

A Rationale for Creating African-American Immersion Schools

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The Milwaukee Public Schools educates more than 80 percent of the African-American students in Wisconsin. Thus, the economic and social well-being of African Americans in the entire state is inextricably tied to the quality and vigor of the Milwaukee elementary and secondary schools. And, for African Americans in the Milwaukee Public Schools, the system has unraveled. Consider the following:

- Milwaukee Public Schools are third among cities in the nation in suspending more black than white students from school.
- Between 1978 and 1985, 94.4 percent of all students expelled from the Milwaukee Public Schools were African Americans.
- During 1986-87, Milwaukee's African-American high school students had an average grade point average of "D" (1.46).

The statistics for African-American males are even more disturbing. For instance, of the approximately 5,716 African-American males enrolled in high schools, only 19 percent (1,135) have a cumulative grade point average of "C" and above. Also, during 1989-90 school year, 50 percent or 3,565 of the students suspended systemwide (7,113) were African Americans, although African-American males constitute only 27.6 percent of students in the system.

In addition, African-American males have a staggeringly high dropout and low graduation rate; some leave school as early as the elementary level.

For those who are serious about improving education for all students, it should be clear that desegregation alone is not the answer. Rather, we must expeditiously provide an excellent and equitable educational program for our African-American students with a high quality multicultural instructional approach.

The traditional American classroom's milieu has historically distorted and refused to recognize the language and cultural richness of African-American students. The typical instructional approach addresses the needs of Anglo-American students and, unfortunately, places the African-American students at greater risk of psychological abuse and of being miseducated by teachers having different cultural and language backgrounds.

In *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. DuBois (1909) explains that the black American male is always aware of his double consciousness: wanting to assert himself culturally as a black man, while also needing to show that he is an American like any other American. Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint indicates that an individual's sense of self derives from interaction with and reaction to other members of society. One learns to assume the rules and attitudes of peers, parents, and teachers.

In *The Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Class* (1990), Benjamin De Mott articulates the view that teachers and administrators who serve at-risk youth and who are not trained to be culturally sensitive can negatively affect those they intend to help. De Mott further states that public school teachers recognize the "ideal" student as one who personifies middle- and upper-class behavior, aspirations, manners, dress, and speech. "Where does this leave the African American in the educational process?" In order to effectively educate the African-American student, we must address these important concerns.

Victor Berger Elementary School and Parkman Middle School, Milwaukee's two immersion schools, place the African-American students and their culture at the center of the educational process. These schools are in the forefront of an effort to require those responsible for educating our students to gain an understanding of and to respect students' culture. Would not all teachers enhance their educational effectiveness if they gained an understanding of their students' culture and its implication for learning? □

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