

Shattered lives: Buffalo-Niagara Schools Fail to Educate Blacks – Solutions are a moral imperative!

"It is easier to build healthy children than to fix broken men"

- Fredrick A. Douglass

By: Mike Madigan

These words of Fredrick Douglass ring as true today as when he first spoke them in the 19th century. Fredrick Douglass, former slave and friend of Abraham Lincoln observed that once he became educated, he became more keenly aware of his situation as a slave. This knowledge drove him to no longer accept slavery and oppression and to revolt against it, leading him on the path to freedom.

Douglass' slave master discouraged him from learning to read for that very reason, and our public education system in New York State and in the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls in particular, appears to be demonstrating the same unwillingness to properly educate our youth.

Failure to educate our children leads to lives that are shattered. Most children who leave the system uneducated are doomed to high rates of incarceration, drug and alcohol abuse, violent injury and death, abortions, out of wedlock births, low self esteem and high rates of dependence on government assistance, all of which results in their complete and total loss of freedom.

The multi-billion dollar poverty industry that is created by this failure to educate negatively impacts essentially all New York State residents. The money that fuels this industry comes directly from the private sector creating a tremendous burden on taxpayers and businesses. This burden compounds the failure to educate as jobs, people and businesses are driven out of the region as a result. This vicious cycle has left the Buffalo-Niagara area economically depressed.

As for education of black males, New York stands alone and statistically, is significantly worse than any other state. New York graduates only 25% of its black male children. Next in line is Florida, which graduates a full 12% more. Right next door, New Jersey graduates 69% of its black male children, a full 44% more.

The current social conditions in Buffalo are ripe for a change. Leaders in Buffalo's communities and schools, such as Sam Radford III, Darius Pridgen and many others, have stepped up to create awareness of this crisis and drive solutions.

A strong resistance, primarily from the Buffalo Teachers Federation (Union), against proposed reforms has developed and set back this team of leaders on several occasions. But for every battle lost their resolve gets stronger. This strength is evidenced in recent rallies and meetings that are growing in frequency, numbers and focus.

The suburbs are complacent and only marginally aware of the magnitude of this tragedy in our education system. Over the coming months this team of leaders must continue to develop a communication plan that includes educating the Buffalo-Niagara regions suburbs to gain their much needed support for the changes required to prevent continued failure.

The teachers and administrators within the public school system are keenly aware of the education crises, and while a limited few have engaged, the majority has not.

Teachers join the profession typically based on a strong desire and passion to teach and help children – they are good people who care. The problem occurs, for many teachers, once they are hired and are forced to join the teachers union.

The power of the Union can determine whether the teacher prospers or fails. The fear of job loss or other consequences, including implied threats, result in many good teachers being silent, even when they feel strongly that inappropriate action is being taken.

The current crisis has reached a breaking point and conscientious teachers have begun to step up and take a risk, giving voice to what is currently mostly a silent majority. If this silent majority could be encouraged to step up, the opportunity for real change would grow.

Similar lack of engagement has persisted for years within the political leadership, with too few exceptions. Far too often politicians are distracted by other more visible and politically popular activities, like the Buffalo waterfront, while inner city children's lives are being destroyed.

Special interest money plays a large part in the silence of many politicians as well. The Unions fund many campaigns and are one of the primary benefactors from this failure to educate. Unions typically hire only skilled laborers resulting in the exclusion of a large number of black males from their ranks. This is a direct result of this failure to educate.

The Western New York Congressional delegation has been unengaged and complacent over the years while this crisis has occurred. They must engage with the reform leaders and the Buffalo School system in an effort to begin to learn about this crisis and to provide support for these heroic leaders in their efforts.

The solution to this crisis will require changes in legislation, giving more control to local communities, loosening the grip of federal and state bureaucrats. It will also require structural changes within the school system itself, embracing the unparalleled success of the charter school model, loosening the grip of union leadership and embracing Governor Cuomo's call for teacher evaluations.

This crisis warrants immediate and primary focus with all other priorities being secondary. Children's lives and families are being shattered and as such, the status quo can no longer be accepted. Solutions exist for this failure to educate in New York State. The solutions will require active interest from residents in the city and the suburbs, government officials of all political persuasions and educators working together to effect change.

Young Jada Williams of the Rochester City Schools echoed the sentiments recently of Fredrick A. Douglass when she compared his slave owner discouraging him from becoming literate, to the modern school system, which dooms students to failure. She wrote "When I find myself sitting in a crowded classroom where no real instruction is taking place I can say history does repeat itself." Unfortunately, she suffered acts of retribution at the hands of her teachers, for her remarkable perception and honesty.

It's time for everyone to follow the example of people like 13-year old Jada and our reform leadership, and step up, attend DPCC (District Parenting Coordinating Council) meetings, and participate in other actions supporting efforts towards educational reform.

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