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ACHIEVEMENT MATTERS

**GETTING YOUR CHILD THE BEST
EDUCATION POSSIBLE**

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is my first “real” book. In the past, the National Urban League has published compilations of my speeches and articles. But mustering the energy and self-confidence to write for a broad audience is a different enterprise altogether. This book bears the fingerprints of countless family members, friends, and colleagues who helped make it happen.

Let me begin with the folks who belong right up front in the “but for” category. But for my effervescent mother, Charlotte S. Price, and my late father, Dr. Kline A. Price Sr., who was an unflappable but firm role model, I would never have graced this earth and earned the chance to write this book. My brother, Dr. Kline A. Price Jr., is a highly respected physician whose inspiring response to every professional challenge I’ve ever faced is: “Go for it!”

My beloved wife, Marilyn L. Price, and our three precious daughters—Lauren A. Price, Janeen A. Price, and Traer E. Price—are the center of my universe, as is Traer’s delightful husband, Steve Mitchell. I owe my career and whatever I’ve accomplished to them. Their love and the lives they’ve led helped spur me to write this book so I could share what I’ve learned as a husband and a father.

Thanks to my good friend Tom Dortch Jr., who is the national president of The 100 Black Men of America, I teamed up with an immensely talented writer, Carla Fine. We collaborated with ease, I’m convinced, because she’s such a warm person who deeply understands why we must educate and develop America’s children to their fullest potential. Leonor Ayala served with dedication and enthusiasm as our editorial assistant.

My savvy agents, Barbara Lowenstein and Madeline Morel, guided me through the process of prospecting for and selecting a publisher. The moment I met them, I could tell that Walter Zacharius, the founder and CEO of Kensington Books, and Karen Thomas, my talented and supportive executive editor at Kensington, shared my aspirations for this book and how to bring it to the broadest audience possible.

Much of what I have to say here derives from the work of the great Urban League movement, which I’ve been privileged to lead and to serve since July 1994. Rapidly approaching its second century of leadership and service, the Urban League is the oldest and largest community-based movement devoted to empowering African-Americans to enter the economic and social mainstream.

Many presidents of local Urban League affiliates caught the vision for our Campaign for African American Achievement. I fondly recall stimulating conversations during the formative stages of the Achievement Campaign with legendary Urban League leaders such as Henry Thomas of Springfield, Massachusetts; T. Willard Fair of Miami; Eloise Gentry of Gary, Indiana; John Johnson of San Diego; James Buford of St. Louis; J. T. McLawhorn of Columbia, South Carolina; Dennis Walcott of New York City; Esther Bush of Pittsburgh; Don Bowen of Broward County, Florida; Maudine Cooper of Washington, D.C.; John Mack of Los Angeles; and the late Rev. William Clark of Kansas City. They are but a few of the incredibly dedicated and hardworking affiliate CEOs who give their all to the venerable Urban League movement and those we serve.

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The Board of Trustees of the National Urban League has generously indulged and wholeheartedly supported my obsession with improving the academic achievement of our children. That starts with the trustees who have chaired the board on my watch—Reginald Brack, Jonathan Linen, and Kenneth Lewis. The senior vice-chairs of our board, Dr. Bernard Watson and Charles Collins, have been terrific friends and steadfast supporters as well.

Many other trustees have taken a keen interest in the League's Achievement Campaign, notably Eleanor Horne, the Rev. Franklyn Richardson, Stephanie Bell-Rose, William Lewis, Kevin Hooker, Ivan Seidenberg, Bill Stephany, Sean Barney, the Honorable Alexis Herman, Carolyn Wright Lewis, and Dr. Israel Tribble, the "godfather" of the National Achievers Society. Karla Ballard of the National Urban League Young Professionals offered many useful insights for this book and Pierre Bagley, the gifted filmmaker and founder of First Tuesday Productions, has brought the abstract idea of an Achievement Campaign vividly to life in his riveting videos. Dick Robinson, the CEO of Scholastic Inc. and his colleague Karen Proctor have been enthusiastic and generous partners in the production and dissemination of the *Read and Rise* guide for parents and caregivers.

We were blessed at the League that many corporations and foundations cast their lot with our Achievement Campaign and the pilot initiatives that set the stage for it. I am deeply indebted to the following supporters: Monsanto Fund, Proctor & Gamble, Verizon Communications, State Farm Life Insurance Companies, Shell Oil Company, Met Life Foundation, Merrill Lynch, United Parcel Service Foundation, Major League Baseball, Sears Roebuck and Company, Borden's Inc., Coca-Cola Company, Exxon-Mobil, Duracell North Atlantic Group, Educational Testing Service, the Hartford Freddie Mac Foundation, New York Stock Exchange, Compaq Computer Company, Gillette Company, Motorola, MTV Networks, Viacom International, American Airlines, Skyline Connections, Kraft Foods North America, McDonald's Corporation, MCI, Tommy Hilfiger, Amtrak, NIKE, Pfizer, the Gap Foundation, Marriott Corporation, Flagstar, Urban Cool Network, Darden Restaurant Foundation, and Jostens Renaissance.

Many foundations and agencies backed us along the way. The Lilly Endowment awarded us the largest foundation grant in the National Urban League's history. Other pivotal supporters include the Ford Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Pew Charitable Trusts, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, U.S. Department of Education, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Annie I. Casey Foundation, Picower Foundation, Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund, Starr Foundation, Hearst Foundation, Smith Richardson Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Joseph Drown Foundation, and Atlantic Philanthropic Services.

Over the years, I've drawn inspiration and intellectual sustenance from dozens of devoted national leaders, educators, school reformers, and youth development experts who I'm privileged to call authentic friends of young people—and of mine. I count the legendary school reformer, Dr. James P. Comer of the Yale University Child Study Center, as my principal mentor in these matters.

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Like everyone else, I can look back on teachers and coaches who genuinely believed in me, gently

counseled me, and propelled me along the way toward whatever success I've achieved. The passage of time plus the onset of "old-timer's disease" (which jokesters say is the first stage of Alzheimer disease) prevents me from recalling all their first names. Come to think of it, many teachers and principals back then didn't even have first names as far as their pupils were concerned.

In any event, I retain warm memories of Hilda Cobb, my wife's aunt who taught me at B. K. Bruce Elementary School in Washington, D.C.; her husband, Dr. Montague Cobb, the distinguished anatomist who started steering me toward his alma mater, Amherst College, as early as the sixth grade; both Mrs. Johnsons at Bruce; Mrs. Mills, a white teacher at newly integrated Taft Junior High School, who nonetheless pushed me hard academically; Mr. Brooks, my baseball coach in Taft recreational programs, who filled my days with an after-school activity I never could get enough of; and last but by no means least, Ms. Anderson, my white homeroom teacher during those tense early years of integration at Coolidge High School, who spurred me to reach for the loftiest academic heights and never accepted halfhearted performance out of me.

