

# Black excellence —the case of Dunbar High School

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**S**OCIAL pathology has held an enduring fascination for researchers, and nowhere more so than in the study of black Americans. Isolated “successes” or “heroes” receive occasional attention, but large-scale or institutionalized progress and excellence seem almost to be shunned, except for passing references to the “middle-class” end results. With all the voluminous outpourings on black educational pathology, there has been an almost total neglect of one of the most remarkable black educational success stories: Dunbar High School.

For a period of 85 years (1870-1955) Dunbar was an academically elite, all-black public high school in Washington, D.C. As far back as 1899, Dunbar students came in first in citywide tests given in *both* black and white schools. Over the 85-year span, most of Dunbar’s graduates went on to college, even though most Americans—white or black—did not. Most Dunbar graduates could afford only to attend the low-cost local colleges: either federally-supported Howard University or tuition-free Miner Teachers College. However, those Dunbar graduates who attended Harvard, Amherst, Oberlin, and other prestigious institutions (usually on scholarships) ran up an impressive record of academic honors. For example, it is known that Am-

herst admitted 34 Dunbar graduates between 1892 and 1954; of these, 74 per cent graduated, and more than one fourth of these graduates were Phi Beta Kappas.

In their careers, as in their academic work, Dunbar graduates excelled. The first black general (Benjamin O. Davis), the first black federal judge (William H. Hastie), the first black Cabinet member (Robert C. Weaver), the discoverer of blood plasma (Charles Drew), and the first black Senator since Reconstruction (Edward W. Brooke) were all Dunbar graduates. During World War II, Dunbar graduates in the Army included "nearly a score of majors, nine colonels and lieutenant colonels, and one brigadier general"<sup>1</sup>—a substantial percentage of the total number of high-ranking black officers at that time.

Almost as astonishing as Dunbar's achievements has been the ignoring of those achievements—which might, after all, conceivably have some bearing on questions about educating black children. No scholarly study of the school has yet appeared, and almost the entire literature on the subject consists of one slim volume, *The Dunbar Story*, printed privately at her own expense by Mary Gibson Hundley, a retired Dunbar teacher. Where Dunbar has been noticed at all, it has been brushed aside as a "middle-class" black school, and local tradition in Washington suggests that its students were predominantly light-skinned Negroes, many scarcely distinguishable from whites. The facts do not support either assertion, but the attempt to dismiss the Dunbar experience is a significant phenomenon in its own right.

### History

What are the facts and factors in the Dunbar story? First of all, Dunbar High School, as it existed from its founding in 1870 to the school reorganization following the Supreme Court's integration decision in 1954, is no more. The name and the building are still there, but it is now just another ghetto school—in appearance, atmosphere, and statistical profile. It is more fortunate than most in having a dedicated principal, but she is clearly struggling against the odds. Alumni who refer to "Dunbar when it *was* Dunbar" do not help her, or today's students, but they are expressing a bitter historical truth.

The unique educational phenomenon that was Dunbar High

<sup>1</sup> Mary Gibson Hundley, *The Dunbar Story* (New York: Vintage Press, 1965), p. 57.

School occurred between 1870 and 1955. The experience began in a basement school, changed locations and names,<sup>2</sup> but maintained institutional continuity and high academic standards. It was the first black high school in the United States, and it was an academic school from the beginning—fiercely resisting recurrent pressures upon it to become vocational, commercial, or “general.” It taught Latin throughout this period, and in some early years Greek as well. It was never “relevant” to the passing fads, but it instilled individual and racial pride. In the building it has occupied since 1916, the auditorium is dominated by a verse by black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar:

*Keep a-pluggin’ away,  
Perseverance still is king . . .*

Why this particular school—and why Washington, D.C.? There is no ready answer. Certainly there was nothing radically distinctive about the Washington black community through most of the 20th century, and since Dunbar was unique from the outset, the elements of that uniqueness are probably best found in history and in the traditions generated by its early success.

Back in 1870, the Washington black community was in fact unique. Although slavery had ended just five years earlier, the Washington Negro community was much older than that. As far back as 1830, half the Negroes in Washington were free. Before the Civil War started, 78 per cent of the blacks in Washington were free. As the slave states of the South progressively tightened up their restrictions on the “free persons of color” in the decades preceding the Civil War, Washington became something of a Mecca for those free Negroes seeking a better life. The federal government’s presence made Washington less oppressive than the Southern slave states and also opened employment opportunities in government jobs better than those open to black people elsewhere.

