

# The Rap on Culture

## How Anti-Education Messages in Media, at Home, & on the Street Hold Back African-American Youth

The furor over radio talk-show host Don Imus' slurs aimed at the Rutgers women's basketball team sparked a national discussion of the racist and sexist language and imagery that pervade hip-hop and rap music and the urban culture. What seems to have been largely ignored in this debate are the anti-education messages that have led so many African-American youth away from the academic achievements exemplified by the talented Rutgers women. It's interesting that this uproar over urban culture has erupted at a time when Congress prepares to debate whether to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act, which was enacted in 2002 to improve educational opportunity and accountability. In pushing his plan for education reform in 2001, President Bush spoke of the need to end the "soft bigotry of low expectations." What if those "low expectations" not only refer to schools and teachers who fail to hold minority students to high standards of academic achievement, but also describe a devalued view of education in the black community itself? What if something about the culture enveloping black students, particularly those in low-income, urban environments, impedes academic progress?

The juxtaposition of the Imus comments and the NCLB debate illustrates that policy changes alone cannot spur true education reform. The achievement gap that persists between black and Latino students and their white peers will not be closed without an examination of personal attitudes and lifestyle factors that hinder academic performance and positive self-determination.

The timing is right for such a discussion in Cleveland. In addition to the debate over the merits of NCLB and its impact on area schools, Governor

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Ted Strickland recently appointed former state Senator C.J. Prentiss as a special adviser charged with closing the achievement gap. Earlier this year, the Ohio Department of Education released a report it commissioned to examine the state's educational system and develop a plan for improvement. Cleveland Municipal School District CEO Eugene Sanders has announced plans to reform the district, including establishing a residential academy for at-risk boys. These are all positive steps forward in addressing why so many black youth are failing to master the academic skills they need to compete in today's global economy. However, we contend that institutional policy changes cannot succeed without addressing lifestyle factors that derail far too many black youth – boys in particular – from the surest path toward economic well-being: education.

Our goal with this report is to shape the debate on education reform by offering recommendations for refining the No Child Left Behind Act. These include:

- Adding African-American boys, which are the most academically vulnerable, as a distinct category of students to be served and providing additional programs and funding to meet their needs.
- Extending the school day and year for schools in distressed communities.
- Creating special incentives to attract more African-American male teachers to serve as role models for students.
- Setting aside funding for more programs designed to prevent African-American male students from dropping out of high school.
- Designating funding priorities for agencies and programs serving the lowest-achieving communities.

In addition to these national policy changes, we also propose a "Policy of Personal Responsibility" aimed at local students, parents, educators, government and business leaders, and anyone who recognizes that the problem of low educational attainment has ramifications for us all. These recommendations include:

- Parents and educators need to raise their expectations of what African-American students can and should achieve academically.
- Parents need to consider themselves partners in their child's education and involve themselves in schools as volunteers and advocates. They need to encourage their children to read more for fun and spend less time watching television.
- Teachers and volunteers need to be freed to address learning issues creatively.
- School administrators must set high standards and insist on an environment of respect, order and self-discipline.
- More African-American men need to step up as role models for black youth.
- Caring community members – black and white, urban and suburban – must take on the role of mentors, tutors, and life coaches.
- Students themselves must reject the negative images of education they hear in popular culture and from classmates and demand of themselves and their schools elevated educational commitment.

This report will examine the growing research on cultural differences in educational attainment, explore the problem of low academic achievement among African-American students in Cleveland and Ohio, provide some historical context for the problems facing the urban poor, and focus on programs that are succeeding in serving at-risk students. We will conclude with more detailed recommendations. As with our earlier report, "Untapped Potential: African-American Males in Northeast Ohio," our primary focus is on African-American males, who are at considerably higher risk of failing to complete high school and living a life of poverty.

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**PolicyBridge is a non-partisan public policy think tank founded in 2005 to monitor urban policy issues affecting the quality of life for minorities in Northeast Ohio and inform regional public policy debates by framing issues of relevance to the minority community. PolicyBridge would like to thank Fran Stewart for preparing this report and acknowledge the insights of Charlise Lyles, editor of *Catalyst Cleveland*; Dr. Mittie Chandler, director of the Urban Child Research Center at Cleveland State University; and Gregory Brown, president and CEO of the Center for Community Solutions. For more information, contact PolicyBridge at [policybridge@sbcglobal.net](mailto:policybridge@sbcglobal.net).**

## Looking Beyond Class

Much of the discussion over school reform in recent years has centered on class. Low-income students are at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts in middle-income and affluent schools. Given that African-American and Hispanic students are more likely to be poor, the assumption has been that minority students' lack of access to middle-income educational experiences accounts for differences in achievement levels. Recommendations for reform have largely diagnosed the ills of poverty, lamented the inequality of resources and opportunity, and essentially failed to make a difference for thousands of black schoolchildren who continued to languish and wither, ill-prepared for success in school and in life beyond.

