

Why Black Students Are Making Progress

"Why Is Black Educational Achievement Rising?" by David J. Armor, in *The Public Interest* (Summer 1992), 1112 16th St. N.W., Ste. 530, Washington, D.C. 20036.

The bad news about the lives of many blacks living in America's cities is all too familiar: drugs, crime, joblessness, family breakdown, and, by many accounts, failing public schools. Yet, in the face of these oft-reported woes, black students in America over the course of the 1970s and '80s posted substantial gains in math and reading achievement, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). What explains this good news? Armor, a George Mason University sociologist, contends that the most important factor was neither school desegregation nor compensatory-education programs but rather the rising socioeconomic status of many black families.

The students' accomplishment—as measured by NAEP tests, a series of "snapshots" based on samples of schools and students and done for the U.S. Department of Education—is impressive, whatever the reasons for it, especially when contrasted with white achievement, which was largely stagnant over the same period. In reading, for example, the scores of black 13-year-olds jumped from 222 (out of 500) in 1971 to 242 in 1990, cutting the black-white gap nearly in half—from 39 points to 20. In mathematics, the story was much the same, with the black-white gap for 13-year-olds dropping from 46 points to 27.

Educators and others, including the head of the research organization that administers the NAEP, have speculated that the black achievement gains may result in part from school desegregation. Armor, however, says the trends do not match up. Most of the increase in school desegregation took place during 1968–72 and few comprehensive plans were implemented after 1980. The gains in black achievement were as large after 1980 as they were during the '70s. Moreover, recently released data from the NAEP itself show that while blacks in majority-white schools generally scored higher than blacks in predominantly minority schools, the latter students registered equal or greater gains.

Specialists trying to explain the striking progress of black students also have looked to the growth of compensatory-education programs such as Head Start for preschoolers and Chapter I, which gives

extra help to low achievers in poverty-ridden schools. But worthwhile as these programs may be, Armor says, national studies have found that their positive effects are modest or short-lived. "Although compensatory programs may explain some portion of black achievement gains, it is unlikely they account for most of the improvement."

Most national studies of academic achievement show that it is most strongly linked to such socioeconomic factors as parental education, income, and job status, Armor notes. NAEP data suggest the same. In 1971, only 21 percent of black 13-year-olds had parents whose education extended past high school; by 1990, 49 percent did. By the latter year the black parents had achieved near-parity with the white parents, 53 percent of whom had gone beyond high school. "The increased education of black parents is not necessarily the direct cause of achievement gains" by their sons and daughters, Armor says. Rather, it indicates "a host of specific family behaviors and attitudes—such as motivation, educational aspirations, child-rearing practices, help with homework—which [translate] into actual academic improvement for their children." Encouraging such behavior and attitudes within families, he suggests, might help American children of all races and ethnic groups more than all the much-touted schemes for school reform.

My Brother's Keeper

"Selling Poor Steven" by Philip Burnham, in *American Heritage* (Feb.–Mar. 1993), 60 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011.

It was "a very Sad Day" for William Johnson of Natchez, Mississippi. "Many tears were in my Eyes . . ." he wrote in his diary on December 31, 1843, "On acct. of my Selling poor Steven," a slave whom he had bought in 1832 for \$455 and just sold for \$600. Of all Johnson's slaves—he had 15 helping him try to turn a profit on his farm when he died in 1851—only one, aided by "a white scoundrel," ever escaped to freedom. Yet, as in the case of Steven, Johnson expressed considerable compassion for his human property in his diaries. As well he should have, for Johnson once had