The Washington black community was thus more than a generation ahead in freedom and acculturation. Moreover, Dunbar was not a neighborhood school, but drew upon the entire black community of Washington for its students. It was in a similarly favorable position in recruiting its teachers and principals. Given the extreme scarcity of educated Negroes in 1870, Dunbar’s performance could not be readily duplicated elsewhere within any reasonable span of years. The first black woman to receive a college degree in the United States graduated from Oberlin in 1862—and taught at Dunbar. The

<sup>2</sup> Rather than keeping track of a variety of changing names, we will use “Dunbar” throughout to denote each of the successive institutions continuously deriving from the high school established in 1870.

first black man to graduate from Harvard received his degree in 1870 and became principal of Dunbar in 1872. For decades to come, Dunbar would have its choice of teachers with outstanding academic credentials. Four of its first eight principals graduated from Oberlin and two from Harvard. Some had graduate degrees as well. Dunbar had three Ph.D.'s on its teaching staff in the 1920's, due to the almost total exclusion of blacks from most college and university faculties. (It was 1942 before there was a black senior faculty member at any major university—and he was a Dunbar graduate.)

In short, as the first black high school, Dunbar had its pick of potential teachers and principals. By its early reputation for excellence, it continued to attract them. Segregation and discrimination gave it a captive market of both students and teachers. But though these may have been necessary conditions for Dunbar's success, they were hardly sufficient. What Washington also had was a black community that demanded academic excellence even in 1870, and continued to fight tenaciously for it over the years. As early as 1807, the approximately 500 "free persons of color" in the District of Columbia built a small school house for their children. Over the next several decades they sent their children to private schools before they were allowed in the public schools. When the "colored trustees" of the D.C. public school system established the first high school in 1870, they were planting it in fertile ground.

### **The founders**

The achievements of Dunbar no doubt also reflect the personal qualities of individual leaders during the institution's formative years. A special kind of confidence and courage must have been required for a black man or woman to pioneer at Oberlin or Harvard in the middle of the 19th century, when the very capacity of the race for education was openly questioned, even by liberals opposed to slavery. The early Dunbar principals had to be individuals not easily discouraged, frightened, or inclined to compromise about quality. This is how historical accounts describe them. Certainly this became the dominant tradition of the school.

The head of the group which founded the first high school for Negroes was a remarkable man named William Syphax. He grew up as a free man, having been freed in infancy in 1826, and became a civil rights activist in the Washington Negro community in the mid-19th century. He was described as a man of "dauntless courage and unwavering integrity" who "dared to demand what was due his

race, fearing no man regardless of position or color." The substance and tone of his messages to municipal and federal officials clearly support this description. He was hard-headed on education. While the group he led preferred Negro teachers for Negro children—other things being equal—they were not prepared to compromise quality for the sake of racial representation, for they deemed it a "violation of our official oath to employ inferior teachers when superior teachers can be had for the same money." Syphax was equally frank in telling the black community that it would have to send its children to school with respect for teachers and a willingness to submit to discipline and hard work, if their education was to amount to anything.<sup>3</sup>

The early principals were equally remarkable people. Mary Jane Patterson not only was the first black woman in the United States to earn a college degree, she did it by spurning the usual courses for women at Oberlin, and taking instead a program of Greek, Latin, and higher mathematics designed for "gentlemen." As principal, she was "a strong, forceful personality," noted for "thoroughness," and for being "an indefatigable worker." She was principal for a dozen years in the formative period of the school.<sup>4</sup>

A successor as principal, Robert H. Terrell, "devoted most of his time out of school to preparing boys for college," with the result that "a goodly number" later "completed their education at Harvard"<sup>5</sup>—and this at the turn of the century. The tradition continued as the school changed principals and buildings. In the period 1918-1923, Dunbar graduates earned 15 degrees from Ivy League colleges and universities, and 10 degrees from Amherst, Williams, and Wesleyan.

Throughout the period of its academic ascendancy, Dunbar was characterized by the *esprit* of its students, the dedication of its teachers, and the strong support of the community, both in everyday chores and in episodic crises. Special efforts were made to get college scholarships for bright but poor youngsters. Indeed, special efforts were often needed to get the parents of such youngsters to keep them in high school, instead of sending them to work to bring home some much needed help for family finances. One concrete indicator of student attitude is the record of attendance and tardi-

<sup>3</sup>E. Delorus Preston, Jr., "William Syphax, A Pioneer in Negro Education in the District of Columbia," *Journal of Negro History* (October 1935), pp. 462-64.