Let me end these acknowledgments where everything begins—with the children, whose unshaped and thus unlimited potential inspires us all. I'm grateful to those bright young men I mentored as a law student—Butch Banks, Jimmy Stevens, Conley Monk, and their buddies—who showed me early in my career that mentoring pays handsome dividends for youngsters and for society. Nearly three decades later, the kids in "the Club," that inspiring program founded by the Westchester Clubmen, proved the same point even more convincingly.

The enthusiastic young people in the League's NULITES program (National Urban League Incentives to Excel and Succeed), along with the young scholars in our National Achievers Society, continue to inspire me. As do their parents, who are hell-bent on raising successful kids. Lastly, thank those parents and young people who consented to be interviewed for this book, as well as the authors and task forces whose publications were such a valuable resource and a deep reservoir of relevant quotations that reminded everyone of their insightful points while helping me make mine.

These individuals and many others are my unofficial, behind-the-scenes coauthors who've earned a spot in the credit roll. It's abundantly clear by their words and deeds that they believe, as we Urban Leaguers do, that *Our Children = Our Destiny*.

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to *Achievement Matters*, when it was originally published in 2003, I wrote that education is the great equalizer in American society. It unlocks the doors to children's futures. While education isn't a surefire guarantee of success, the plain fact is that the better educated you are, the better off you'll be economically. That's the reason I wrote back then that every adult—every parent, every grandparent, every relative, and every foster parent—who is responsible for raising children must be obsessed with making certain the young people they care about succeed in school and that their youngsters get the top-flight education they need and deserve. They must genuinely want the children to do well in school because they really do understand why achievement matters.

I welcome the publisher's decision to reissue *Achievement Matters* as an e-book, a technology that did not exist when it first came out. If anything, my book is even more relevant today because the critical role of parents in their youngsters' education is more compelling than ever.

One decade and a horrific Great Recession later, my plea to parents to get actively involved in their children's education rings truer than ever. We've all seen, and many of us have suffered, the dizzying changes of the past decade. Even young people with college educations have endured bouts of unemployment and underemployment. Yet those with solid educations still fare much better than low achievers and high school dropouts in the ferociously competitive job market. That's because in a sluggish economy with so many people looking for work, employers have the luxury of picking the most educated applicants over less educated ones, regardless of job requirements.

America's elementary and secondary schools certainly have not been immune to change or to intensifying pressure to improve. Since this book was published, wave after wave of reform has washed up on the shores of public schools. The federal No Child Left Behind law forces school districts to publish their academic results, school by school and subgroup by subgroup. Districts are beginning to factor student performance into teacher promotion and compensation decisions. Between small themed schools, charter schools, and traditional schools, parents have vastly more choice about where to enroll their children than ever before. With financial help from the U.S. Department of Education, many aggressive school systems have mounted concerted efforts to turn around or close failing schools.

Thanks to these reforms and others, there are glimmers of progress in student achievement. Some big school systems are making headway at some grade levels. According to the nation's official report card, known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 51 percent of African-American fourth-graders and 49 percent of Hispanic fourth-graders scored "below basic"—roughly two notches below grade level—in reading in 2011. That's a welcome contrast to 2002 when 68 percent of black and 61 percent of Hispanics youngsters respectively scored "below basic" in the same grade.

The obvious problem is that, despite all these reform initiatives and investments, roughly half of African-American, Hispanic, and Native American children continue to languish way below grade level. Students who can barely read by the fourth grade face a steep climb uphill in school and in life. They will struggle with the reading assignments in social studies, the writing assignments in English class, and the word problems in algebra. They probably won't be able to pass the tough exams that some states impose for moving from grade to grade and for high school graduation. Progressing through school may get even harder as states embrace Common Core Standards. Community colleges and four-year colleges will be off-limits to young people with lousy educations. The same goes for the good jobs that provide a solid living for those who are well prepared academically.

Despite the modest gains in student achievement and the narrowed gaps between white and minority youngsters in some places, the pace of progress should simply be unacceptable to our society and especially to parents. According to a study by the Center on Education Policy, it could take decades for minority and low-income students to catch up with their better performing peers. The Center even ventured the alarming projection that in the state of Washington, it will take 105 years to close the black-white gap in fourth-grade reading.

That's why parents and caregivers must get involved to help turbocharge the pace of progress. Parent engagement has come of age as a recognized and respected ingredient in the recipe for improving student achievement. The most recent *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* reported a surge in parent involvement around the country. In fact, teachers with higher job satisfaction are likelier to report greater involvement of parents in cooperating with educators to improve the learning and success of students. The survey also found that two-thirds of students said they talk with their parents every day about things that happen in school. That's up from 14 percent in 1988. Nearly half of students surveyed said their parents visit their school at least once a month. That compares to 10 percent a generation ago.

Given the passage of time, a few sections of this book needed to be freshened up. For instance, there's a new education landscape that parents must navigate now with the advent of small schools, charter schools, and widespread choice. Therefore I have updated part of Chapter 5 ("Navigating the School System") to incorporate this new reality. When I originally wrote this book, technology was an emerging but still peripheral issue in teaching and learning. Today, education and technology go hand in glove and the relationship promises to intensify. Both students and parents are impacted, indeed empowered, by this phenomenon. In fact, it is so sweeping and profound that I have completely rewritten Chapter 7 titled "Computer Literacy Matters for Kids—and Parents." Does it ever!

The practical suggestions and tips presented in *Achievement Matters* are both timely and timeless. Experts are fond of saying that parents are their children's first teachers. What do you suppose they mean by that? For me it means you must see to it that each and every child you're personally responsible for raising learns to read early on and acquires a love of learning. It means we must make certain that as your youngsters progress through school, they learn to read and write, calculate and compute, reason and solve problems, express themselves in mainstream language, navigate the Internet, and acquire the people skills and self-confidence to get along gracefully with others.

It means you should make certain your children can pass—and better yet, excel on—those exams given by states and school districts to determine whether students have the academic knowledge and skills to advance from grade to grade and eventually graduate from high school.

Remember: Children spend most of their waking hours outside of school. As your child's first teacher, you set the tone at home. To turn your youngsters on to school, you have to take the time and expend the effort to salute them for doing the right thing and publicly celebrate their academic success. You must remain steadfast and unwavering in order to provide a supportive and encouraging environment for the children you are raising.

Above all, you must continue to urge your children to strive and persevere, even when others tell them they shouldn't excel in school. Keep watch on what they think of school. Don't let them be swayed by classmates who try to intimidate them emotionally or physically if they strive to do well. Whatever else you do, please don't let your children buy that anti-achievement baloney. It's a fool's errand and a road to nowhere.

Working with schools and community groups, parents and caregivers should pressure city officials, local foundations, and business leaders to offer sound after-school programs that provide a safe haven, academic support, and constructive activities for youngsters while parents are still at work.

