Building Collaborative Partnerships with Local Churches to Assist Low Performing Schools

Since the founding of the Black church, these institutions have strived to implement and fulfill their missions. These institutions acknowledge the importance to become actively involved in the community as well as engaged in the lives of young people. Black churches are faced with unique challenges every day, however, they provide significant number of resources to the communities at large. In this study, we examine the role of partnerships through local churches and its impact on low performing schools using qualitative methodology. Research shows that low performing schools are influenced positively by partnerships with Black churches. Read more inside this issue.
The Busing Dilemma
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The long bus rides that students have to endure as a result of school mergers is a major point of contention for opponents of district consolidation (Buchanan, 2004; Howley, 2001; Howley & Howley, 2001; Pascopella, 2004; Ramage & Howley, 2005; Spence, 2000; Zars, 1998). It has received little attention in research. The issue of school busing rose to prominence in the late 1960s when forced school busing was legally mandated as a way to integrate schools (Malhoit & Yaunches, 2004). Most research examines school busing from this standpoint. Only a few researchers have focused on the daily commute experienced by rural students and its impact on school experience (Howley, 2001; Howley & Howley, 2001; Ramage & Howley, 2005; Spence, 2000; Zars, 1998).

While proponents of school consolidation argue that students in larger schools have more academic and co-curricular opportunities, critics maintain that long commuting times often preclude participation. Similarly, while school consolidation has proven cost effective in many cases (New Jersey, 1999; Self, 2001), the added expense of school transportation may have the reverse effect (Buchanan, 2004; Lawrence et al.).

The consolidation of rural schools in the United States has been a controversial topic for policymakers, school administrators, and rural communities since the 1800s (Bard, Gardener & Wieland, 2005). Throughout the history of schooling in America, school consolidation has been a way to solve rural issues in the eyes of policymakers and many education officials. Some small communities have successfully staved off consolidation, yet they view it as an inevitable occurrence at some point (Howley & Howley, 2006). Amidst the controversy surrounding consolidation, the overall consensus is that extensive research should be conducted to ensure that the district(s) is conducive to the economic and educational advantages of school consolidation (Hughes, 2003; Nelson, 1985, 1999; Okaloosa County, 2002).

The leading argument in favor of school consolidation is economic efficiency (Bickel & Howley, 2001; Nelson, 1985; Fanning, 1995). This perspective is exemplified by former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee who acknowledged and maintained that many rural residents oppose school consolidation but contends that very small rural school districts are economically unsustainable for many states, particularly in view of the dual pressures of increasing demands and limited resources (Buchanan, 2004). Declining school enrollments combined with a diminishing tax base in rural areas have fueled a wave of school consolidation efforts in several states since the early 1980s (Seal & Harmon, 1995).

Advocates of school consolidation argue there are educational as well as economic advantages (Nelson, 1985). Consolidated schools offer students a broader and richer array of courses while reducing expenditures for capital improvements and school building maintenance. A report issued by the Okaloosa County School District, Florida, cited raising academic achievement as the primary aim of school reorganization (Okaloosa County, 2002). In addition to a more diverse curriculum, consolidated schools also provide a greater variety of co-curricular activities and athletic programs (Nelson, 1985).

Although consolidated schools employ fewer teachers, teachers may have the advantage of higher salaries and more opportunities for professional development (Self, 2001). Students stand to benefit from teachers' professional status through greater instructional quality. However, in most cases, consolidation reduces administrative costs and allows more resources to be earmarked for classroom and student needs (Nelson, 1985; New Jersey, 1999).

On the other side of the debate are critics who argue that despite prevailing assumptions, enlarging school operations does not necessarily reduce costs or raise student achievement (Gregory, 1992). A substantial body of research confirms that students perform better in small schools (Bailey, 2000; Black, 2006; Cotton, 1996; Howley, 1989, 1996; Lawrence et al., 2002; Lee & Smith, 1997; Meier, 1996; Raywid, 1999; Wiles, 1995). Although larger schools have the resources to provide students with a wider range of activities, there is evidence that student participation in co-curricular and leadership activities is higher among students in small schools (Bailey, 2000; Cotton, 1996; Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; McNeal, 1999; Schoggen & Schoggen, 1988). Rural educators in the process of school reform initiatives report that their small school and class size convey an advantage in implementing comprehensive reforms (Carlson & Buttram, 2004).
The Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship among school achievement scores (school grades, standardized reading scores of students, and standardized mathematics scores of students) and transportation variables (percent of students transported, transportation dollars per student, and bus route miles in district) that may contribute to erosion in school level academic performance when schools consolidate in Florida. The study included data from 41 rural school districts of various sizes, localities, and sociodemographic composition throughout the state.

