE12-46D0-A852-D2E2B4638885/0/Spring04.pdf>

⁷ For more information on challenging curriculum and courses you can download our report *A New Core Curriculum for All*: http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/26923A64-4266-444B-99ED-2A6D5F14061F/0/k16_winter2003.pdf

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics: *The Condition of Education 2004*.

courses in the high school, and are they available to all students? Make sure your children are in courses that challenge them to do their best.

Funding⁹

Most states give less money to the schools educating the highest proportion of low income students and students of color. Nationally, schools with the most minority students receive, on average, \$797 less per student in state and local money than the schools with the fewest. That's not fair. As we work to make sure all children meet high standards, it will be important to make sure all schools have the resources they need to make this goal a reality.

What African-American parents can do

African-American parents can do a lot to help their own child's performance as well as working with teachers, administrators and other parents to help improve their child's school. First, African-American parents need to know what their rights are regarding their child's education. But there are other things that they can do at home to help their child succeed.

Know your rights¹⁰

There's no question that parents can be an important force in accelerating school improvement. The federal law called No Child Left Behind can help African-

American parents become stronger advocates, but the law won't meet its full potential for improving schools without parent and community groups organizing and pushing to make sure that policies are implemented according to the intent of the law. When African-American parents combine facts with their passion to improve their child's education, they become a powerful force.

No Child Left Behind provides data that African-American parents can use to evaluate the academic progress of their children. Each school district is required to develop an effective process for encouraging parental involvement.

Using No Child Left Behind to help your child:

This powerful new law guarantees many rights to African-American parents, including:

1. Clear, honest information about your child and your child's school, district and state:

- You have the right to know how your child is performing in mathematics and reading/language arts, and any specific needs your child may have.
- You have the right to know how your school is doing overall in comparison to the state academic standards and whether it is meeting annual state goals for student learning, called "Adequate Yearly Progress" or AYP.
- You have the right to information about your school's performance with groups of students, including African-American students. If any of these groups is not making Adequate Yearly Progress, the school must focus on making sure they will.
- You have the right to know if your child is being taught by a teacher who is not fully qualified. Do not hesitate to ask your school principal about the qualifications of your child's teachers.

2. Options to obtain better educational opportunities or services for your child:

- NCLB provides funds for some students to transfer to higher-performing schools or get tutoring to raise their academic achievement. Ask your school principal whether NCLB gives your child the right to transfer or receive after-school tutoring. Remember: Parents do not have to pay for this service – the school district receives federal funds for this purpose.
- If you ask, the school must have regular meetings with you to discuss your concerns about your child's education.

Remember, when parents are involved in the education of their children, children do better in school. Experience shows that most school systems and schools won't change the way they do business without outside help and pressure. No Child Left Behind provides some leverage for parents and advocates. Schools and school districts benefit when parents are informed advocates.

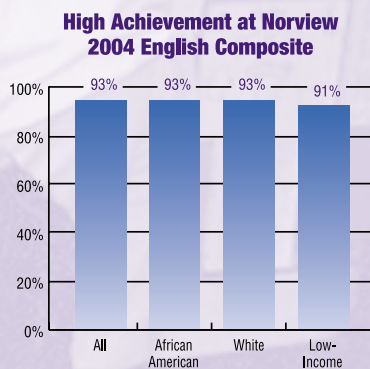
⁹ For more information on funding you can download our report The Funding Gap: <http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/30B3C1B3-3DA6-4809-AFB9-2DAACF11CF88/0/funding2004.pdf>

¹⁰ For more information on NCLB you can download our community guide: <http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/12E942C4-B544-438A-B4E4-9FCD97B86921/0/userguidebw1.pdf>