<sup>4</sup>Mary Church Terrell, "History of the High School for Negroes in Washington," *Journal of Negro History* (July 1917), pp. 255-56.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 259.

ness. A spot check of old Board of Education records in both categories shows Dunbar's record to have been superior to the average of its white counterparts, both around the turn of the century (1901-1902) and around mid-century (1952-1953).

### Dunbar I.Q.'s

The argument has often been made that I.Q.'s have little relation-ship to performance as far as black people are concerned; however, there is already a considerable literature indicating that I.Q. and similar tests are equally accurate predictors of black and white academic performance. Dunbar provides a somewhat different kind of test of this hypothesis, based on a black group with outstanding performances in both academic and career terms. Are Dunbar I.Q.'s significantly different from the national average I.Q. of 85 for black Americans? The table below answers that question:

TABLE 1. *Mean I.Q. of Dunbar Students*

CLASS OF	ALL STUDENTS	GRADUATES ONLY	NON-GRADUATES ONLY
1938	105.5	111.6	97.1
1939	111.2	114.0	101.9
1940	108.5	111.1	100.9
1941	109.3	111.7	101.7
1942	105.2	107.8	101.4
1943	101.3	102.6	98.5
1944	106.0	109.8	97.5
1945	98.8	101.6	93.5
1946	102.1	105.7	102.1
1947	102.6	108.4	94.9
1948	105.3	106.5	98.2
1949	106.1	106.1	104.0
1950	110.9	111.3	99.4
1951	102.7	103.4	98.1
1952	103.1	104.7	94.3
1953	101.3	102.7	93.5
1954	101.7	102.6	98.8
1955	99.6	100.8	96.4

Dunbar students' average I.Q.'s were substantially higher than those of other blacks as reported in numerous surveys, and usually were above the national average as well. Even the Dunbar dropouts scored higher than the average of other blacks. It should be noted that Dunbar students were *not* selected on the basis of I.Q. tests. Indeed, admission to Dunbar was a matter of individual self-selection. No one was automatically assigned to Dunbar, because it was not a neighborhood school during the 1870-1955 period. Nor was it likely that anyone merely happened to enroll there, since its repu-

tation and standards were well-known throughout the local black community. Indeed, some black youngsters from nearby Maryland and Virginia were known to give false D.C. addresses in order to attend.

The high I.Q.'s at Dunbar were hardly the whole story, however. An equal number of black students scattered elsewhere with equal I.Q.'s might not have produced an equal number of high academic and career performances, because certain other factors would have been lacking: (1) the *motivational* element associated with self-selection for such a school; (2) the benefits of mutual association with high-quality students and with teachers attracted to teaching such students; and (3) the school traditions, including distinguished alumni who were constantly being held up as examples to the students. Certainly, the kind of personal interest, counseling, and extra-curricular tutoring which Dunbar students received is extremely rare for black students today, whether in all-black or in integrated schools. A recent Ford Foundation study, for example, has reported the quality of counseling available to black students to be "markedly inadequate" in both North and South, and the testimony of college recruiters paints an even grimmer picture of neglect or distorted "guidance" given to black students.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly *not* essential to the Dunbar performance was racial integration, outstanding physical facilities, or generous financial support. It had none of these. Except for a few white teachers in its early days in the 1870's, Dunbar was an all-Negro school, from students to teachers to administrators, for generation after generation. Moreover, it was located in a segregated city, where as recently as 1950 Negroes were not admitted to most downtown movie theaters or restaurants. The physical facilities of Dunbar were always inadequate; its lunchroom was so small that many students had to eat lunch out on the street, and it was 1950 before the school had a public address system. Dunbar was part of a segregated school system, administered by whites at the top and perennially starved for funds. Internally, there were class-conscious and color-conscious cliques among students, and resentment of administration favoritism among the teachers. In short, the list of "prerequisites" for success in which educators indulge themselves was clearly not met at Dunbar.