The Problem

The problem is long school bus rides may contribute to the erosion in school achievement scores when schools consolidate. Although the school bus has become such a fixture in the American landscape, the school bus ride is not a typical focus of study. Excessively long commutes force some students to give up co-curricular activities and detract from the time spent on homework (Spence, 2000). Classroom performance is affected when children arrive at school sleep deprived and have difficulty concentrating on academic work (Purcell & Shackleford, 2005; Spence, 2000).

Of all relevant topics, busing has been given the least attention. Rural students are more likely than their suburban counterparts to have rides lasting 30 minutes or longer, attendance areas exceeding 10 square miles, bus rides over rougher terrain, and have elementary and secondary school students sharing the same bus (Howley, 2001). The relationship between the length of bus rides and reading and mathematics grading of schools is unknown, although a large number of schools have consolidated in America.

However, a 2004 report issued by Challenge West Virginia showed that spending actually increased by 16% between 1990 and 2000 instead of decreasing, administrative costs increased, along with the cost of providing students with bus transportation, despite the fact that the state lost 34,000 students during that time.

Linda Martin, the executive director of Challenge West Virginia, declared that, “The state promised citizens they would save a lot of money and students would have a broader curriculum. Neither has happened” (Buchanan, 2004, p. 5). In particular, Martin implicated the long bus rides for undermining the educational experience of West Virginia children as well as contributing to soaring costs.

Research from different states shows mixed results for school consolidation. In New Jersey, building ongoing evaluation into the program was a key to winning public acceptance and promoting program success (New Jersey, 1999). The same strategy was similarly successful in Okaloosa County, Florida (Okaloosa County, 2002). Reports from Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, and Ohio indicate that the benefits of school consolidation outweighed disadvantages (Self, 2001).

In many cases, the main issue is a clash between the traditional values of small communities and the utilitarian perspectives of state policymakers (Seal & Harmon, 1995). From one perspective, proponents of school consolidation argue that consolidated schools gain status and identity in the community that they previously lacked (Nelson, 1985). Conversely, opponents argue that consolidation challenges the identity of small communities (Bard, Gardener & Wieland, 2005; Lyson, 2002).

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The study was conducted in rural school districts throughout the state of Florida. The study reviewed 98 schools in 41 rural school districts from Walton County in the North West to as far South as Monroe County. These rural school districts are diverse in size, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. They range in student population from Glades District Schools 1,012 to Leon District Schools 32,194. The socioeconomic range is also very diverse from Gadsden to Alachua counties. The benefits of small rural schools are especially pronounced for economically disadvantaged and minority students (Bickel & Howley, 2000; Black, 2006; Cotton, 1996; Howley, 1989; Howley & Howley, 2004; Howley, Strange, & Bickel, 2000; Irmsher, 1997; Johnson, 2006; Lee & Smith, 1997).
The impetus for school district mergers intensified in the post-World War II era with the onset of the Cold War (Bard et al., 2005; Lawrence et al., 2002; Olson, 1999). Lawrence et al. (2002) targeted the launch of Sputnik in 1957 as a pivotal point in the drive for school consolidation. Small schools were considered inadequate for providing science and mathematics courses that would enable Americans to meet the technological challenges of the “space race.”

The results of this study may be of interest to policymakers because of society’s spotlight on school consolidation issues. Two constant findings in the literature on school consolidation are the negative impact and positive impact of small school size on student learning and school involvement. Many rural students must endure long bus rides that interfere with their ability to make the most of the advantages of attending a larger school. While students have access to more co-curricular activities and advanced courses, the long bus ride drains them of time and energy. Transportation for students in consolidated school districts is neither academically nor economically beneficial. The financial cost of rural transportation can outweigh any other savings on school expenditures. The students who have the most demanding bus rides are typically the poorest who stand to gain the most by attending small schools.

Note: In the upcoming summer issue of Black Papers, Dr. Tolliver and Dr. Burnette will closely examine consolidated public school busing and its impact on student achievement in Florida schools.

REFERENCES


The discussion on consolidation and busing continues in the Summer 2012 issue of Black Papers as Drs. Tolliver and Burnette examine touchtone issues related to the busing dilemma including:

- Reducing administrative overhead
- Bringing larger share of educational resources closer to students
- Improving financial management
- Serving the “valued” customers who are students and parents
- Improving academic achievement

Contact the **Black Male College Explorers Program** at Florida A&M University for more information.