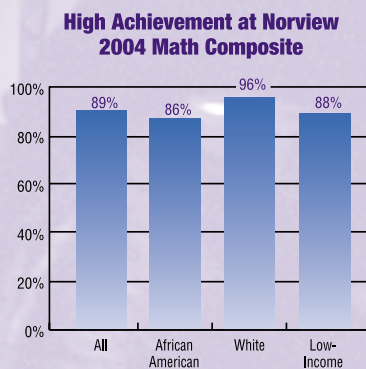
African-American children rise to the challenge when it's presented to them

We mentioned that the education of African Americans in this country is in a crisis. Fortunately, we also know that African-American students will perform at high levels when they receive their fair share of opportunities. There are hundreds of schools all around the nation that have a majority of African-American students, are located in poor neighborhoods, and are outperforming most of the schools in their state. Entire school districts have demonstrated that they can educate African-American students.

A good example is Norview High School in Norfolk, Virginia, where 67 percent of students are African American and about half come from poor families. Educators at Norview have narrowed the gap between African-American and White students in English and math, and most of their students meet state standards for proficiency as the following graphs show:



Source: Virginia Department of Education, <http://www.pen.k12.va.us>



Source: Virginia Department of Education, <http://www.pen.k12.va.us>

It wasn't always this way. In the 1990s, Norview was one of the lowest-performing schools in the city of Norfolk. Educators at Norview decided to turn that around. They set high expectations for all students. Teachers in individual departments like social studies and science work together to plan their assignments. They test students regularly and use that information to uncover which students are struggling and need extra assistance in the classroom. Students who need extra help get it, including after-school and weekend tutoring.

Entire states also are doing solid job educating their African-American children, and in particular low-income African-American students, proving again that poor and minority students can achieve at high levels.

In Delaware, African-American fourth-graders' performance on a key national reading test (NAEP) jumped by 27 points between 1998 and 2003 – roughly equivalent to three years' worth of learning. At the same time, the state narrowed the gap between White and poor African-American students by 12 points.

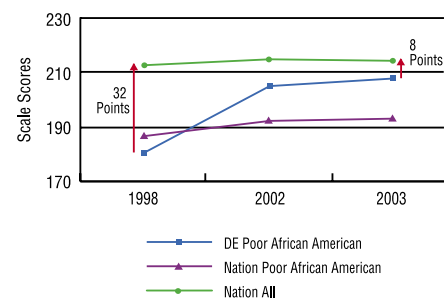
We know African-American students can achieve at high levels; plenty of examples all around the nation prove it. As an African-American parent, you must get involved to make sure your children receive the right opportunities to make this possible.

Understanding the facts: Basics of data for parents

As you can see from the NCLB table on page 5, schools will produce lots of data that provides facts about school performance. Understanding how well students are learning is an important part of being able to help your school become better. But it is only part of the picture. African-American parents need to know whether their children are getting enough help and support from their school. The first thing we need to emphasize is that you should not be intimidated by data. Data is just a fancy word for "information." You do not have to be a statistician or a math expert to understand your school's data. Most of it is very simple and easy to comprehend.

The federal law provides a lot of the basic information, but it is not all of the data

Delaware Raising achievement, narrowing gaps NAEP reading 4th



Source: USDOE, NCES, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

you'll need. You also need to know whether:

- African-American students are being placed in the high-level classes that will help them develop the skills they need.
- African-American students are being disproportionately suspended or placed in special-education programs.
- Your district is receiving its fair share of education dollars.
- Other schools in your area are succeeding with students like yours.

A clear, accurate, and thorough picture, one based on the data, is the only way to communicate the truth about our schools, the truth about who's learning—and who's not being given the opportunity to learn. Knowing the truth is the only way we can begin to improve. This work won't be easy, but it needs to be done. African-American children deserve good schools.

The facts you uncover may be difficult, even painful, for people to hear. It may reveal significant differences in achievement and opportunity between students of different races and income levels. It may challenge people's long-held notions about what's going on in their schools, and force people to recognize and admit that sometimes schools have not served African-American students very well. It may even lead some people, those who haven't heard all the facts, to incorrectly place the responsibility for the achievement gap on low-income and minority students, rather than on the schools and districts that have failed to give them what

they need to be successful. But until your community confronts and understands these facts, you cannot move forward and improve your schools.