### I.Q.'s and sex

There is evidence that Dunbar was at its peak some time *before* the period when I.Q. scores were recorded. The slight downward

<sup>6</sup> See Thomas Sowell, *Black Education: Myths and Tragedies* (New York: David McKay Co., 1972), p. 143.

drift of I.Q.'s over the 1938-1955 period is in keeping with the impression that this was the declining phase of its academic prime. The 1938-1955 period was studied statistically because this is the only period during Dunbar's academic prime for which I.Q. scores are available. Over the 18-year span, girls outnumbered boys every year—usually by about two to one, but by as much as three to one in the class of 1952. This conforms to a general predominance of females among high-I.Q. American Negroes—a baffling phenomenon, difficult to explain by either hereditary or environmental theories or by the cultural bias of the tests. Black males and females obviously draw upon the same pool of genes. They are also raised in the same environment. True, this environment creates sex role differentiation, but I.Q. tests are so structured as to produce virtually identical averages for males and females in the general population. Nevertheless, higher female I.Q.'s remain a persistent phenomenon among American Negroes, even though different tests are used in different times and places. I.Q. results from an all-male and an all-female junior high school (J.H.S. 139 and J.H.S. 136, respectively) serving the same neighborhood in central Harlem for a 20-year period (1941-1960) show the female school to have had a higher average I.Q. for all but one of the years for which such data were available. The particular I.Q. test used varied, but the relative standings of the sexes were virtually constant.

The higher I.Q.'s of black females might be a cultural peculiarity (along the lines of the Moynihan thesis, for example) or they could be a clue to the lower black I.Q. in general. Among human beings as a whole, and even among other mammals, males vary more (physically, emotionally, and mentally) with the environment than do females. If the generally low I.Q. scores of black Americans (or any other group) are due to environment rather than to heredity, it should also be expected that the lower average I.Q. would be accompanied by a degree of sex difference in I.Q. not found in the general population. This is almost invariably the case in studies of black American I.Q.'s. It is also true of studies of working class I.Q.'s in Britain, so it is hardly a racial characteristic.

### **Class and color**

Given the general predominance of mulattoes among the "free persons of color" and their descendants, it seems probable that the light-skinned mulatto stereotype was applicable to the early Dunbar students and teachers. This group continued for many years to be



over-represented among Dunbar students and teachers—but this is not to say that it constituted a majority. A study of old yearbook photographs at Dunbar High School shows the great bulk of the students to have been very much the color of most American Negroes. Any bias in the photography of that period—before black was beautiful—would be toward printing the pictures lighter than in life. My impression from visiting a Dunbar reunion also accords with the conclusion that most Dunbar students were not unusually light in complexion.

A study of class records for the period 1938-1955 also confirms that most Dunbar students' parents were *not* middle-class professionals. Among those students whose parents' occupations could be identified and categorized, the largest single category was consistently "unskilled and semi-skilled," and the median job index was at about the level of a white-collar worker. Perhaps more significantly, the differences in mean I.Q. were relatively slight between students whose parents fell in different occupational categories. For the classes of 1938-1955, the mean I.Q. of students whose parents were in the "unskilled and semi-skilled" category ranged from 96.1 in 1945 to 113.3 in 1950. The mean I.Q. of students whose parents were "professionals" ranged from 102.1 in 1942 to 124.2 in 1950. Moreover, even the academic exclusiveness of Dunbar should not be overstated. Figures available for the period 1938-1948 show that approximately one third of all black students enrolled in D.C. high schools were enrolled in Dunbar.

Although the local stereotype of Dunbar was that it was where the doctors' and lawyers' children went to school (as it probably was), the percentage of Dunbar students whose parents' occupations could be identified as "professional" never exceeded six per cent for any of the 18 years surveyed. Since only about half of the parental occupations were identifiable and categorized, this should be regarded as a high of about 12 per cent of the occupations known and classified—exceptionally large for a black school, but still a long way from predominance. Former Dunbar principal Charles S. Lofton refers to the middle-class stereotype as "an old wives' tale." "If we took only the children of doctors and lawyers," he asked, "how could we have had 1400 black students at one time?" Similarly, former Dunbar teacher Mary Gibson Hundley wrote: "A large segment of the students had one or more government employees for support. Before the 1940's these employees were messengers and clerks, with few exceptions."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Hundley, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

### Time and tradition

It is true, however, that the history and traditions of the school were to a large extent shaped by members of a few prominent families in Washington's Negro community. These were, typically, descendants of the antebellum "free persons of color," light-skinned in general, and in particular cases physically indistinguishable from whites. This group was not numerically dominant, and did not intermarry with the mass of blacks during most of the period under discussion, so it had little *biological* effect on the rest of the Negro population. (In fact, this small group of families married among themselves to such an extent that it became noted for birth defects.) But it did have a major and enduring cultural impact on the Dunbar community. For example, as late as the 1950's there was a dedicated Dunbar teacher of many years' service who had herself graduated from Dunbar, whose mother had graduated in the class of 1885, and whose grandfather had headed the group that set up the original school in the basement of a church in 1870. She is still active in alumni affairs today.

