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In Pursuit of Equity, Ethics, Excellence

A Call to Close the Gap

By Jesse L. Jackson

As a religionist involved in the struggle for excellence in education, the thing that appeals to me is that both have in common a commitment to truth. Religion from its perspective seeks to know the truth, and education from its perspective has an ultimate commitment to seeking to know the truth.

Truth, however, is not static; it is organic. It cannot be limited to just the "facts." When fully understood, truth represents the dynamic combination of what has been, what is, and what ought to be. And every generation faces its particular challenge—to know and engage in that dynamic truth if it is going to be relevant to its day.

Sometimes people argue, "who was the greatest?" Babe Ruth or Hank Aaron; Rocky Marciano or Muhammad Ali; Oscar Robertson or "Dr. J?" All anyone can say, objectively, is that each was the best of his day.

History and circumstances provide the context within which each generation addresses the issues of its day. Life's circumstances determine, in large measure, strategies and tactics available, timing and choice of priorities. The greatness of this generation will be determined by how well we deal with the priority needs of this day in light of where we need to go as a people. The failure of this generation would be to answer questions that nobody is asking.

Historically, we have been locked out and our challenge has been to *move in*.

1954. *We moved in* to the right of equal educational opportunity (Brown vs. Board of Education).

1964. *We moved in* to the right of public accommodations (Civil Rights Act).

1965. *We moved in* to the right to participate politically (Voting Rights Act).

1968. *We moved in* to the right to buy a house in any neighborhood (Open Housing Act).

But the new challenge is to *move up*. Upward mobility is the issue. Our struggle has shifted from the horizontal to the vertical. It was difficult marching across the plains, but it will be even more difficult climbing the mountain—often without a rope.

Too many young people in this generation have lost their appreciation for the historic shoulders upon which they stand. The Merediths (James), and the Hunters (Charlayne), excelled because they willed to serve the need of their generation by busting down the barriers of opportunity. They refused to allow death threats, antagonisms, governors, demagogues, dogs, fire hoses or anything else to stand in their way. It was a hard fight to create opportunity.

The challenge of this generation is to match opportunity with effort and efficiency to take advantage of the opportunity. Too many young people today think that change will come as a right rather than through effort. If this generation is to be great, it must keep those doors open, walk through them and conquer the tasks beyond opportunity.

We must EXCEL because we are behind. There is one white attorney for every 680 whites, one Black attorney for every 4,000 Blacks; one white physician for every 649 whites, one Black physician for every 5,000 Blacks; one white dentist for every 1,900 whites, one Black dentist for every 8,400 Blacks. Less than 1 percent of all engineers are Black. Blacks make up less than 1 percent of all practicing chemists.

We must EXCEL because resistance to our upward mobility has increased. The Bakke case has convinced white America, erroneously, that Blacks are making progress at the expense of whites. The mass media has conveyed to white America that Blacks have gained too much too fast, and have come too far in their quest for equality. There is resistance to our upward mobility.

We must EXCEL because the sickness of racism, in too many instances, forces us to be superior in order to be considered average.

We must EXCEL because competition is keener. The exportation of jobs to the cheap labor base of the Third World; the increased competition on the world market from Japan, Western Europe and the Middle East; and cybernation and automation have forced us to compete for jobs requiring greater knowledge.

We must EXCEL because of the joy and fulfillment that comes in the victory of conquering a task and doing it well against the odds.

Our goal is educational and economic equity and parity. The goal is to close the gap between the races, the rich and the poor, male and female. We are behind in a race; the only way to catch up is to run faster.

What does EXCEL advise in this race to close the gap? Does it follow the conservative educational school of thought, or does it follow the liberal thought? EXCEL is neither conservative nor liberal, but follows the school of thought which is basic. We know that ignorance and poverty are on the bottom of all isms—capitalism, communism and socialism. EXCEL focuses on what is basic to all education. And what is basic means: effort must exceed opportunity for change to occur; people excel in what they do most; that there is nothing wrong with our genes, but there is something wrong with our agenda.

We must change our agenda if we are going to close the gap and catch up.

To date, EXCEL's major contribution has been to change the atmosphere and expectations around education, provide some motivation and spark some involvement. It must now seek massive involvement and massive effort. Both tears and sweat are wet and salty, but they render a different result. Tears will bring sympathy, but sweat will bring change.

I. Equity

Racism has forced the Black liberation movement to spend most of its time and effort fighting for opportunity. Thus, in 1954, the Brown decision allowed us to use the leverage of the law to compete as equals. EXCEL is not a departure from that historic struggle; rather it is an extension of and a quest for the fulfillment of the historic goal of educational equity and parity. The fight against all institutional and structural impediments to equal educational opportunity must continue. EXCEL, therefore, supports the foundation laid in the Brown decision but argues that we must go beyond the desegregation of our school children to the desegregation of the power. The same people who were in charge of segregation are still in charge of desegregation. Thus, Black children, parents and educators have no protection, and are without ability to redress their grievances.