If we do all these things as parents and caregivers and as members of our community, we will close

that embarrassing reading gap highlighted by NAEP. We'll equip even more of our youngsters to go on to community colleges, universities, and career training programs. And we'll prepare them to earn a solid living or launch their own businesses.

By now you may be saying: "I hear you. Sign me up. Now what do I do next?"

What you should do is read the rest of this book. In it I lay out expert advice and real-world tips from everyday parents whose children have done very well in school. In the pages that follow, you and other people share their secrets to scholastic success. I also explain what the National Urban League and its partners in the Campaign for African-American Achievement did when I headed the organization to counteract that "anti-achievement" peer culture, spread the gospel that achievement matters, and convince our kids to take pride in their academic accomplishments.

The vast majority of black children attend public schools. So beyond doing what we must at home, improving public schools that perform miserably is the other key to boosting the achievement level of children. In this book I explain how parents and community and business leaders have created consumer demand for better schools and gotten results. In the twenty-first century, there must be zero tolerance for lousy schools.

If you accept inferior education for your children from this day forward, in effect you're signing a death warrant for their dreams. If you allow them to think academic achievement matters little, the odds are they'll amount to little.

But this doesn't have to be. Our children are every bit as eager and bright as other children. As the parents and first teachers, you are key to starting them out on the right track and making sure they stay on course.

With its inspiring stories, practical tips, and expert advice, *Achievement Matters* is your real-world guide to unlocking your children's potential and unleashing their dreams.

CHAPTER ONE

Taking Charge of Your Child's Education

My wife and I started our family in New Haven, Connecticut, where all three of our daughters were born and began school. In New Haven, parents in some of the public schools were pretty involved, although this was more an exception than the rule.

In 1968, we bought our first house on Ford Street in the predominantly black, working-class neighborhood of Newhallville. We lived right across the street from the brand new Martin Luther King Elementary School. As luck would have it, King was one of the first schools where the legendary educational reformer Dr. James Comer of the Yale University Child Study Center was launching his School Development Program (SDP). That year our eldest daughter entered kindergarten. It was just the second year of the SDP at King.

Dr. Comer really stressed parent involvement and building true partnerships and trust between the school staff and the parents. In fact, constructive and respectful collaboration was the key to his approach, a method which worked back then and which has proven its validity over time.

Parents at King really were into the school. They flocked to the meetings, meet-the-teacher nights, bake sales, and assemblies. That was easy for us, of course, because all we had to do was stroll across the street. It also helped that people didn't work such crazy hours in those days.

We knew our daughter's teachers and they knew us. More importantly, they knew that we cared about how she was doing academically. They also knew we were keeping an eagle eye on whether she was doing her schoolwork and whether they did their jobs as educators. Most other parents felt the same way as well. The culture of the school reflected that enthusiastic involvement by parents and the trust we'd built up with the principal and teachers.

With the teachers' encouragement—and we would have done this whether they'd encouraged us or not—we kept a close eye on our daughter's report card and how she was doing, subject by subject. We made sure to check whether she was progressing properly, learning what she should, and performing at or above grade level.

Even when she came home with a really good report card, we would touch base with her teachers to confirm that she was doing nicely. We would ask whether there was anything they wanted us to work with her on or to do in order to ensure her academic success.

Now I need to confess that our daughters have always done well in school. Even so, that doesn't happen on automatic pilot. They worked very hard at it. So we were blessed that things tended to turn out well for them. Other than saying, as most youngsters do from time to time, that school was *borin*, they always took academic achievement seriously.

So to be perfectly truthful about it, our daughters didn't present us, or their teachers, with some of the very stiff challenges that other youngsters pose. Yet the other parents at King, most of whom were working people instead of professionals and some of whom were on welfare, were every bit as involved in King, equally dedicated, and just as vigilant as we were. Their commitment to King really showed in the positive environment at the school and, above all, in the impressive scholastic gains posted by the students.

Other schools in the city struggled to get parents to care. Attendance at meet-the-teacher nights was sparse. Parents didn't feel all that welcome in their school. Their lack of engagement showed in the academic results. What was it that set King apart from other inner-city schools in New Haven? Pure

and simply, it was parental involvement.

King started out as one of the weakest schools in the district academically. But using Dr. Comer approach—with its emphasis on active and authentic parent engagement—King steadily climbed near the top of the academic ratings in the school district.

In July 1978, we moved south, from New Haven to New Rochelle, New York. New Rochelle is situated in Westchester County, which is predominantly middle class and heavily upper middle class. The difference between the two towns in terms of parent involvement was eye-opening. The level of involvement that we'd experienced even at King paled by comparison with the way parents monitored schools in New Rochelle.

We moved to New Rochelle because I took a job with *The New York Times*. Three weeks later, yet three weeks later, we went out on strike at the *Times*. I was out of work and off a payroll for the first time in my life. Mind you, my wife hadn't started working, so this really was belt-tightening time when it came to family income.

Initially I figured the strike wouldn't last more than a week or two. So I took advantage of the lull in the employment action by sleeping late, watching New York Yankee baseball games, and puttering around the house. Meanwhile our eldest daughter entered the ninth grade, and the younger two enrolled in elementary school.

Since we had enrolled our children in a new school system, I decided to see how it worked first chance I got. Several weeks after school opened, I ventured out to meet-the-teacher night at the junior high school. I was dumbfounded and dazzled by the turnout. So many parents were there that night that the school had to hire off-duty policemen to direct the traffic. Each classroom I visited averaged one parent—and often two—per pupil. Sometimes it was standing room only.

I'll never forget a couple of encounters between my daughter's ninth-grade math teacher and some parents, which showed how closely New Rochelle parents were on the case. The teacher, who was in a grouchy mood, opened the session by explaining how disappointed she was that the youngsters weren't doing well in her class. In response, one parent raised her hand and then announced that her son, who actually was an eighth-grader, attended this class because he was very bright and that she, the mother, possessed a doctorate degree in math. The youngster's mother stated firmly that if her son wasn't performing well, it was the teacher's fault and that the teacher had better check herself out.

Her blunt comment rattled the teacher momentarily, but she recovered. She went on a few moments later to note how many pupils had gotten the wrong answer on a math problem that very day that they should easily have been able to handle. The teacher wrote out the problem on the blackboard and worked through to the answer. Within an instant, another parent in the back of the room raised his hand. He told the teacher that if she figured out the problem over again and with care, she would discover that she'd arrived at the wrong answer. The silence in the classroom was deafening.

This encounter shows how closely these parents monitored their children's academic performance at their schools, and even their teachers. They turned out in huge numbers to make certain that both the educators and their own children knew that what was happening in school was critically important to them and that they had every intention of staying right on the case.