The history of Dunbar High School places in sharp relief the importance of time and tradition. Not only did the institution have a decisive head start as the first black high school in the country; the community from which it came had a similarly decisive head start in freedom, combined with stable employment opportunities in the federal government, even before the Civil War. These circumstances in turn drew into Washington a nucleus of like-minded and highly qualified Negroes, as well as a larger mass of less favored but also ambitious blacks receptive to their leadership. The individuals who founded and shaped the early history of the institution which became known as Dunbar High School were remarkable people, as is evidenced by their achievements as well as by accounts and descriptions of them. They were not narrow education careerists. Most went on to achieve distinction in other fields—as lawyers, judges, and, in one case, U.S. Consul in Vladivostok. The children and grandchildren of these individuals also went to Dunbar and often became teachers there as well, bringing a tradition and dedication that could not be bought on the open market.

A 20th-reunion survey of the class of 1940 indicates that Dunbar graduates apparently shared a striking characteristic of the black elite: fertility rates too low even to replace themselves. The married members of the class of 1940 averaged 1.6 children. This is typical of middle-class Negroes: They not only have far fewer children than lower-class Negroes, they have fewer children than whites of the

same income or education as themselves. This demographic peculiarity means that a great part of the struggle from poverty to middle-class status has to be repeated in the next generation, for very few black children are born to parents who could start them off with the benefits won by their own struggle.

### **Decline and fall**

The Supreme Court desegregation decision of 1954 set in motion a series of events which in a few years destroyed all that had been built up over several decades at Dunbar High School. The whole dual school system in Washington had to be reorganized. In this reorganization, all D.C. schools became neighborhood schools. The neighborhood in which Dunbar was located was one of the poorest multi-problem areas of the Washington ghetto. For years it had been the pattern that most youngsters who *lived* near Dunbar did not *go* to Dunbar. Now, suddenly, they did—and the character of the school began to change drastically. As an interim measure, existing Dunbar students were allowed to continue in the school until graduation, regardless of where they lived, and most elected to do so. This postponed the inevitable, but not for long.

Teachers used to bright, eager students began to find learning problems and then disciplinary problems in their classrooms. Advanced courses in mathematics faced dwindling enrollments which finally forced their cancellation, while remedial math courses appeared for the first time. Similar trends were apparent in other subjects as well. The Dunbar teaching staff at that time was somewhat advanced in years, and many began retiring—some as early as the minimum age of 55, whereas in the past it had been common for Dunbar teachers to stay on until the mandatory retirement age of 70. Equally qualified replacements were hard to find, with Dunbar now rapidly becoming a typical ghetto school. Ironically, the drastic changes forced upon Dunbar in the reorganization that followed the 1954 Supreme Court decision had virtually no desegregation effect, given the virtually all-black neighborhood in which the school was located.

Today, the present principal of Dunbar, Mrs. Phyllis Beckwith, spends much of her time dealing with discipline problems: roaming the halls to maintain order, receiving police reports on truants loitering on the streets during school hours, and otherwise struggling to achieve the kind of learning atmosphere earlier Dunbar principals could take for granted. In addition, Mrs. Beckwith spends a consid-

erable amount of her own after-school time maintaining contacts with the still active Dunbar alumni groups—attending class reunions and trying to elicit concern from the old Dunbar graduates for today's very different students. Her dedication is virtually the only reminder today of the Dunbar tradition. To an observer, her efforts seem heroic but largely unappreciated—either by the current students or by the old alumni, who show little sympathy for the students who to them represent the destruction of their school.

The Supreme Court's desegregation decision, as such, did not doom Dunbar High School. Theoretically, Dunbar could have remained an academically elite high school, not tied to neighborhood boundaries, and could have simply opened up to students without regard to race. There have been public schools of this sort in New York, Boston, and other cities. But in the emotionally charged atmosphere of the time, under the strong legal and political pressures to "do something" in the nation's capital, such a resolution was never a realistic possibility. "Neighborhood schools" was the rallying cry of whites resisting total desegregation; "integration" was the battle cry of black leaders. The maintenance of educational quality at a black elite high school had no such emotional appeal or political clout. The school reorganization plan gave something to both sides—a measure of integration and the maintenance of neighborhood schools—and so was a political success. For Dunbar, however, it was an educational catastrophe.