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Abstract

Since the founding of the Black church, these institutions have strived to implement and fulfill their missions. These institutions acknowledge the importance of becoming actively involved in the community as well as engaged in the lives of young people. Black churches are faced with unique challenges every day, however, they provide a significant number of resources to the communities at-large. In this study, we examine the role of partnerships through local churches and its impact on low performing schools using qualitative methodology. Research shows that low performing schools are influenced positively by partnerships with Black churches.

Introduction

In recent years, the importance of school community relations and overall school public relations has grown rapidly. The development of sound and constructive relationships between the school and the community are a necessary and natural function of a publicly supported institution in a democratic society. This position arises from a consideration of the public character of the school and the legal framework within which it operates. It is also supported by the role of public opinion in shaping educational policies and practices. Even though the American way of life is characterized by constant change, these considerations nevertheless form the basis of the decision making process in the management of public schools, and they exercise an influence on the nature and direction of change (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore 2005).

Communication is a key element to building effective relationships with external stakeholders. Schools that communicate with their external publics in an organized way have a better chance of receiving public support, minimizing criticism, learning the values and priorities of a community and reducing many functional ideas that will help them educate students better.

Too often there has been little interaction between educators and community partnerships. Today, however, there is a surge of interest in partnerships between community and faith-based organizations and schools in efforts to improve schools by effectively enhancing student learning and development. This seamless approach combines “inside” expertise with “outside” resources and support, resulting in a dual benefit: expanding services, support, and opportunities for young people, while strengthening the school as a universally available public institution for all residents. At their best, these partnerships transforms schools into “community schools,” vital centers of life that make their facilities and resources available to their neighbors Church.

Role and Mission Versus the Constitution

In 1995, the Clinton Administration released guidelines on school and community partnerships. The guidelines addressed faith-based organizations and schools that were interested in forming partnerships. "Our new guidelines will help them work together on common ground to meet constitutional muster, to avoid making students uncomfortable because they come from different religious traditions, while helping students make the most of their God-given talents," Clinton said.

A four-page document, published by the United States Department of Education (2003), titled "Guidelines for School Officials, Volunteers and Mentors Participating in Public School Community Partnerships," lists some dos and don'ts in developing school community partnerships:

1) schools that form partnerships and include faith-based communities must ensure the programs are secular, include student participants without regard to their religious affiliation, and are held in spaces that are free of religious symbols;

2) schools should not limit participation in the partnership to certain religious groups and should neither discourage nor encourage students in regard to engaging in religious activities; and

3) the guidelines also include reminders to volunteers, warning them not to pray with students,
preach about their faith, or prohibit or discourage any activity solely because of its religious nature.

President Bush signed an Executive Order (EO) in 2001, allowing for increased partnerships between faith-based groups and the government. The EO created a White House Office on Faith-based and Community Initiatives to “help funnel millions of dollars to religious groups working on social problems” (O'Keefe 2001, p. 1). The order also instructed the five cabinet-level agencies (Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Labor, Department of Justice, and Department of Education) to lift regulations that had prevented nonprofit religious groups from collaborating with the Federal Government. President Bush asked Congress to make it easier for faith-based groups to compete for federal grants traditionally obtained by secular nonprofit groups (O'Keefe, 2001).

Some groups, including African-American faith-based groups, opposed President Bush's commitment because they viewed his EO as a violation of the Constitution's First Amendment declaration of separation of church and state. Traditionally however, Black churches have had a cooperative relationship with government. According to a study of 1,236 congregations published in the 1999 American Sociological Review, "nearly two-thirds of pastors from predominantly African-American churches said they would seek government funds for social service projects. That contrasted with a mere 28 percent of conservative, mostly White evangelical church leaders" (O'Keefe, 2001, p. 2).

For years these donors shunned religious institutions, worried about the separation of church and state. But now, many have come to believe that churches, by their very nature, can supplement what they see as gaping holes in public schools, providing moral or religious training and treating the whole range of social ills that doom many children to failure. To avoid church and state conflicts, most donors require that funds be used for nonreligious educational programs; filling a gaping hole.

Past and present administrations have recognized the importance of church and state separation; however, they have also recognized the need for faith-based organizations to be included in the development and delivery of educational and social services. Since religious institutions are considered one of the prime sources of moral teachings in the community and based on findings that over 50% of all Americans regularly attend church, church involvement in addressing social, political, and educational problems would seem appropriate (Loury & Loury, 1997). It can be argued that the influence of the church is even greater within the Black community. The Black church has been long recognized as the oldest and most influential institution founded, maintained, and controlled by African American people (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, & Lincoln, 2000). These researchers further noted that no other institution in the United States can claim the loyalty and attention of African Americans that the Black church claims.