Talking about social class is much easier in this country than talking about race; it doesn't pick at a scab covering centuries of pain. Defining the achievement gap in largely economic terms may make for an easier discussion, but it may have contributed to a sense of hopelessness when it comes to education reform: If you want to ensure that all children achieve academically, then it would seem that you first need to eliminate the challenges of poverty. That view, without a doubt, is outside the ability of schools to fix and contributes to a sense that the problem of low educational attainment is intractable.

A 96-page report commissioned by the Ohio Board of Education did not quibble: "Contrary to some beliefs, achievement gaps between Black or Hispanic students and white or Asian students cannot be completely explained by economic disadvantage." In 2006, 51 percent of low-income black fourth-graders in Ohio tested proficient in reading; 68 percent of black students whose family income did not put them at a disadvantage read at a proficient level, based on Ohio Department of Education data. That compares to 70 percent of low-income white students and 76 percent of low-income Asian students. The report, "Creating a World-Class Education System in Ohio," isn't the first to point out that economic inequalities cannot solely explain why African-American students leave high school roughly four years behind their white peers. In fact, a number of researchers – black and white – have begun to suggest that there may be something about the African-American experience itself that holds black children back. At issue is, according to Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson, "in a nutshell, culture."

In his provocative and controversial book *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, linguist John McWhorter writes that many African-American youth subscribe to cults of victimology, separatism, and anti-intellectualism, taking "an almost alarming pride in disengagement from learning."

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## The Growing Academic Emergency

First, it must be said that we reject the notion that race in the sense of inherent, genetic differences explains why black children are not performing at the academic levels of their white and Asian counterparts. We also do not want to discount the lingering effects of discrimination and institutionalized racism as obstacles for black children and families. However, it is our contention that in the black community today there is a culture of learned behaviors and negative attitudes that are putting black students at a disadvantage.

Clearly, there is a failure to thrive in the black community:

- In 2002, only 59 percent of African-American students in Ohio high schools graduated. That compares to a graduation rate of 84 percent for white students in Ohio, according to a 2006 report by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.
- During the same school year, only 36 percent of African-American males earned a diploma on time with their Ohio high school peers, according to a 2004 report by the Schott Foundation for Public Education.
- In Cleveland, only 19 percent of black male students graduated on time in 2001-2002, according to the Schott Foundation report. The Cleveland and Cincinnati districts tied for the worst graduation rates among 58 districts serving large populations of black males. It should be noted that white male students fared little better in Cleveland, with only 24 percent graduating on time.
- Nationwide, the high school dropout rate for African-American males is nearly double the rate of their

white counterparts. Students who drop out of high school are more likely to be poor, engage in violent behavior and end up in prison.

- Male and female students with low academic achievement are twice as likely to become parents by their senior year of high school, compared to their more studious counterparts.
- Roughly three-fourths of Ohio prison inmates dropped out of high school.

In the case of Cleveland schools specifically, eight of the 19 high schools assessed for the 2005-2006 state report card were designated in “academic emergency.” Although Cleveland Municipal Schools overall managed to climb into the “academic watch” category, roughly 40 percent of its high schools, most of them serving a student body at least 97 percent black, languished in the very bottom designation for achievement. It should be noted – and is probably not noted enough – that within the Cleveland district there are pockets of effectiveness and excellence. Four high schools – SuccessTech Academy, Jane Addams Business Careers High School, Whitney Young and Cleveland School

of the Arts – were rated effective in 2005-2006, all meeting the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirement of No Child Left Behind. One, Early College School, was even deemed “excellent,” putting it in the top category largely dominated by affluent suburban schools. Serving a student body that is 78 percent African-American, Early College posted a 97 percent passage rate on the reading portion of the 10<sup>th</sup>-grade Ohio Graduation Test and a 96 percent passage rate for writing and math. More than 98 percent of seniors graduated. The pockets of excellence and effectiveness in the Cleveland Schools should be celebrated. However, there are far too few. The five schools meeting and exceeding academic expectations serve only about 2,000 students. The high schools in academic emergency serve nearly 8,700 students. An additional 4,000 Cleveland high schoolers attended schools that failed to meet AYP.