The Board of Education which promulgated the reorganization plan of 1954 that destroyed Dunbar High School seems to have had no appreciation of or concern about this possibility. In the lengthy and bitter debates recorded in the Board of Education minutes, almost every conceivable problem was argued, other than the effect of the reorganization on Dunbar High School. This is all the more remarkable because the Board's most vocal critic of the school superintendent's plan was a Dunbar alumna. Yet even today she cannot recall saying a word about Dunbar High School at the time, even in executive sessions not reported in Board minutes. Integration was the cry of the hour and the fight of the hour.

### **The conditions of achievement**

Although Dunbar High School was the product of unique historical circumstances, its educational and social achievements have continuing relevance. First of all, it showed what could be done with black children, including substantial numbers from low-income

backgrounds. The question of *how* it was done needs more exploration. It was not done by teaching ethnocentric "relevance," nor was it achieved with generous financing or even with adequate plant and equipment.

What Dunbar had was a solid nucleus of parents, teachers, and principals who knew just what kind of education they wanted and how to produce it. They came from one of the oldest and largest urban black middle classes in the nation. But the beneficiaries of this situation were not exclusively, or even predominantly, middle-class students. Because the knowledge and educational values of the black elite were institutionalized and traditionalized, they became available to generations of low-income black students. Despite the fashionable (and sometimes justified) criticism of the old "black bourgeoisie," they were a source of know-how, discipline, and organization otherwise virtually unavailable to lower-class blacks. The possibilities of transmitting this sophistication from a fortunate segment of the race to a wider range of receptive individuals may now have declined with the exit of the black middle class to the suburbs and with the rise of ideological barriers insulating "militant" black youth from such influences.

The I.Q. scores of Dunbar students averaged very much higher than those of black students in general, indicating that I.Q.'s and achievement are correlated among blacks as among whites. Note that "achievement" here means the *subsequent* accomplishments of students, rather than the socioeconomic background of their parents. Dunbar students from homes of low socioeconomic status also had substantially higher I.Q.'s than the black population at large. Special efforts were made by Dunbar teachers and counselors to tutor promising students from such backgrounds and to see that both they and their parents understood the importance of a college education, and the numerous practical details to be taken care of in order to secure college admission and financial aid. Most black high school students today get nothing resembling this kind of preparation, whether they are in all-black or in "integrated" schools.

### **Patterns of black success**

Dunbar developed and thrived during its period of academic ascendancy in almost total isolation from whites. Even as a subject of research, Dunbar was as remote from whites as if it were on Mars. It was part of a dual school system ultimately controlled by whites, but the white officials took little interest in what was going

on at Dunbar, and such interest as they did manifest took such forms as trying to get the school to move in a non-academic direction and resisting the demands of Dunbar parents for calculus courses and better chemistry labs. They casually destroyed the institution as an incidental by-product of their reorganization of the Washington school system in 1954. Ironically, white liberals noticed Dunbar only *after* it became a typical ghetto school with all the usual problems—and even then its previous history remains wholly unknown to them. Considering the general effect of white liberals on black education, it may be that the absence of such people and their “innovative” programs should be counted among Dunbar’s major advantages.

The Dunbar experience is by no means an argument for either externally imposed segregation or self-imposed separatism—and in fact the school fought against both these ideas. The founders of the school first tried to secure equal access to all public schools for all students, and only when this failed did they set about producing the best school they could for black youth. Down through the years, Dunbar teachers sought to break through the imposed insularity of a segregated society by bringing both black and white speakers, entertainers, and other cultural attractions to the school. While Dunbar promoted racial pride, it was pride in the achievements of outstanding Negroes as measured by universal standards, not special “black” achievements by special “black” standards.

There is a tendency among some white critics of the American Negro to point to particular black “success” models and ask, “Why can’t the *others* do it?” If racial barriers and cultural handicaps did not stop men like Ralph Bunche and Edward Brooke, how can they provide a blanket excuse for welfare recipients and hell-raisers? It is no answer to say that Bunche, Brooke, and others were just “exceptions,” for that amounts to nothing more than rephrasing the question. What the Dunbar history shows is the enormous importance of time, tradition, and institutional circumstances in providing the essential setting in which individual achievement can flourish. If such achievements were wholly or predominantly a matter of personal ability, so many outstanding individuals would not have come from one institution.