Schools by themselves cannot achieve goals and objectives of the institution alone. Schools are discovering that faith-based and community groups can be important allies in supporting student learning (Roehlkepartain, 2007). Low-performing schools, in particular, need the assistance of community stakeholders to raise student performance (United States Department of Education, 1998). Given the importance of the church in the Black community, it is likely that any attempts to introduce educational, social, political, economic development or health programs to disadvantaged or minority communities would require their participation.

In the current political climate, standards-based reform is creating pressure to increase student achievement, a pressure felt most intensely by teachers and administrators. Meanwhile, community builders — community development corporations, neighborhood-based organizations, faith-based groups, settlement houses, and others — are starting to include education reform as part of their agenda to develop the community's social, physical, economic, and political infrastructure. In a 2003 study, researchers Mark Regnerus and Glen Elder Jr. demonstrated that when youth from low-income neighborhoods attend church, their academic performance improves. The study, commissioned by the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, relied on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine the relationship between religion and academics in nearly 10,000 students. Regnerus and Elder (2003) found that the poorer the neighborhood, the more church attendance helped kids to improve academically. The findings held true even after controlling for obvious influences, such as a student's relationship with parents.

Regnerus and Elder (2003) are not the only researchers to find a link between church and academic excellence. More than 600 studies identified by the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society have also shown the positive effects of religion on physical, mental, and social health. In 2002, Loconte and Fantuzzo (2008) conducted a study that focused on social services delivered by faith-based organizations. Leaders at 37 faith-based organizations from 22 states were interviewed. The faith-based organizations worked with public schools, correctional centers, child and family service providers, public housing agencies and juvenile courts. The researchers found that religious organizations met the emotional needs in the lives of youth by building relationships of trust and love.
The leaders considered exposure to faith as a very crucial part of their effectiveness with youth. Improving academic performance seems to flow from "doing" church than from merely believing. In neighborhoods where libraries and schools are depleted and after-school jobs are hard to find, the church is the main resource-rich presence in the community. For instance, Black churches in Leon County, Florida, have been very supportive and attentive to the needs of the children within their communities. These churches recognize the unique problems that exist for children residing in their communities and have sought ways to address these problems through grants, corporate sponsorship, congregational and community support. In an effort to serve the youth in its community, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church was the recipient of a Department of Juvenile Justice grant in 2002 that was utilized to provide after school services (i.e., mentoring and tutoring) for elementary and middle school children. Many of the mentors for this program were criminal justice students from Florida A&M University. New Mt. Zion AME Church, located in Tallahassee, Florida, in its efforts to provide school supplies for the children in the community, sponsors an annual backpack program where children are given backpacks filled with the necessary supplies for the new school year. It should be noted that Griffin Middle School, which is located about .2 (two tenths) miles south of New Mt. Zion AME Church, performed better than other schools located in disadvantaged communities.

The Black Church: A New Agenda

Those who would save America's inner-city schools are discovering a long-neglected resource, the Black church. From after-school tutorials to summer schools, computer classes to family science activities, Black churches are renewing their historic commitment to education. But now, they are getting money from private foundations and some government agencies that see Black churches as their best link to children in neighborhoods beset by poverty, violence, and school failure.

As retired Senior Bishop John Hurst Adams of the AME Church observed recently, Black churches are operating essentially on the agenda given to them by their founders. The first agenda of early Black American congregations and of emergent denominations included (a) the proclamation of the gospel, (b) benevolence, (c) education and, by the mid-19th century, (d) foreign missions (Jones, 2001). The fact that these items continue to dominate the church’s mission priorities and stewardship planning may be attributed in part to the continuing marginalization and relative powerlessness of Blacks in American society. It is also due, in part, to the fact that religious institutions in Black communities have not been sufficiently cognizant of the radical implications that the changing political, economic, and social realities have for their life. Bishop Adams’s antidote for this institutional inertia is “zero-based” mission planning -- an imaginative and valid suggestion.

The church’s historic concern for education initially focused on efforts to compensate for the exclusion of Blacks from access to elementary education. After emancipation, the most pressing concern became that of establishing and supporting secondary schools and colleges (Jones, 2001). By 1900, the churches had compiled an impressive record: Black Baptist associations were supporting some 80 elementary schools and 18 academies and colleges; the AME churches were underwriting 32 secondary and collegiate institutions; and the smaller AME Zion denomination was supporting eight (Jones, 2001). Historically, the Black Church has been a core institution for African-American philanthropy. The Black Church does not only serve as a faith-based house of worship, but also facilitates organized philanthropic efforts including meeting spiritual, psychological, financial, educational and basic humanitarian needs such as food, housing, and shelter. Most Black churches are community focused, committed to helping the inner city, and are owned and operated by African-Americans (Duran, 2001). Their impact on the Black community, especially as it relates to education, is historically well-documented.