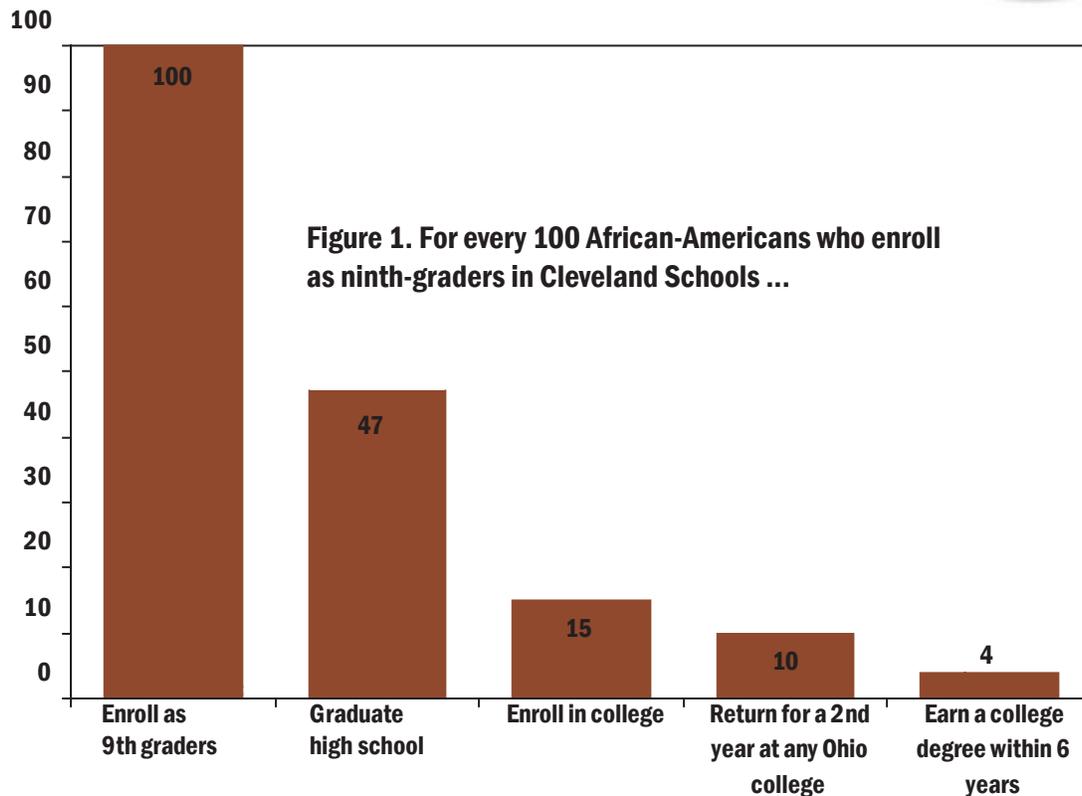
As the state’s report card terminology suggests, the Cleveland Schools, the city and, in fact, the entire metropolitan area are facing an “academic emergency.” At a time when education is increasingly required and rewarded in the workplace, unacceptably large numbers of Cleveland students, most of them black and most of them male, are removing themselves from the economic benefits of education.

At a time when the U.S. Department of Labor predicts that nearly 80 percent of new jobs created over the next decade will require education beyond high school, 48 percent of students in Cleveland Schools fail to graduate, according to the state’s most recent report card. Figure 1 illustrates how few Cleveland students will be prepared to reap the benefits of the knowledge economy.

African-Americans who graduate from high school will earn \$200,000 more over a lifetime of work than their black peers who dropped out of high school, according to 2000 U.S. Census data. The earnings chasm jumps to nearly \$1 million when black high school dropouts are compared to black males who graduate from college. The woefully high dropout rate, in Cleveland and in urban centers throughout the nation, doesn’t even tell the whole story of inadequate preparation for success in life. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that black students graduate high school with skills roughly four years behind their white counterparts.