Now I'm not naive. I don't expect every parent to be able to figure out the correct answer to that math problem. I sure couldn't have. But by virtue of their determined presence and by quizzing the teachers closely on how their youngsters were doing academically, the parents were keeping the children and the teachers on their toes. So I know firsthand from our own daughters' positive academic experience in school that parental vigilance definitely pays off.

Youngsters whose parents aren't active can be overlooked in the shuffle. That's why parents must make their presence felt, so the schools don't slack off or shower attention only on the children of the squeaky wheels. In addition, the children will get the message that the right to a quality education

something worth fighting for. As Temple University psychology professor Laurence Steinberg writes in his book *Beyond the Classroom*: “If we want our children and teenagers to value education and strive for achievement, adults must behave as if doing well in school is more important than any other activity in which young people are involved.”

Parental involvement is key to academic success. In the remainder of this chapter, I’ll present specific ways to make sure your children are provided with the fundamental academic knowledge and practical skills they’ll need to succeed in a complex and competitive world.

YEARS OF PROMISE

Will Rogers, the wise humorist, once said: “Things will get better despite our efforts to improve them.” For the sake of our children, we must do better than that.

According to the Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades, the years from three to ten are a crucial age span in a young person’s life. This is when a firm foundation for health, development and lifelong learning is put into place. For most children, the long-term success of their learning and development depends to a great extent on what happens to them during these formative years of promise.

The importance of success in school during this time is profound. A child’s basic sense of worth depends heavily on the ability to achieve in school. If the adults who matter in a child’s life expect little and provide scant support, then defeatism quickly sets in. That alienates them from education and undermines their desire to do well academically for years to come.

Jeff Howard, founder of the Efficacy Institute, cites something called “attribution theory” to explain poor academic performance. Children whose teachers and, yes, even whose parents don’t expect them to do well in school then don’t even strive to do well. In these youngsters’ minds, if they don’t try to excel, they can’t be branded as failures because they never tried in the first place. So low expectations fuel defeatism and perpetuate a vicious cycle of school failure.

As their children’s first teachers, parents must nip defeatism in the bud by setting high standards for their youngsters and regularly telling their children they have every confidence they can meet them. Parents should convey those high expectations to their teachers so the schools aren’t allowed to undermine the kids’ self-confidence or scholastic performance.

All children are born ready and eager to learn. Visit any nursery school or Head Start program or kindergarten class. You can feel the excitement in the air as these children respond enthusiastically to new activities and challenges. See the inquisitiveness in their eyes, the smile on their faces, the enthusiasm of their responses to their teacher’s attention.

If youngsters come out of the womb this way, then why in the world do so many bright and beautiful children lose their God-given curiosity and eagerness as they move through school? Why do such an alarmingly high percentage of minority and poor children perform so poorly in school? To go even more basic, why is it that two-thirds of African-American fourth-graders can barely read, year after year after year?

The answer is well documented by Jonathan Kozol, author of *Savage Inequalities*, and by scores of impartial studies. As things now stand, the deck all-too-often is unfairly stacked against poor and minority children. The preschool programs they start out in should be stronger. The schools they attend must get better. And to be frank about it, they need more support, guidance, and encouragement at home from day one.

As loving parents and caregivers, you mustn’t allow your children to receive a slipshod education. There definitely are concrete things you can do to make a difference. Here’s what we know works:

- *At Home.* Children whose parents are involved in their education and create a home environment that encourages learning earn higher grades than children whose parents aren't involved.
- *In the Community.* Youngsters from communities that offer after-school programs emphasizing learning and practical help for parents to promote academic achievement and healthy child development do better in school than children whose communities don't support them this way.
- *In Preschool Programs.* Children who are fortunate enough to attend a high-quality preschool child care program and who enter grade school solidly prepared are more likely to do well academically than children whose preschool preparation is weak.
- *In Elementary Schools.* Children who attend an elementary school that sets high standards and does whatever is necessary to see that children meet them are more prone to leave the fourth grade proficient in reading, writing, math, and science than youngsters attending a school that expects little of them.

“You have to expect that children will do well and then do whatever you can to make them learn,” says Velma Cobb, my colleague at the National Urban League who directs the Campaign for African American Achievement. “Even though many parents believe that the school system is not set up to prepare their children for academic success, there’s enough research and pockets of successful schools to show that we can educate our children well if we are committed to these kids come hell or high water.”

It sounds trite, but it’s so true that I’ll repeat it. Parents and caregivers are children’s first teachers. You must become involved—early and actively—in instilling a love and respect for learning in your sons and daughters. The key is to get all children on the educational fast track right from the start as early as possible so that school becomes a voyage of discovery they look forward to instead of a source of failure they shun.

THE PREPARATION GAP

We hear lots of anxious talk these days about achievement gaps. The media moans about it. Organizations like the National Urban League, which I head, agonize over it. Pundits complain and pontificate about it. Public school educators under siege try to duck responsibility by making excuses for it.

When you think about it, there actually are several achievement gaps. There’s the gap between how American children in general and black youngsters in particular stack up against children in the rest of the world. Then there’s the disturbing fact that when you compare what youngsters know and can do, a pupil who earns an A in an inner-city school knows about as much in a given subject as a suburbanite who earns a C. Put another way, black and Latino twelfth-graders in urban schools stack up about equally with white suburbanites in the eighth grade.

The achievement gap isn’t confined to inner-city and rural schools. Middle-class black kids in integrated suburban schools generally lag behind their white and Asian-American classmates.

So any way you measure it or however you explain it, these achievement gaps along ethnic and economic lines are distressing. Society should summon the will and allocate the resources to close these gaps. It’s a moral and economic imperative, in my opinion.

There’s another way of looking at the achievement gap that doesn’t get nearly as much attention. But I happen to think that closing this one is more urgent for parents, communities, and society large. It’s what I’d call *The Preparation Gap*.

You're probably wondering what I mean by *The Preparation Gap*. It's the gap between what poor and minority children know vs. what they need to know in order to meet state academic standards, move from one grade to the next, and eventually graduate from high school. There's also that gap between what they can do and what they must be able to do in order to land good jobs and get into college and trade schools. These are the gaps that I believe must be closed ASAP. Why? Because if we don't, the children won't have the knowledge and skills they need to become self-reliant adults and informed citizens.

As the late President Richard Nixon once said, let me make one thing perfectly clear. I am determined as the next person to close those achievement gaps that divide ethnic and socioeconomic groups. But the vastly more urgent task in my view is to eliminate *The Preparation Gap*. Until we do, low achievers will stay stuck behind the eight ball, woefully unqualified for higher education and the increasingly demanding world of work.

The seeds of *The Preparation Gap* are planted early in a child's life, often unintentionally and usually without parents even noticing what's happening. It starts with preschool. Many child care providers and day care centers that parents send their preschoolers to offer only custodial care and recreation. Assuming they even have one, their formal "curriculum" devoted to preparing youngsters properly for reading may be weak or improvised. It often isn't based on the best available research and practice about preparing preschoolers to become good readers and eager learners.