One might ask what grievances? What protection is needed? Nancy L. Arnez of Howard University shows in her research work that desegregation in a power vacuum has negatively impacted upon the Black community in the following specific ways: the loss of teaching and administrative jobs by Blacks through dismissals, demotions, or displacement; the loss of millions of dollars in projected earned income; the loss of racial models, heroes, and authority figures for Black children; the loss of cherished school symbols, colors,

emblems, and names of schools by Black children when their schools were closed and they were shifted to white schools; subjection to segregated classes and buses, and exclusion from extracurricular activities; disproportionate numbers of Black students suspended, expelled, and pushed out of school; exposure of Black children to hostile attitudes and behavior of white teachers and parents; victimization by forced one-way busing policies and the uprooting of Black children for placement in hostile school environments without any support systems; victimization by misclassification in special education classes and track systems; victimization by unfair discipline practices and arbitrary school rules and regulations; and victimization by ignorance of their learning styles, culture, social, education and psychological needs.

The country's agenda relative to desegregation today is: to enforce the present law, desegregate the power, and complete the task of changing peoples' hearts and minds—not just their behavior and actions.

In addition, we are increasingly confronted with a new phenomenon in our large cities. White flight has left our cities essentially non-white and poor. The issue now is not so much segregated schools but segregated school systems. Therefore, we must fulfill the letter and the spirit of the 1954 Brown decision through metropolitan-wide desegregation. Arbitrary boundaries must not be the basis for denying equal educational opportunity.

Another impediment threatening to deny us equal educational opportunity is the lack of adequate and equitable funding for schools. Funding must be adequate to need and addressed to need. The present tax rebellion in California, the refusal of the voters to support school bond issues in Cleveland and Toledo,

Ohio, for example, and the Packwood-Moynihan (Senators Robert and Daniel P.) tax credit proposal threatens to create a three-tiered educational system: A suburban school system based on class, a private school system based on race, and a public inner-city school system based on rejection and alienation.

The nation is now in the process of a massive prison-building program. But building more jails and incarcerating more people is an uneconomic as well as unethical proposition—unethical because it doesn't attempt to redeem and change the individual into a productive citizen. It is uneconomic to the extent that if a young man or woman enrolls at any state university for four years it will cost less than \$20,000. If he or she goes to the penitentiary for four years it will cost more than \$50,000. Thus, education and employment cost less than ignorance and incarceration.

A third impediment is the use of tests to disenfranchise us. Competency tests, too often, are being used in a punitive rather than a redemptive way. We support tests and testing but tests must be used to detect and diagnose, not to delete and eliminate.

Lastly, economic equity and parity must join hands with educational equity and parity for us to be successful. We cannot educate in an economic vacuum. The context must aid our educational goals. We can no longer tolerate a white high school drop-out getting jobs denied to Black and brown high school graduates. An unemployment rate for Blacks that is twice that of whites is a negative inducement to achieving our educational goals. It discourages whites from getting an education because they feel they can get a job without it. It discourages Blacks from getting an education because they feel that even with an education, they will not get the job. Economic disparities impede educational equity and parity.

II. Ethics

There is no such thing as value-free education. Non-values are values, but they are values leading to social, economic and political decadence and decay. Therefore, we argue that the death of ethics is the sabotage of excellence. We need a moral revolution—a revolution in values that will allow us to close the gap. We need a value system that will allow us to fulfill our essential human and humane tasks—to be producers, to be providers and to be protectors.

Ethnic discrimination and an ethical collapse are the joint impediments to excellence. If we are to lift ourselves out of this morass, we must shift our sights from the superficial to the sacrificial. We must lift our sight in order to see a new vision, and we must dig to new depths in order to penetrate the superficial.

If we are to close the gap and catch up, we must do so by disciplining our appetites, engaging in ethical conduct, and developing our minds.

A steady diet of violence, vandalism, drugs, irresponsible sexual conduct, alcohol and television addiction has bred a passive, alienated and superficial generation. If the challenge is to close the gap, decadence diverts one from the goal of catching up.

Morally weak people not only inhibit their own personal growth, but finally contribute to the politics of decadence. A drunk army cannot fight a war for information and close that gap. Minds full of dope instead of hope will not fight for the right to vote, as we must if we are to close the gap. A generation of people lacking the moral and physical stamina necessary to fight a protracted civilizational crisis is dangerous to themselves, their neighbors and future generations. We need a sober, sane, disciplined army to catch up.

The challenge of this generation of adults is to regain the confidence of today's youth. Only by re-establishing its moral authority can the task be done, for if we re-establish moral authority—that is our believability, our trustworthiness, our caring—we can then teach discipline and our children will in turn learn self-discipline. We can then demand discipline and it will be perceived as therapy and not punishment. Both involve pain, but the perception of discipline when demanded by a moral authority will be different. And, if we have moral authority and demand discipline, development will be the by-product.