This concentration of black achievement in a few special settings is not limited to Dunbar. As rare as black doctorates are, empirically they are not *isolated* phenomena. A study of 609 Ph.D.’s awarded to Negroes in 1957-1962 showed that, while these black Ph.D.’s had attended 360 different high schools, 5.2 per cent of these high schools

had produced 20.8 per cent of the Ph.D.'s. (Dunbar was first among these high schools.) A more relevant comparison would have included the vast number of black high schools whose alumni earned no Ph.D.'s during that period—but this would only have made the concentration still more extreme. Another study examined those black families in which someone had earned a doctoral degree of some sort (M.D., Ph.D., etc.) and found that the average number of doctorates per family was 2.25. If the family setting permitted someone to earn a doctorate, it generally permitted more than one to earn a doctorate. Impressionistic evidence on the backgrounds of historic black figures also suggests that black achievements have come out of circumstances very different from those which the majority of Negro Americans experience. W. E. B. DuBois grew up with aristocratic New England whites, Ralph Ellison grew up on frontier territory, George Washington Carver was raised by a German couple, and even Booker T. Washington, though "up from slavery," was in his youth the protégé of a succession of wealthy, educated, and influential whites. This in no way demeans the achievement of these men, for ultimately they had to have the ability to do what they did. But it does underline the importance of the special circumstances necessary for individuals to realize their potential—and the remoteness of these circumstances from the lives of most American Negroes.

### **The problem of discipline**

Despite the emphasis on small classes in the educational literature, Dunbar had large classes. As far back as 1877, there were 40 students per teacher, and a survey in 1953 showed Dunbar's student-teacher ratio to be higher than that of any white senior high school in Washington. This was not a matter of principle but of necessity, given the inadequate financial support the school received from the white-controlled Board of Education. Obviously, class size is less of a handicap with self-selected and highly motivated students than with average students or with students lacking self-discipline. But while the Dunbar experience is not directly generalizable to ghetto schools, it does indicate where the problem lies. There is no inherent reason why large classes cannot be educationally effective, or even psychologically inspiring. The class size at which learning breaks down and disorder sets in is a function of the attitudes brought to the situation by students and teachers.

Much contemporary discussion of teaching methods, educational

philosophies, and organizational principles in the school system seems unreal in the context of the "blackboard jungle" atmosphere in many ghetto schools. While more classroom time is often devoted to trying to maintain order (or contain disorder) than to teaching, more educational literature is devoted to philosophy, politics, "black English," and in fact almost anything other than the overriding problem of reducing the chaos, disruption, and fear which can prevent *any* teaching method or philosophy from being effective. Yet it is not considered politic, much less chic, to discuss such things.

Although Dunbar, when it was an elite high school, had few discipline problems, its history is not wholly irrelevant here. The importance of parental attitudes and parental involvement was recognized literally from the inception of the school. Although Washington in 1870 had many Negro families who were ready and eager for a first-rate school, it also had many who were not. The recent abolition of slavery had swelled the black population of Washington with many new arrivals from Southern and border states. As of 1868, only about one third of the Negro children of the District of Columbia were attending any school. In this setting, William Syphax's admonitions to black parents to send their children to school with respect for learning and a readiness to work were very much to the point.

Black schools that have been educationally successful generally have *not* shared a common teaching method or educational philosophy. They *have* almost invariably had a high level of parental involvement. This was true throughout the ascendancy of Dunbar High School. It was also true of successful Harlem schools studied by Charles E. Silberman.<sup>8</sup>

### **The importance of parental involvement**

I found a graphic example of this in a ghetto school I visited in Cincinnati. Although Frederick Douglass School did not attain the erstwhile academic achievements of Dunbar, it was striking because its ancient building stood in the midst of a run-down slum, with no fence around it, no bars on the windows, no graffiti, quiet halls, and an atmosphere of human relations among the staff that would have been a credit to a middle-class private school. Board of Education statistics showed its staff morale indicators (turnover, etc.) and student performance to be well ahead of what should have been ex-

<sup>8</sup> Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom—the Remaking of American Education* (New York: Random House, 1970).



pected according to the socioeconomic profile of its neighborhood. Principal Tom Murray mentioned in passing that the school had corporal punishment, and added: "The staff resisted the idea, but the parents insisted upon it." When a white principal in a black school is given the authority to administer corporal punishment at the insistence of the parents, there is clearly more here than meets the eye—particularly in an era when the very appointment of a white principal in a black school is often opposed by the community (as Murray's appointment had been). Yet, by visiting the homes of hundreds of students, by talking "straight" (even bluntly) to the parents, by involving himself in the community, this man had been able to involve the community in the school. The important question here is not whether corporal punishment is good or bad, any more than the important question about Dunbar was whether Latin was really needed. The point is that certain human relations are essential to the educational process, and when these conditions are met, then education can go forward—regardless of methods, educational philosophy, or physical plant.

