



Academic Equity: African-American Youth in Texas Public Schools

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by

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This past week Representative Paul Sadler, Co-chair of the Legislature's Interim Committee on School Finance, stated that he thinks educational adequacy of Texas Public Schools is defined by the state curriculum (TEKS) and state tests (TAAS/soon-to-be TAKS).

For many, an adequate education means academic equity and excellence. For African-American students in Texas, state curriculum and tests fail to provide equity or excellence.

Texas Public Schools are failing many African-American students. While there are broad performance gaps between all student groups in Texas, African-American students have the lowest scores on TAAS and tests of college readiness. NAEP tests reveal the wide and growing performance gaps between African-American, Hispanic, and White students. African-American students are disproportionately represented in special education programs, school suspensions, as high school dropout counts, and as college non-completers in Texas [See report: *African-American Students: Texas Public School Facts*].

The under-performance of African-American students should be directly attributed to educational opportunity and academic curriculum. The evidence is clear. African-American students elect to take fewer and less advanced academic courses than taken by White and Hispanic students in Texas Public Schools.

Classroom instruction for African-American students is different from instruction offered in classrooms predominantly populated by white students. Correlations between TAAS scores and school grades reveal the disparity between school expectations for White and African-American students; grade inflation in Texas Public Schools is almost twice as high for African-American than for their White counterparts [Citation: *Comprehensive Biennial Report on Texas Public Schools, 1998 & 2000*, Texas Education Agency].

When African-American and White students take the same core courses in Texas High Schools, African-American students post significantly lower scores [Citation: *ACT State Profiles*]. Courses in high schools of Texas vary in academic quality, according to research conducted by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and African-American and Hispanic students are academically less well-prepared for college than are other racial/ethnic groups taking the same curriculum [Citation: *Relationship of the Texas High School Curriculum to College Readiness* by Omar Lopez, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 1999].

African-American students in Texas are more likely than White students to be taught by teachers who lack a major or minor in the field they teach and who are less effective teachers.

Over the past several decades, the Texas Legislature has sought to develop educational equity primarily through school finance systems, attempting to equalize financial resources of public schools. However, the experience of African-American students in Texas indicates the need for a different – an academic – approach to educational equity and adequacy. This experience is supported by a reputable body of research revealing the critical relationship between academic equity, excellence, and curriculum; curriculum – what a student studies – is more important than ethnicity, economic background or funding in determining educational success [Citation: *Answers in the Tool Box*, U.S. Department of Education, 2000].

The Texas Legislature can improve academic equity and excellence in Texas Public Schools by enacting law to:

- ✓ Standardize curriculum between classrooms and schools by establishing curriculum standards that explicitly define the knowledge and skills required in each grade and course, as well as the level of performance that students should demonstrate;
- ✓ Require school districts to place the most highly qualified teachers in classrooms with high concentrations of academically-disadvantaged students;
- ✓ Establish academic qualifications as the foundation of teacher certification policy;
- ✓ Create teacher compensation policies that pay stipends for work in schools with high concentrations of academically-disadvantaged students;
- ✓ Establish academic advisors for each pupil, from kindergarten through grade 12, charged to provide parents and students with the information needed to make decisions about curriculum and course-taking;
- ✓ Identify grade inflation and academic inequity by requiring schools to administer and report scores of a national norm-referenced test annually;
- ✓ Require schools to subsidize supplemental educational programs for under-performing students of the parents' choice when test scores reveal achievement gaps; and
- ✓ Define the curriculum that constitutes adequacy, academic excellence and equity.