According to the Carnegie Corporation, the vast majority of early child care and education programs fail to meet accepted standards of quality. As a result, as many as one-third of American children enter kindergarten already behind their age group whose preschool experience was more solid. As early as kindergarten, black and Hispanic pupils already trail behind white and Asian American kindergarteners on exams that gauge general knowledge and early reading and math skills. So right off the bat, many minority children require extra help in order to catch up and keep up with their peers.

The Preparation Gap persists and even widens as they move through elementary school. The early years are a defining experience for children that will heavily shape their lives all the way through adolescence and beyond.

For most schoolchildren, the early elementary grades are when the so-called "ability sorting" really begins. Children are steered onto academic paths that they'll pretty much follow the rest of the way through school. That's fine if your child lands on a path headed toward high academic standards. But if the route is littered with low expectations, your child could be headed for frustration, academic failure, and trouble.

Parents who aren't paying close attention often find out too late that their kids lose interest in learning sometime around the third grade or so and their grades fall off the cliff. Educators say this is especially a problem among black boys. The damage often can't be undone, and when it can be, it takes years of extra instruction and tutoring. This dashes the children's dreams by undermining their interest in school and destroying their confidence that they'll ever become achievers. So they cease trying and the cycle of academic failure spins on the rest of the way through school until they dial out completely or actually drop out.

It doesn't get any easier to close *The Preparation Gap* when students move on to middle school. Just think about it. Youngsters who can barely read won't be able to handle the word problems in algebra or read the instructions for science experiments, much less complete the reading assignments in social studies. If they cannot read, writing probably will be a struggle as well. So English class will be a severe challenge for weak students.

The problems that surface in elementary school don't disappear in high school either. In fact, as youngsters approach the end of adolescence, the stakes from *The Preparation Gap* get much higher.

They are held back in grade and sent off to summer school. They fail the tougher exams imposed by states and school districts and cannot graduate from high school. They do miserably on college entrance exams and cannot qualify for admission. They score poorly on tests required by employers and cannot land those good-paying skilled and professional positions that comprise 85 percent of all the jobs available. That frustrates job applicants and employers alike. When you add it all up, inferior education leads to economic apartheid.

What explains these gaps that seldom go away? One expert, Stephanie Bell-Rose, president of the Goldman Sachs Foundation, believes that what teachers teach and how well they teach it is perhaps the most important variable affecting how youngsters perform. “Unfortunately, black students generally attend schools with fewer resources, larger class sizes, and less-qualified teachers,” she concludes.

Another culprit is low expectations. According to a National Urban League survey conducted in 2001 of black Americans under the age of 35, 51 percent believed that public school teachers had a lower expectation for black student performance than for white students.

You can be sure students notice it when teachers don’t think they amount to much academically. “Sometimes I think my teacher doesn’t call on me because he just assumes I don’t know the answer,” says Omar, a fifth-grader from Chicago. “Some teachers stereotype African-American males. It’s like the movie *Finding Forrester*, where they think you’re up to no good because you’re black and live in the projects. But racial profiling just encourages me to do better. I want to show them they’re wrong and it makes me want to work harder.”

To help your children reach their highest potential, parents should familiarize themselves with the academic standards they’re expected to meet and when the schools give those critically important tests that assess whether they do.

Parents don’t necessarily have to figure this out by themselves. The New York Urban League, for instance, operates its Standard Keepers Program that teaches parents about the academic standards and exams in the New York City schools. The program informs them about the specific academic standards their children must meet from grades three through eight, and explains assorted tests the children must take to see if they measure up to these standards.

“In order to know if your children are being adequately prepared to meet the academic requirements in their grade level, parents have to know what their children are supposed to learn,” says LaVern Bloomfield-Jiles, director of Standard Keepers, which is part of the national Campaign for African American Achievement. “Parents go from being passive to active participants in their children’s education because now they understand how their children should perform on a grade-by-grade basis. They can begin to gauge their children’s performance on an objective basis and not have to rely solely on a teacher’s evaluation.”

Standard Keepers encourages parents and caretakers to establish and build relationships with the children’s teachers. Parents learn how to make sense of their child’s report card. Plus they are prepped on the types of questions they should ask at conferences with their child’s teacher.

“Let’s say a father doesn’t know what to ask about his daughter’s performance in her third-grade math class,” Ms. Bloomfield-Jiles explains. “He might not even know the type of math she’s being taught. We prepare a list of questions for the father so he can get a better idea of what his daughter should be studying and the tests she is required to pass. He can then monitor his daughter’s progress himself and make sure she is keeping up with the rest of her class.

“We believe strongly that parental participation is the key to a child’s success. We’re not comparing student to student, but how each individual child is able to meet the expected standard every grade and level. By preparing parents to be the Keepers of the Standards for their children, we are helping to close the achievement gap by making parents—not a large and impersonal school system—to be the ultimate caretakers of their child’s education.”

Standard Keepers helps parents participate knowledgeably in their youngster's education. I would urge parents and caregivers to find out whether there's a program like this in your neighborhood. If there isn't, ask a community-based agency or even your church to start up one. Or you could ask the school principals to provide this kind of information. If they care at all about kids, they'll probably be pleasantly surprised to get a request like this and probably will be pleased to help.

YOU DEFINITELY CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

When it comes to literacy, the adults who rear children make a huge difference. But it doesn't come easy and cannot be done on cruise control. You must be willing after a hard day's work to tuck your child in after supper and read to her until she falls asleep. And when she's older, have her read to you before you doze off. Even if you can't help them with homework, you have to keep a close enough eye on them to know whether they're doing it themselves. No matter how much they protest, you have to limit how much television they watch. You have to get up and out on a Saturday morning to take your son to a museum or the library. I don't care how fatigued you are from work, you have to find the time and energy to attend parent-teacher conferences at school.

Research shows that parents still matter the most. In examining the lessons from the fourth-grade test results in 2000, the authors of the NAEP report found that students who talk about their schoolwork with their parents and live in a home where reading materials are widely available actually read on a higher level than other children.

"Parents are the most important teachers," says Stephanie Akpa, 17, co-president of the 21st Century Youth Leadership Team of the San Diego Urban League. "My advice to younger kids is to make sure that someone cares about you—a parent, a teacher, a relative, a mentor—and don't be afraid to ask them for help.

"On a certain level, I feel I'm getting good grades not only for myself but also for other students who know they can do the same," Stephanie explains. "It's important that African-American young people set good examples and show that we can achieve and do well. Our team proves that we can be achievers and we're backing it up by our actions. The more we do, the more we break the negative stereotypes about black youth. We are the future and must always remember that we should serve as mentors to others."

The active involvement of parents is the first step in creating a level educational playing field. Parental involvement in a school can help turn it from a failure to a center of excellence. They can influence the choice of the principal, the type of curricula, the quality of teaching, and the expectations of teachers, along with the provisions for security and safety in the classrooms.