Parental involvement is particularly important in black schools, for the black culture is not a permissive culture. If black kids raise hell, it is because their parents don't know or don't care, but *not* because of any philosophy that youths should "do their own thing." Where black parents have become involved in a school, they have sometimes urged a stricter discipline than the school was prepared to impose. Parental involvement does not mean making "community control" either an ideological dogma or a public relations ploy. Where a community has a high rate of residential turnover, "community control" can mean the unchallenged dominance of a handful of activists not accountable to any lasting constituency. What is important is the widespread involvement of individual parents as such.

The importance of individual parents is often ignored or slighted. Schemes for "open enrollment," voucher systems, or any other form of free choice by black parents of public school children invariably run into the argument that uneducated ghetto parents cannot make informed educational choices. Yet the history of Dunbar High School shows that only a relative handful of people need to understand the complexities involved in creating a first-rate education. Once they have created such an education, the others need only be able to *recognize* it. Generations of *non-middle-class* youngsters were sent to Dunbar for just this reason. Today, thousands of other non-middle-class black youngsters are being taken out of dreadful ghetto schools (created by those who presumably do understand education) and

enrolled in local Catholic schools by Protestant black families. The cost of such schools is typically very low compared to other private schools, but still very high compared to ghetto incomes—and yet many black families are making this sacrifice in cities across the country. But this widespread phenomenon remains a non-event for intellectuals, just as Dunbar High School was a non-event for 85 years. To admit the possibility of widespread individual initiative on the part of those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder would be to threaten a whole conception of the world and of the intellectuals' own role in it.

### **The Dunbar example**

During the 1870-1955 period, the self-selection of students freed Dunbar from the incubus of disinterested and disruptive students. After such students began entering, following the school reorganization of 1954, they destroyed the school within a few years. Various forms of self-selection can free other institutions from the hard core of disruptive and violent students, but all plans that involve freedom of choice (vouchers, open enrollment, etc.) are damned by critics as inhibiting racial integration. It is an empirical question, however, whether black youngsters will gain more educationally by separation from a hard core of hell-raisers or by integration with whites. Studies of the educational effects of integration show few gains. Yet the shibboleth of integration is still powerful enough to thwart fundamental educational reform.

The combination of historical circumstances that created Dunbar High School can never be recreated. Some of those essential circumstances *should not* be recreated—for example, the racial barriers which led a scholar like Carter G. Woodson to teach at Dunbar High School, when he should have been conducting graduate seminars at a major university. Yet such historical experiences contain important lessons for the present. Dunbar did not seek “grass-roots” teachers who could “relate” to “disadvantaged” students, even though a substantial part of its students were the children of maids, messengers, and clerks. Dunbar’s faculty included many “overqualified” people, in today’s parlance. Almost all of its principals during its 85-year ascendancy held degrees from the leading colleges and universities in the country—not teacher’s college degrees or education degrees from other institutions. They had been trained in hard intellectual fields and had been held to rigid standards, and this was reflected in the atmosphere and standards of Dunbar.

While the Dunbar experience provides some empirical refutation for currently fashionable statements about the "necessary" ingredients of good education for black children, it is not itself a universal model. Part of Dunbar's strength was that it did not try to be all things to all people. The founders of the school intended it to be an institution solely devoted to preparing black students for college and in that special role it was unsurpassed. It showed what could be done and some of the ways that it could be done; it also demonstrated that some of the presumed "prerequisites" of good education are not really essential. What *is* essential is to create and sustain an atmosphere of academic achievement.

Dunbar High School provides no instant formulas for use by "practical" planners. Its example suggests that instant formulas by "practical" planners may not be the way to quality education. What is needed, above all, is *a sense of purpose*, a faith in what can be achieved, and an appreciation of the hard work required to achieve it. As the many flaws of Dunbar indicate, it is not necessary to find ideal people or an ideal setting, but it does require a dedicated nucleus of people in a setting where their dedication can be effectual.

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