Truth, like electricity, needs a conduit. It needs a conductor through which to travel. The teacher is the conductor, and if the teacher has a healthy respect for the child, the teacher can serve as a good conductor. On the other hand, if the teacher has exposed wires and is rotten on race or ethics or character or caring, the teacher will either blow a fuse or set off sparks that burn up a child's life. The teacher must love those he or she teaches. Without sounding anti-intellectual, we must be clear that the issues of life flow from the heart, not the head. You must be the truth that you speak. You cannot teach children against your spiritual will, using only your intellectual skill. You cannot feed children with a long-handled spoon. The teacher must love the taught.

The need for a moral and ethical foundation is the reason EXCEL argues for a written code of conduct for students. It is the reason EXCEL argues for character education versus mere I.Q. education.

We are not trying to argue that we ought to substitute consecration for developing our minds. We just know that on a scale of 10, intellect does not deserve 8 points. There are other factors in life. Integrity and drive and commitment and concern above and beyond

one's self count also.

EXCEL's grounding in a moral foundation is the reason we argue that non-violent education must become part of the curriculum in our public schools. Our children must be taught alternatives to violence in resolving conflicts.

III. Push for Excellence

Effort must exceed opportunity for change to occur. Opportunity must be matched by a superior effort, an urge to EXCEL, a will to learn. We are not so dumb that we cannot learn if we study; but we are not so smart that we will learn if we don't study.

The questions that have been asked of me the most are: Why are you putting all of this pressure on the victim instead of the victimizer? Why are you letting the "system" off the hook? Well, I'm not arguing that the victimizer is not guilty. I'm not arguing that the victimizer abdicate his responsibility and I challenge the victimizer everywhere I go.

But I also know that the victimizer may be responsible for the victim being down, but the victim must be responsible for getting up. The victim is responsible for initiating change; determining strategy, tactics and timing and being disciplined enough to pull it off. It is to the victim's self-interest to get up, while the victimizer does not perceive it to be in his self-interest. It is precisely because the slave is in chains that he must run faster. In this relationship between slave and slave-master, I have never known of a retired slave-master.

Our quest for excellence must be balanced between educating the head and the hand. We must know that 80 percent of our children graduating from high school are going to the world of work and only 20 percent to college—and less than that 20 percent graduate. We must balance our emphasis on a liberal education with vocational and career education. We must concentrate on the

five basic steps to learn: exposure, repetition, internalization, developing convictions about the subject matter, and its application.

There is a challenge beyond the bus. We must move from educational existence to educational excellence. We must contrast the politics of the five Bs—Blacks, browns, budgets, busing and balance—with five As—attention, attendance, atmosphere, attitude and achievement. When the doors of opportunity swing open, we must make sure that we are not too high or too indifferent to walk through.

We must have the total involvement from the 11 levels affecting education: the political, the board, the superintendent, the administrators, the principals, the teachers, the parents, the pupils, the religious institutions, the mass media, and the broader community. Students must sign pledges that they will study a minimum of two hours every evening—with the radio, television and record player off—with no telephone interruptions or social visits. Parents must pledge to monitor their children's study hours, pick up their child's report card each grading period and go to the school to examine the child's test scores.

At the beginning of the academic year, the principal must give a "State of the School" address, which clearly defines the educational goals, establishes the rules, sets expectations and lays out a plan for achieving the goals by the end of the year.

Upon graduation, students must be given a diploma in one hand, symbolizing knowledge and wisdom, and a voter registration card in the other hand, symbolizing power and responsibility.

In religious language, we argue that for people to do less than their best is sin. In more secular language, we argue that the purpose of life is to develop one's potential to his or her highest capacity.

Education is a key element in the preservation of democracy. Therefore, if education is in trouble, democracy is in trouble.

We must know that if we sow short-term pleasure, we will reap long-term pain. But if we sow short-term pain, we will reap long-term pleasure.

Motivation must be seen as important and a critical element in turning this crisis in education around. We must teach our children that if they can conceive it and believe it, they can achieve it. They must know that it is not their aptitude but their attitude that will determine their altitude. Teach our children that their mind is a pearl and they can learn anything in the world.

Fight for equity.
Fight for ethics.
Fight for excellence.

This is the only way that we can catch up. We must run faster because we are behind in a race for information.

We must not only close the quantitative gap but the qualitative gap as well. We must close the doctors gap—with doctors who are more concerned with public health than personal wealth; close the lawyers gap—with lawyers who are more concerned with justice than a judgeship; close the preachers gap—with preachers who will prophesy, not merely profiteer; we must catch up in journalism—with journalists who will ascribe, describe and prescribe, not merely scribble; catch up in politics—with politicians who seek to be of service, not merely seek an office; close the gap and catch up in teachers—with teachers who will teach for life, not merely for a living.

Believe in yourself. Believe in your ability to close the gap.

Believe in our children. Believe in your ability to teach them and their ability to learn.

Believe in our parents. Believe that if they are consciously sought and planned for, they will participate.

Believe that life is not accidental, that it has a purpose, a meaning—if you will but seek the way.