The plain fact is that the academic achievement level of young people is in direct proportion to the caliber and consistency of support adults provide for them. According to a study published in the *American Educational Research Journal*, parental involvement has been shown to influence children's achievement in language and mathematics, their academic persistence, their behavior problems, and whether or not they remain in school or drop out.

"My parents set up a structure," says Shawn M. Barney, a 26-year-old partner in a wireless technology company and a member of the League's Board of Trustees. "Every morning my father took me to school. I grew up in New Orleans and went to public school through the eighth grade, then to an all-male, all-black high school. Driving to school with my dad was our private time together and I really treasured it. We would discuss anything and everything as we shared our McDonald's breakfast in the car. It was spending time together on a consistent basis, and I knew I could always count on him. Now I have a friend who walks his 8-year-old daughter to school every morning, and I plan to do the same."

same thing when I have my own children.

~~“My parents were very active in my education—they went to PTA meetings and made it a point to~~ meet all my teachers. They instilled an independence in me and the goal of being successful in whatever I chose to do in my life. I understood that doing well in school was important because the A’s I got would be further communicated down the road and would have consequences as a result. I also felt my mother and father really cared about me and were on my side. I knew that if something was wrong, they would work with me to try to fix it. It was as if I had constant backup, which gave me a lot of confidence and self-esteem.”

Even so, parents also have to be backed up by the educational and political system: it won’t work if you’re out there all alone. For example, a *Chicago Tribune* survey found that of the city’s 550 public schools, only 24 had levels of high parental involvement. As a result, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley held a series of citywide assemblies to arm adults with the skills and knowledge to help their children with schoolwork and boost parental involvement in order to improve children’s performance in the classroom.

The assemblies were open to all adults with children in public, private, or parochial schools. The gatherings featured workshops on topics ranging from “Raising a Reader” and “Working with Your Child’s Teacher to Improve Performance,” to “The Effects of Health and Nutrition on Your Child’s Learning.” The workshops provided information about services and programs readily available for adults who are raising children.

Another shining example are the public schools of Mount Vernon, a Westchester County suburb just north of New York City. The pupils in the failing school system were predominately black and poor. Ronald O. Ross, a former teacher and principal, was brought in to turn the school system around and indeed he did. Within two years, the district boasted three of the most improved schools in the state for fourth-grade reading test scores. Several of the district’s elementary schools had more than doubled the percentage of students passing the tests since 1999, the first year they were given. Mount Vernon soared from roughly 35 percent of the fourth-graders passing the state literacy arts exam in 1999, to nearly 75 percent by 2001.

Teachers and principals were involved in Mount Vernon’s turnaround, but so were parents. After the first grade, all students had to write in a journal each night when they got home. In addition, parents had to sign forms confirming that their child read for thirty minutes every night. This shows again that for academically successful children, education doesn’t stop when the school bell rings.

Another impressive parental involvement program is The Right Question Project in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Parents in the Boston area who get hold of computers can go online to www.rightquestion.org and find out specific information about their child’s school.

Parental interest and involvement reinforce the natural inclination of children to strive to do the best. Lousy schools with apathetic and alienated pupils can improve only if the adults in their lives mobilize to make it happen and refuse to accept any excuses for failure.

A third-grader from Ft. Lauderdale named Cheryl cut right to the chase when she said: “It’s important for parents to give you support and motivation. That way you don’t feel alone.”

Here are some basic ways you can help your children develop a thirst for learning and acquire the skills they’ll need to do well in school.

1. Get an early start on making sure your children become good readers by reading to them from the time they are toddlers and having them read to you as soon as they’re able. In Chapter “Reading,” I lay out some practical tips on how to do this.
2. Use everyday occurrences, such as cooking and family trips, as ways of helping youngsters practice doing math and learning to look up things in books.

3. Be sure they read for fun because that builds a love of learning and discovery through reading ~~and besides, practice makes proficient readers.~~
4. Help them turn their favorite hobbies into enjoyable learning experiences that enable them practice skills they are taught in school.
5. Visit the school on parent-teacher nights and in-between if necessary, so both the teachers and your child know that you mean business when it comes to your children getting a good education.
6. Establish appropriate routines at home, like creating quiet time for homework and recreation, reading, and limiting the amount of television they can watch.
7. Visit libraries, bookstores, and book fairs with your children so they can see that reading is important to you and that it should be to them.

I would characterize these as constructive activities that help youngsters acquire an appetite for learning and a positive attitude toward school. I hate to say it, but parents must also keep an eagle eye out for any sign of academic slippage by their children or slipshod education by the school. Since it is black, Latino, and Native American youngsters who usually lag way behind, their parents especially must stay on the lookout against their children losing ground. Here are some ways to keep watch:

1. Given the tendency of black youngsters to slip backward around the third or fourth grade, you should be especially alert for any backsliding in these grades even if they did well in the early years.
2. Monitor each report card and make sure your child is performing at grade level or better. Don't just accept the teacher's word for it. Ask to see the data and test scores. Even if they're performing on grade, ask the teacher how both of you can help them do even better. If they are slipping behind, develop a game plan in partnership with the teacher to get them up to speed.
3. Talk frequently with your children about what's happening in class. Ask to see any notices from the teacher, guidance counselor, or principal. Look for signs that they are extremely bored, disengaged, dropping out, or withdrawn from school. Seek counseling to get them back on track before it's too late.
4. Challenge any suggestions by the schools to place your child in special education. Insist on receiving a second opinion about whether the placement really is necessary. Since the pattern of wrongful and unneeded assignment to the purgatory of special ed is so widespread and pernicious, seek expert second opinions before consenting.
5. Work closely with teachers to ensure that early warning systems are in place and make certain that activities and supervision outside of school are fully in synch with what happens inside the classroom.
6. Keep your kids from falling under the influence of friends and classmates who say school achievement isn't important. Cheer them on at home, show up when they're involved in a school event, and join with other parents, school officials, and community groups like the local Urban League in saluting them for striving to excel in school.
7. If doing these kinds of things is a struggle for you, admit it for the sake of your children and ask a relative, a friend, or a pastor for help in keeping close tabs on how your youngsters are doing and in working with the school to implement an action plan for improvement.

WATCH OUT ESPECIALLY FOR SPECIAL ED

For far too many children, referral to special education is a one-way ticket to failure. Special education often derails students from a regular education. I'm talking about students who, if they were given intensive instruction, would be capable of doing quite well in mainstream classes alongside other children who haven't been labeled or stigmatized. In some big-city school systems, fewer than 10 percent of special ed children ever escape or, as bureaucrats say, are "decertified."

