

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

been a slave himself.

Black slave-owners do not fit easily into today's stereotypes of the slave master, notes Burnham, a Washington-based free-lance journalist. Yet black slave-owners were a reality in ante-bellum America, albeit "a tiny minority within a minority."

Nearly one in eight blacks, or more than 300,000, according to the 1830 census, were so-called free persons of color, having reached that status by birthright, manumission, or the purchase of their freedom. Of those, 3,775 blacks, living mostly in the South, owned a total of 12,760 slaves. The vast majority of these masters had no more than a few slaves, but some in Louisiana and South Carolina owned as many as 70 or 80.

In most cases, Burnham says, the motive for ownership appears to have been benevolent. Mosby Shepherd, for instance, manumitted by the Virginia legislature for having provided information about an insurrection in 1800, bought his own son with the intent of later freeing him. "Owning blood relatives could be a convenient legal fiction to protect them from the hostility that free blacks attracted," Burnham notes. "Often it was a way to evade stringent laws requiring newly freed slaves to leave the state within a certain period." (Sometimes, ownership added a new dimension to fam-

ily disputes. After Dilsey Pope, a free woman of color in Columbus, Georgia, quarreled with her husband, whom she owned, she sold him to a white slave-owner. Husband and wife eventually settled their differences, but the new owner refused to sell him back to her.)

Not all black slave-owners, however, were motivated by a desire to protect family members. A "significant minority," Burnham observes, owned slaves "for the same reasons that motivated white slave-owners: commercial profit and prestige." Andrew Durnford, a free man of color, bought slaves at auction for use on his sugar plantation south of New Orleans. He did not think manumission would become widespread. "Self-interest is too strongly rooted in the bosom of all that breathes the American atmosphere," he once explained. At his death in 1859, he owned 77 human beings.

As the Civil War approached, Burnham says, the position of black slave-owners grew more uneasy. In 1860, several wrote to the New Orleans *Daily Delta* that "the free colored population (native) of Louisiana . . . own slaves, and they are dearly attached to their native land . . . and they are ready to shed their blood for her defence. They have no sympathy for abolitionism; no love for the North, but they have plenty for Louisiana."

PRESS & MEDIA

The Cheerleaders on the Bus

A Survey of Recent Articles

Never before had a presidential candidate donned shades and played the saxophone on a late-night television talk show. And never before had a serious contender for the nation's highest office announced his candidacy on a television call-in show. No doubt about it: The Making of the President 1992 was different. But if TV chat shows assumed unprecedented political importance last year, most Americans, according to the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, still got their news about the presidential contest from the traditional sources: TV news programs and daily newspapers.

Many journalists thought the press had done badly in covering the 1988 presidential contest, in

which visual images—of Willie Horton, of George Bush at a flag factory, of Michael Dukakis in a tank—seemed to predominate. "This time, there was a real determination to keep the candidates from controlling our agenda," *Newsday* campaign correspondent Susan Page comments in a survey in *The Finish Line: Covering the Campaign's Final Days* (Jan. 1993), a special report from the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center. "The best example," she says, "may be the tough coverage . . . of television ads for distortion and lack of context."

Yet if the press in 1992 succeeded in correcting its worst failures of '88, and tried hard to give thoughtful coverage to economic and other issues, it still managed to stumble badly, in the view of