An emergency such as this demands action. In his “State of the Schools” address in early February, Cleveland Schools CEO Eugene Sanders laid out a bold game plan for ensuring that all children in the district receive access to a quality education. He proposed a dress code and innovative new schools, including the Ginn Academy, a school for high-risk teenage boys. The Ginn Academy will incorporate the lessons Glenville High School football coach Ted Ginn Sr. has learned from his years of motivating students, including Heisman Trophy winner Troy Smith, to excel. Sanders has articulated the vision, drawn largely from his experiences in Toledo, and he, as district CEO, will be charged with executing the plan. However, if the plan is to succeed, it will require more than the vision, commitment, and work of Sanders alone. Success will require buy-in from teachers, staff, politicians, business leaders, local higher-education institutions, and even suburban communities. All are vested stakeholders in the success of this venture. The education

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SOURCES: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Ohio Board of Regents

reform catchphrase “Great schools make great communities” underscores the very real link between struggling schools and struggling communities. The Greater Cleveland community, struggling to remake an old, sputtering manufacturing economy into a new economy built on knowledge, can no longer allow so many of its children – its future workforce – to fail.

Without a doubt, the economic stakes for this undereducated region are high. However, whether Sanders’ vision – or any reform efforts, for that matter – succeeds rests primarily with students and parents themselves.

## The Rap on Culture

When people think of “urban black youth culture,” what readily comes to mind may be saggy pants and hip-hop. Plenty of middle-class commuters who happen to pass by a Cleveland high school when classes let out no doubt look disapprovingly on the saggy pants that defy mainstream “dress for success” norms as clearly as they seem to defy gravity. Plenty of business owners whose stores serve as the after-school hangout worry that teens’ coarse language and defiant postures will chase away customers. Plenty of parents, educators and leaders of the black community have attacked the misogynist, destructive messages of hip-hop and rap that glorify sex, drugs, and crimes and deride academic effort and ambitions. The Rev. Al Sharpton, as an example, even called for a 90-day television and radio ban on violent, sexist, offensive music in 2005. In a 2000 appearance before a Senate committee, Michael Eric Dyson, professor of African-American studies at the University of Pennsylvania, said that:

... hip-hop culture has [even] provoked a deep black nostalgia for a time when black communities were quite different than they are now. When children respected their elders. When adults, not young thugs, ruled over neighborhoods. When the moral fabric of black communities was knit together by a regard for law and order. When people shared what they had, even if it was their last crust of bread or drop of soup. When families

extended beyond blood or biology to take in young people in need of rearing. When communication between blacks on the street was marked by courtesy more than cursing. When black folk went to church and, even if they didn't, respected the minister as a source of moral authority. And on and on ...

No doubt today's middle-class, baby-boom generation commuters made the authority figures of their era fret over their own fashion and music choices. That's a common tension between older and younger generational values. As with hip-hop, jazz, blues, and rock 'n' roll were often labeled subversive and destructive. However, Ronald Ferguson, a senior research associate at Harvard University's Wiener Center for Social Policy, has noticed a troubling correlation between the rise of hip-hop and a fall-off in reading scores for African-American teenagers. Ferguson looked at reading scores for 17-year-olds who graduated in 1988 and in 1992. Tracking each group for the four years leading up to

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graduation, Ferguson found that the gains for the 1988 graduates were nearly double that of the 1992 graduates. He also found a dramatic drop-off in leisure-time reading among African-American teenagers. In 1988, 35 percent of 17-year-old black students nationwide reported reading for pleasure; by 1992, that figure had plummeted to 15 percent, according to data he cited from the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

"I want to be clear that I don't know for sure if there's any connection between hip hop and achievement," Ferguson said in a 2005 issue of *Catalyst Cleveland*. Noting that 80 percent of black elementary schoolchildren now have televisions in their bedrooms, he said that other lifestyle factors may explain the plunge in leisure-time reading. However, he believes that educators and parents

need to be more aware of the potential impact of hip-hop and other popular media on teenagers' ability to manage their time and engage in their studies. Some educators have even gone so far as to suggest that teachers need to embrace hip-hop culture in an attempt to reach urban youth. One Cleveland student, however, was indignant at the kind of message that would send: "Hey, they're black. Let's put math in a rap song. We learn the same way they do."

Talk to students in Cleveland high schools, and they say a song is just a song. It's not a way to reach urban youth, nor is it an explanation for why black students' reading scores dropped in 1989 and have not recovered. "Rap ain't got nothing to do with it," said one Cleveland freshman. "It don't matter. It's just music. Either their parents or their environment is what they grow up to do."