African-American parents must be wary because racial discrimination is rampant in special education despite its supposedly noble intentions. According to an alarming study by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, black students were three times more likely than their white classmates to be identified as mentally retarded; almost twice as likely to be identified as emotionally disturbed; and 1.3 times as likely to be identified with a specific learning disability. What's even more astonishing is that the Harvard researchers reported that black boys living in wealthier communities with strong integrated schools were more prone to be sent to special classes than black students attending predominantly black schools in low-income neighborhoods.

Children who are diagnosed with these "problems" can be forced to attend special education classes where progress is slow and properly trained teachers are scarce. Youngsters who land in special education tend to get in more trouble with the law. Many minority children who are sent to special education never return to regular classes. Some school systems have even been accused of sticking weaker students in special ed, where their test scores aren't pooled with the regular pupils, so the school will rank higher based on its overall test scores.

Now I'm not saying that there's never a need for special education. Clearly some children suffer from emotional and physical handicaps that seriously impede their ability to learn in a traditional classroom, where instruction moves at a pace prescribed by state academic standards and exams.

But parents must be vigilant about making sure that their child actually needs to be in special education classes before they agree to it. Oftentimes, teachers will place students there because they're doing poorly or because they pose behavioral problems. In truth, these kids may be plenty bright but hopelessly bored, hyperactive, and hard to manage. Inexperienced or culturally insensitive teachers may be ill-equipped to capture their attention and gain their confidence. Special education programs are often used as a dumping ground for lazy or burned-out teachers who don't want to make the effort to help children who may be a challenge to teach.

Labels stick. Original labels can stick the longest and do lasting harm. A child classified as "different," who goes to classes apart from other children or travels to another school, may start doubting his or her own academic abilities. It's worth remembering that faulty diagnosis also endangered the future of many noted Americans who were labeled dyslexic and written off early on by their teachers. The celebrated filmmaker George Lucas comes quickly to mind.

"I was told that special ed was the only way to help my 6-year-old granddaughter," says Brenda, a college professor from Houston. "Her teacher and the school's guidance counselor told me that she was a 'slow learner' and would do better in a different kind of setting. But do I really want my granddaughter, who's very timid and small for her age, in a classroom with kids who are continually acting up? How will she learn if she's distracted and maybe even afraid?"

I was horrified by what Theresa Sanders, head of the Urban League of Long Island, told me almost happened to her daughter. She's a very strong student, so one day Ms. Sanders paid a visit to the guidance counselor to find out how to get her into Advanced Placement courses. The counselor said he wasn't equipped to do that, nor did he so much as offer to find out how and get back to her. However, he did say he had all the forms handy in case she wanted to place her daughter in special education. Of course, this savvy mother told the useless counselor what he could do with his forms.

All children enter school at the same grade level. Once enrolled, a child can be tracked—as early as first grade—into an honors/ advanced/gifted program, a regular class, or a special education section.

In Chapter 5, “Navigating the School System,” I will go into more detail about what you can do to navigate your way through the school system so your child isn’t derailed academically by being steered down the wrong track.

What happened to Theresa Sanders and her daughter is downright scandalous. Nor is hers an isolated story. It illustrates the pervasive discrimination in special education that parents constantly must guard against.

COLLEGE LESSONS ABOUT ACADEMIC SUCCESS

College is another place to look for helpful lessons about how to improve the achievement levels of youngsters in elementary and secondary school. There are programs in higher education I’ve heard about that do a terrific job of boosting the scholastic performance of minority students. Even though the students who participate obviously are older, these programs have much to say to parents and caregivers whatever their child’s age.

A fine example is the Meyerhoff Scholars program at the University of Maryland/Baltimore County. It prepares talented African-American students for research careers in science and engineering. The program was created in 1988 by Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, a distinguished African-American mathematician and scientist who is president of the university. He was disturbed by the shortage of blacks in these fields and determined to do something about it at his campus. More than 100 Meyerhoff Scholars have already graduated, and almost all of them are enrolled in graduate and professional programs in the sciences and medicine. The program originally focused on males, but now it includes female students.

Dr. Hrabowski coauthored a book about the program. It’s entitled *Beating the Odds: Raising Academically Successful African American Males*. He also is coauthoring a sequel on raising academically successful young women. The original book describes how the families of the Meyerhoff Scholars went about rearing academically successful sons who scored among the top 1 percent of black males in terms of SAT scores and grades. One key is that these parents became quite assertive, even forceful, whenever they spotted signs that:

1. The schools had low expectations for their sons.
2. Their sons seemed to be the victims of some type of discrimination at school.
3. Their children had problems at school.

“The critical importance of parental contact and involvement in the school to academic success cannot be overstated,” the authors write. “Many social science research studies have linked great levels of parental involvement in education with higher educational achievement. Here we find that for African-American males in particular, parents put forth extreme efforts to help ensure that their sons successfully overcame the barriers and temptations that have tragically undermined and derailed the academic focus of so many other capable black youth.”

Young men who became Meyerhoff Scholars attribute their academic success to several factors, including positive neighborhood and school environments, self-esteem, and religious beliefs. Yet the reason they cited most frequently by far is parental support and involvement in their schooling. The sons tell of parents who were constantly in contact with their classroom teachers; attended parent-teacher conferences on a regular basis; visited their classrooms to observe how they were being taught; made sure they were appropriately placed in academically challenging classes and programs; kept an open line of communication with their guidance counselor and school principal; and

participated in the PTA and school volunteer work.

For their part, the parents emphasize the critical importance of holding high expectations for the children. They constantly pushed their sons to achieve, reminding them over and over that they could excel in school. If their sons fell back for any reason, they had to explain what was wrong and why they were not getting the best grades. When they did well in school, their parents showered praise on them. They also expected their youngster's social behavior to be exemplary. These lessons applied equally to boys and girls.

The bottom line is that these determined adults value the importance of high-quality education for their kids and work tirelessly to make sure they receive the best preparation possible. Every adult who is raising a child should have the same mind-set.

Ron is a U.S. customs agent in Detroit who is the father of two young sons and a daughter. "Parents have to stay up to date on what's going on in their children's lives," he says. "All children are different from each other and parents must value each as distinct individuals. You have to hear what they're saying to you and try to be objective and not judge them. I grew up without a father, and I vowed that when I had children, I would always be there for them. I'm proud to say that I am convinced that my daughter and sons' schoolwork reflects the constant attention and presence of my wife and myself."

"African Americans need as much education as possible in order to help others," the authors of *Beating the Odds* write. "If blacks achieve more academically, they will be able to combat the insidious message that achievement in school is not to be valued."