The following examples show ways in which schools have developed collaborative partnerships with churches and other religious organizations:

1) Between 2002 and 2004, there was a 50% increase in the number of faith-based organizations receiving state funding to provide juvenile delinquency prevention services in Florida. These services typically involved educational and character development activities. Following the direction of the Federal Government, the leadership in Florida recognized the importance and commitment of faith-based organizations in providing community-based social services and encouraged their participation. State agencies were encouraged to solicit faith-based and other nontraditional service providers to compete for grants and other funding sources on an even playing field with other social service agencies.

2) The University of South Florida, located in Tampa, Florida has developed a Church Leaders Assuring Student Success (C.L.A.S.S.) program, designed to promote the collaboration and sharing of educational resources and information between faith-based organizations, community groups and schools. Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, DC, established a Family Life Center to strengthen and nurture families in the surrounding community, bringing them together for educational, cultural, and recreational activities. One of its
collaborative partnerships with faith-based organizations: school administrators in low performing schools in building level, because that is where the real action takes place, ways to move national initiatives to the local, grassroots expanding educational and technological opportunities, it is ing children to achieve high standards. In today's world of volition to church facilities where 250 volunteers work with 350 children, providing assistance in reading and mathematics. Volunteers from the tutoring program also raise funds to purchase school supplies and then operate a school supply "store" that gives school supplies to students prior to the opening of school. 

4) The Sixth Episcopal District of the AME Church (Georgia) launched an America Reads Challenge project with emphasis on rural areas. "Meeting Our Community in Their Community" launched a campaign to provide a home library for every family in several rural areas. The fourth Sunday of each each month was declared "My New Books Sunday." The project culminated in a special learning and recreational event featuring storytelling, reading aloud, and a time for children to pick out their new books. 

Conclusion Many national religious organizations are committed to being a part of improving the educational opportunities available to children in the communities that are served by their houses of worship. Together, national organizations, their local affiliates, schools, communities, and individuals can make a positive difference in the family's involvement in education and help improve schools by assisting children to achieve high standards. In today's world of expanding educational and technological opportunities, it is more important than ever to find effective and efficient ways to move national initiatives to the local, grassroots level, because that is where the real action takes place, which is helping children learn.

Recommendations The following recommendations are made to assist school administrators in low performing schools in building collaborative partnerships with faith-based organizations:

1) Encourage and build collaborations between state and federal agencies responsible for the oversight and delivery of educational services and faith-based institutions.

2) Study the feasibility of creating a faith-based institute to serve as a clearinghouse and training hub for faith-based organizations. The institute would also provide programmatic and management training, specific goal and objective measurement, evaluation, and documentation.

3) Develop strategies to solicit faith-based institutions to utilize their existing resources (i.e., facility, transportation, etc.) to provide needed educational and social services within their community.

4) Faith-based institutions must make assisting low performing schools a part of their mission work.

References


Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test Student Performance Results: Demographic Report, 2000-2007.

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice 2006 Comprehensive Accountability Report.


Participants are enrolled in grades 7th-11th:

An African-American male enrolled in a Florida middle or high school
A child of a low income family
A depressed grade point average that does not adequately represent the potential of the student
A history of disciplinary problems or the propensity to display irregular behavior
Willingness to commit to the program through high school graduation
Willingness to consider post-secondary education after high school

Anticipated Outcomes:

75 percent of the students’ grade point averages will increase by 20 percent
70 percent of the students will meet all college course requirements by graduation
90 percent of the students will graduate
70 percent of the students will manifest a change of attitude by
   Increasing their class attendance;
   Decreasing their discipline referrals;
   Improving their appearance; and
   Seeking college university admission.

Programs participants attend a six-week summer school session at the FAMU campus. While the program curriculum will be the focal point of the summer session, the by-product is exposure to college, campus activities and life style. Students will attend classes daily, Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday will serve as a personal development day. The program includes transportation to and from the campus, lodging, food, books, and classroom materials. Given our current appropriations FAMU will house, feed, insure, and provide personnel to instruct, mentor and counsel approximately 40 young men during the 2012 summer residential program.

Please Note: Because of deep budget reductions totaling more than 80 percent ($485,300.00) of the 2008-2009 fiscal year appropriation; our rationale for the Give One ($1) To Save One initiative becomes part of a solutions-based self-sufficiency model. Florida has approximately 325,000 Black male students; and, in order to have any creditable statewide impact our BMCEP budget would need to approach 200 million dollars given only 37 percent of Black males graduate from schools in Florida.

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