Many researchers would agree with the Cleveland student's observation: Cultural differences in expectations and behaviors are far more detrimental to educational progress than the music and fashion choices of popular culture. McWhorter, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, said "the main problem African Americans face in schools ... is the set of values they choose to embrace." However, Howard sociologist Patterson, in a March 2006 opinion piece published in the *New York Times*, suggests that all these factors are intertwined into a "cool-pose culture" of self-destructive behaviors and toxic attitudes. Drawing from interviews his colleague conducted with high school students, Patterson indicted an addictive subculture of black teenage boys:

So why were they flunking out? Their candid answer was that what sociologists call the "cool-pose culture" of young black men was simply too gratifying to give up. For these young men, it was almost like a drug, hanging out on the street after school, shopping and dressing sharply, sexual conquests, party drugs, hip-hop music and culture, the fact that almost all the superstar athletes and a great many of the nation's best entertainers were black.

Not only was living this subculture immensely fulfilling, the boys said, it also brought them a great deal of respect from white youths. This also explains the otherwise puzzling finding by social psychologists that young black men and women tend to have the highest levels of self-esteem of all ethnic groups, and that their self-image is independent of how badly they were doing in school.

## A Culture of Underachievement

Talk to black boys in Cleveland high schools, and they will share examples of how their peers discourage them from valuing their education. “I shout out the answer” in class, said one, and “Sometimes [other students] get mad. Some people’s response is shut up.” One student said he had even taken the approach that getting Ds instead of Bs would keep other students from picking on him. “People like to see you do bad. They want you to be on the same level as they are.” Many of the students reported fighting in schools with a blasé acceptance that it was a social norm. They shared a sense that the values of the street were often in conflict with those of school: “I’m tough and smart,” said one freshman. “Nobody messes with me. You can’t be scared. . . . You have to be smart in the books and tough on the streets.”

Cleveland students are used to seeing disagreements resolved through fighting, said Edward Weber, principal of the Cleveland School of Science & Medicine, which opened this fall as one of three small schools in the newly renovated John Hay Building. “On the street, they have to fight. I don’t think they want to fight, but they don’t know how to solve their problems otherwise,” said Weber, noting that many of his 100 students had been suspended at their old schools. “Some of the toughest kids are finding that school can be a lot different” than what they have been used to.

LaDonna Norris, who coordinates the Barbara Byrd-Bennett Scholars program at Martin Luther King High School, said much of her job has been taken up with fighting a counterculture that “it’s not cool to be good at school.” She said that her students’ reluctance to look the part of a scholar extended all the way to use of a backpack. Her students would hide their backpacks under their coats or refuse to carry them because they didn’t want their peers to see that they cared about their studies. Norris, however, hit upon a streetwise solution that bridged the gap: She bought the boys Timberland and Rocawear backpacks, brand names of urban fashion. “If it’s Rocawear, they’ll carry it,” she said. “I was very deliberate about that.”

Negative messages about the importance of grades and schoolwork aren’t only coming from peers. Many black parents fail to set a high academic bar for their children. Laurence Steinberg, author of *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*, studied 20,000 high school students in California and Wisconsin from 1987 to 1990. Steinberg found a greater achievement gap between Asian-American students and their non-Asian peers than between poor and affluent students and between children with two parents at home versus those in single-parent households. In other words, Asian-American students tend to outperform their peers even when controlling for socioeconomic issues. However, Steinberg did not attribute this difference to innate ability; instead, he suggested it came down to work ethic and parental expectations. He asked students a simple question: What grade would their parents accept? What grade did students think was high enough to keep them out of trouble? Asian-American students believed they needed to earn at least an A-. White students thought a B- would be sufficient. Black and Hispanic students answered a C-. This may seem trivial, but Steinberg highlighted a difference in how Asian-American families viewed education: Schoolwork took priority over extracurricular and leisure activities, and effort was valued over innate abilities. “They believed . . . that their academic performance depended almost entirely on how hard they worked; their performance was within their control.”

Steinberg’s observations on the emphasis Asian-American families place on effort and work ethic seem to dovetail with findings published in 2005 in *Psychological Science*. In two studies of about 300 eighth-grade students, Angela L. Duckworth and Martin E.P. Seligman, both of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, found that self-discipline was a better predictor of academic achievement than IQ. “Highly self-disciplined adolescents outperformed their more impulsive peers on every academic-performance variable, including report-card grades, standardized achievement-test scores, admission to a competitive high school, and attendance.”