Experts remind us that education isn't confined to the classroom. Nor does it end when school adjourns every June or when youngsters graduate. According to Emma M. Talbott, author of *The Joy and Challenge of Raising African American Children*, learning is ongoing and lifelong. In her book she offers many practical ideas for fostering educational success through family togetherness and discovery. Admittedly some activities take money, but that isn't true of all of them. Imagination is the only limit on the ways you and your child can learn together. Here are some of Ms. Talbott's effective ideas, along with several more of mine:

1. Explore African-American culture and learn about other ethnic groups as well.
2. Visit historic places, libraries, museums, concerts, and plays.
3. Work to improve your children's communication skills and make sure they have full command of standard English regardless of the slang they may use among friends.
4. Engage in dialogue with your children and tell them stories of your childhood.
5. Be selective about what your children watch on television.
6. Teach them the games you played back when you were growing up.
7. Play educational games with them.
8. Encourage your children to have hobbies that promote learning and discovery, like collecting rocks or stamps.
9. Purchase a computer for your home and invest in an encyclopedia—in print or online.
10. Subscribe to a reputable newspaper and have your child read it.
11. Encourage your children to write by keeping a diary or journal.

Candace Smith is a successful young attorney with a large law firm in Atlanta and a member of the National Urban League's Board of Trustees. A graduate of Brown University and Harvard Law School, Candace says that the more support she received, the better she did in school.

"My parents and grandmother were always asking me about my studies and took a great interest in my schoolwork," she says. "It's so important to be encouraged and feel that your achievements are valued."

acknowledged and rewarded. Children feel more confident and self-assured knowing that there are adults who care about and support them. Every parent has the tools to reinforce academic achievement by showing enthusiasm and being actively engaged in their children's education."

EQUALITY BEGINS WITH EDUCATION

African Americans have always valued education and viewed it as the surest route to success. "[I]n this society, education opens the door to success," writes sociology professor Walter R. Allen in *The State of Black America 2001*, a publication of the National Urban League. "Because talent is significantly equated with high educational performance and attainment, the cherished belief that even the poorest American can, with hard work and determination, achieve greatness is a linchpin of the belief that education is the foundation of democracy."

Academic failure simply isn't an option in the Information Age economy of the twenty-first century. It's essential to economic self-sufficiency and effective citizenship in the twenty-first century. Parents must begin to think—and participate—"outside of the box." As your children's first teacher, you owe it to them to take charge of their learning and development at home and also get involved at the community level and in the political process.

Attend school board meetings and keep the members' feet to the fire about focusing on the best interests of your child and all of the children. Pressure them to boost student achievement by improving teaching and learning inside the classroom instead of cracking down mercilessly on kids through measures like ending social promotion and mandating summer school. Those are Band-Aid measures, bred of panic and political sloganeering, that ignore a truism that's both obvious and proved by research: The caliber of classroom instruction must be raised in order for student performance to rise.

To paraphrase Peter Finch's cry of frustration in that celebrated film *Network*, "We're mad as hell and we're not going to take it anymore." Tell your local school board in no uncertain terms that you have zero tolerance for lousy schools—and so must they. If your child's school performs miserably year after year, get impatient. Get angry. Get involved. Insist on answers, and if none are forthcoming demand alternatives. Join forces with other parents, community groups, and business leaders to pressure politicians at the local, state, and federal levels for wise policies and adequate funding for the schools.

Breadwinners work hard these days providing for their families. In fact, some studies show that on average we toil the equivalent of one month longer than our parents did. So it's no wonder that we often have little energy left when we get home. If the traditional methods of getting involved are too taxing for you, here's another approach worth trying. What about forming a support group made up of parents and caregivers who face similar pressures. Members could alternate going to key meetings of the school board and at school, and later on brief one another on important developments, key political debates, and upcoming decisions where parents' voices should be heard.

The clock is ticking. America's heavy-duty reliance on well-educated workers will never reverse course. That's why we no longer have time *not* to have time for our children. We must stop playing hooky from our most basic of obligations to them, namely loving them unconditionally, nurturing them as they grow up, and equipping them for success in life. Urban Leaguers are fond of saying that *Our Children = Our Destiny*. That compelling slogan won't come alive unless we, the parents and caregivers who raise them, make it real by taking charge of ensuring that our children achieve.

CHAPTER TWO

Spreading the Gospel of Achievement

“Some black kids will shoot you down if you’re smart in school and accuse you of having ‘airs’ and thinking you’re better than anyone else. I love school but I don’t want people to say stupid things about me or leave me out. It’s hard to know what to do.”

That chilling comment by Cheryl, a fifth-grader from Detroit, goes right to the heart of one of the biggest obstacles facing youngsters who want to do well in school. They can handle the schoolwork itself. But they struggle to fend off—and sometimes fall prey to—the intense razzing and sometimes even intimidation by schoolmates and friends who say they shouldn’t be about achievement.

“Peer pressure is incredible,” says Karla Ballard, a 30-year-old in Wilmington, Delaware, who helped found the National Urban League Young Professionals. Its purpose is to present positive role models to young people in the African-American community. “I was brought up in a single-parent household by my mother, who was a social worker and nurse. I attended public schools in Philadelphia until the fifth grade, then went to a private school. I lived in the inner city and the students at the private school lived in the suburbs with big houses and cars.... Some of the neighborhood kids accused me of acting white because of the way I talked and how I looked.”

Boys probably catch it worse than girls. “Being smart is looked down on,” says Oscar, a soft-spoken 15-year-old achiever from New York. “My friends can’t understand when I want to study instead of hanging out with them. They accuse me of selling out, acting ‘white,’ and talking ‘proper.’ Even though their words hurt, my dream is to go to college and I won’t let anything stand in my way.”

Even girls have noticed that boys come under more intense pressure. “Boys don’t want to be ‘nerds,’ which smart boys are considered,” according to Tiffany, a high school student in Atlanta. “It’s easier for me and my friends, although we have the issue of appearing as snobs or kids telling us that we think we’re better than anyone else because we get good grades and make our schoolwork our focus.”

Parents who keep close tabs on their kids spot the problem as well. “My daughter always gets, ‘You talk so proper. You sound like a teacher,’” says Helen, a teacher herself from Boston. “Then I get, ‘Your daughter talks proper, just like you.’ I offer no apologies for that. Instead, I say, ‘Thank you.’”

Education Week reporter Debra Viadero quotes one shrewd parent who offers an intriguing theory as to why nonachievers try to drag other youngsters down with them. “It sounds like a defense mechanism to me,” said Roslyn Mack, the mother of two African-American students attending integrated schools in the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights. “It gets reduced to: because I’m not doing well, I’m going to make you feel badly because you *are* doing well.”

Some busy or oblivious parents may actually be unaware of the pressure on their youngsters to take their studies lightly. Things happen on playgrounds and among classmates that children keep to themselves. But the fact they don’t complain doesn’t make the pressure any less real. If they feel the pressure, but don’t discuss it, that may actually make matters worse because it stays bottled inside them.

Even parents who are tuned in to their children struggle to motivate them to excel in school. “My son doesn’t want to be the brightest kid in his class,” complains a frustrated mother from St. Louis. “He wants to fit in. I keep on stressing that everyone is different, that it’s better to be a leader than a follower. But that doesn’t seem to hold much weight with a seven-year-old.”

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