

Support for Abbott schools

The Trenton Times

Wednesday, July 11, 2007

By Keith Lockwood

After reading the opinion article "More Abbott funding won't help poor black kids" (June 15) by Donald Roscoe Brown, I was consumed by a sense of dread. The emotional pall of a Dickensian educational system came to mind. Mr. Brown asserts that the Abbott initiative, although well-intentioned, is off the mark where and when it comes to meeting the needs of African-American children. Unfortunately, he doesn't recognize that the law is a hallmark of a legitimate instructional paradigm on behalf of all children in Abbott districts regardless of ethnicity. Based upon his extensive experience as an elementary school teacher in the vastly different New York City school communities of Harlem and Greenwich Village, he seems to believe that the Abbott statute is a judicial gaffe. He adds that his experience as an assistant program director at Educational Testing Service, a nonprofit organization that generates considerable revenue for the advancement of more testing, gives him the cachet to make discerning professional conclusions concerning the education of lower-income African-American children.

In his opinion piece, Mr. Brown focused on children of color. Abbott exists for the support of all students in those districts and schools that are in need of improvement. The essential thrust of the article was that African-American children have poor test scores because many of their parents are under- or nonsupportive of their children. He makes no mention of children of other ethnicities in the same districts who score just as poorly on standardized tests. He suggests that the guardians or parents of African-American students do not require their children to respect teachers and that they do not ensure that their children have meaningfully completed their homework or studied supplementary materials. In many districts and schools nationwide, there exists a subtext of a lack of respect for human beings. Children must be accorded the same respect given adult members of their educational communities. Many parents do well to teach their children to expect as much.

With all due respect to Mr. Brown, his notions, which make specific assumptions about the nature and intention of schools, require critical analysis. School environments are representative of a democracy. With that being said, democracy is a framework for all ideas -- not an organization of top-down executive officers who dictate to the children. They are environments where discourse and critical debate are cultivated. To be of benefit to children, educational environments are unconditionally supportive and a place where children are encouraged to be reflective and are allowed to make mistakes.

The provision of authentic instructional support is neither inexpensive nor easy. Education is complicated by many factors, not the least of which are low socioeconomic status, gender and ethnicity. Regardless of the exhortations of political partisanship or the "needs" of corporate America, we cannot compromise the intellectual and emotional needs of all our children. Abbott, an educational affirmation, proactively supports our children and the integrity of their instruction.

Mr. Brown criticizes lower-income African-American children and their parents and compares them negatively to lower-income students from nations such as Haiti, Liberia and Trinidad. Ironically, these countries' social and educational traditions are steeped in the European educational caste system, which one could argue does not provide opportunities or access for all students except for a privileged few.

That reinforces the notion that those who have access to education have a higher socioeconomic status -- precisely what Abbott seeks to palliate.

Mr. Brown extols the purported virtues of completing one's homework. Paradoxically, recent studies, including Alfie Kohn's highly regarded text, "The Myth of Homework," suggest that homework does not significantly influence academic achievement for students. Curiously, in a study conducted by The Rand Corporation, homework was found to achieve one goal: It socializes children by making them more amenable to working long days, well past the 9-5 scenario, so that when and if they enter the corporate structure they are more docile and will work for less. This set of values, I would strongly argue, has no place in our educational institutions other than as a notion that should be openly discussed.

For many years, there has been a concerted effort to undermine the laudable values of the Abbott statute, which evolved due to decades of institutional neglect and covert racism and classism. Attempts to erode the Abbott statute's field of influence have been directed by more affluent districts as a means of securing additional resources and reducing the property-tax burden on their constituents. Providing tax relief for the wealthy on the backs of our most vulnerable citizenry is thoroughly unacceptable.

Abbott is indeed necessary for all children who benefit from its security. Mr. Brown's assertions underscore a profound misunderstanding of its necessity in providing a free, appropriate and public education that has relevance and appeals to America's highest ideals.

Keith Lockwood, Ph.D., is a former public-school principal, teacher and director of special services. He is a special education program specialist with the New Jersey Department of Education. The opinions in this article are strictly his own and stem from his 17 years of experience as a special-education practitioner.

© 2007 The Times of Trenton
© 2007 NJ.com All Rights Reserved