This task is doable

Schools have it in their power to educate all children to high standards, and it is their responsibility to do so. Indeed, every day a large number of schools in the United States prove that this can be done. It takes hard work, focus and dedication, but schools that have persistent achievement gaps can and must change their practices.

If you don't think your school is doing enough for African-American students, this guide has described things you can do, beginning with examining the data. Armed with the facts,

African-American parents and schools can work together to:

- Change attitudes about why some children are not meeting standards;
- Change policies to make sure that all school systems are 100% focused on getting 100% of their students to high standards; and
- Change practices within schools to make sure that all African-American children are given a fair opportunity to learn.

Most institutions are reluctant to change on their own. But public schools are *your* schools. African-American parents, community leaders and *you* have the power to change them.

Glossary

Achievement gap— The difference in school achievement between different groups of students, such as racial/ethnic groups, family income levels, or special needs.

Advanced placement (AP®) courses— College-level courses designed by the College Board and offered in high schools. If students do well on the AP test, they can earn college credits and save time and money when they get to college.

AYP/Adequate Yearly Progress— A signaling system to tell whether schools are on-track to teach all students what they need to know in each school year.

College-Prep curriculum— The sequence of challenging courses that prepares students for college after high school.

Curriculum— The subject matter, including lessons, units, tests and assignments that teachers cover with students over a school year.

Data— Facts, usually represented by numbers; information.

Opportunity gap— Differences in educational resources available to different schools and students, especially such resources as, qualified teachers, curriculum and money.

State standards— What each state expects students to learn and be able to do at each grade level in the core content areas.

What parents can do

Helping your child

- Talk to your child. Communication is important to understand what your child has to say about his or her education, teacher, homework, and school and to show that his or her education is important.
- Monitor your child's homework. As a parent you do not necessarily have to understand or be able to explain all the assignments that your children receive, but you can monitor your child to make sure they are really working and understanding the homework.
- Look for the following warning signs in homework assignments that might indicate that your child is not being challenged in school: Your child has read few books in his or her English class. Your child is in 8th grade and the major project is to do a collage for class. Your child finishes his or her homework very quickly.
- Read to your child or have your child read to you.
- Know your child's teachers and find out their qualifications and experience.
- Know what is expected of your child in each class and whether your child is meeting these expectations. Become familiar with your child's schedule, know and understand the course requirements necessary to advance to the next grade level and to graduation, if applicable.
- Make sure your children are in the most challenging classes that will prepare them to succeed in college and work.
- Ask for or acquire on your own a copy of the state academic standards for each subject, use them to make sure you know what your child is expected to learn in school.
- Ask for a syllabus or outline of the work your child will receive during the year.

Work with other parents to help your child's school

- There is power in numbers. Talk to other parents about the education your children are receiving. Exchange ideas, information, and concerns about your schools.
- Find out how students are placed in certain classes and work toward getting all African-American students placed in high-level classes.
- Find out how the district assigns teachers and work toward making sure all teachers are highly qualified. Ask the school superintendent and school board members what's being done to get your school more qualified and experienced teachers.
- Use data, such as test score results, to understand how well your schools are performing with African-American students.
- Ask to see school improvement plans. Is the school district doing enough to help your schools improve achievement? You have the right to sit at the decision-making table; ask to be one of the parent representatives on the school-improvement team.

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About The Education Trust



The Education Trust, Inc., was created to promote high academic achievement for all students, at all levels—kindergarten through college. While we know that all schools and colleges could better serve their students, our work focuses on the schools and colleges most often left behind in plans to improve education: those serving African American, Latino, Native American, and low-income students.

The Education Trust works side-by-side with policy makers, parents, education professionals, community and business leaders—in cities and towns across the country—who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. We also bring lessons learned in local communities back to Washington to help inform national policy debates.

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