Among Cleveland students, that message about the importance of effort and discipline, attitudes and behaviors, does not seem to be getting through. Tim Roberts, who runs a program for black boys at Martin Luther King High School, said his students have told him that he is the only person in their lives who “gets excited” about their grades. Students selected for the Barbara Byrd-Bennett Scholars program said they have even had to overcome the low expectations and

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scorn of their teachers, who thought they were undeserving of a free ride to college. Some reported having teachers who told them they weren't college material. Norris has experienced firsthand society's expectations of young black men: When she takes the group on an outing, inevitably someone asks her if they are members of a football team. Or, even worse, people ask if she is their probation officer. "They're shocked when I tell them it's a group of college-bound black teenagers," Norris said. "I hate that." She has had to work at getting the boys to see themselves as scholars; she has

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**Tim Roberts of BRICK**

also labored to get their peers and teachers to value their contributions in the classroom, instead of only praising their skills on the sports field.

In the culture of their communities, cool trumps smart, said Roberts, executive director of Brotherhood Respect Intelligent Conduct and Knowledge. BRICK, which Roberts founded in 1996, attracts about 50 MLK students to the after-school mentoring program. "They come [to school] wanting to be cool, popular," Roberts said. "They don't want to be looked at as being smart. The problem that is going on in our communities is that they just don't have the examples. It's not right to sell drugs. It's not right to have a bunch of babies. They have to have someone to tell them this."

Roberts and Ginn, both school security guards by profession but athletic and life coaches by calling, have had an extraordinary year in seeing their efforts rewarded. Both men played significant roles in shaping Ohio State University quarterback Troy Smith. When Smith took home the Heisman Trophy earlier this year, both men basked in the reflected glow of his accomplishments. Smith had a difficult, troubled childhood, filled with the same temptations facing many urban youth, both men said. His successes have not come from luck or circumstance; they have been the direct result of effort, self-discipline, and encouragement. These are the messages they

preach to their students, and although Smith has excelled at sports, both men said black students need to see that education is their path to a better life, not sports or entertainment.

"Who decides what is cool? I decided years ago that it was cool to go to class and get an A," said Ginn, who admits that football is his "hook" to get students' attention. "I don't separate academics from athletics. I don't see anything recreational about going to high school. It's all about business. It's all about life. Where are you going to get your resume for life?"

## How Did We Get Here?

More than 40 years ago, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the late Democratic senator from New York, called attention to a trend he believed threatened the very core of the African-American family: the rising incidence of households headed by black women. His "Moynihan Report," issued in 1965 while he served in the Department of Labor, suggested that family culture might be responsible for some of the racial achievement gap. Calling for national action, Moynihan warned that the black family structure was "approaching complete breakdown" in low-income urban centers. He urged efforts to create jobs for unemployed black men and provide financial incentives instead of disincentives for fathers to remain in the home. Moynihan's report, which attributed the problems in the black family to the unacknowledged toll of "three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment" and to the "social insanity" of welfare programs that drove men away from their families, touched off a fire storm of controversy. His views were labeled racist, and President Johnson failed to address the issue of family stability in his White House Conference on Civil Rights.

Since Moynihan's report, there is little doubt that the difficulties of the nation's urban centers have gotten worse. Moynihan had been alarmed at 25 percent of black children being born to single mothers, not the 70 percent today. It should be noted that births to unmarried white women have also increased, now accounting for 30 percent of all births.

Over the past four decades, governmental policies, economic trends and social norms have contributed to the urban decay seen in Cleveland and other cities nationwide. In *Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, William Julius Wilson argues that social-structural factors, such as historic discrimination, the decline

of low-skilled occupations, migration patterns, the exodus of middle-class and working-class blacks, and residential segregation, have transformed urban neighborhoods, resulting in a crushing concentration of poverty, joblessness, and crime; a shortage of marriageable men; and a rise in births to single mothers. In the 1960s, governmental policies were enacted to provide public assistance to the needy, but, over the course of more than two decades, generations raised on welfare have bred a sense of dependency and entitlement. The 1970s witnessed the rise of busing for school integration and the mass migration of white residents from Cleveland to the suburbs. Businesses abandoned the city – and black communities. Black residents with means moved out, leaving behind those with lower incomes and fewer opportunities. The 1980s gave rise to the crack epidemic, which led to the criminalization of African-American men at unfathomable proportions. African-American men continue to be incarcerated at an alarmingly high rate: The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that nearly a third of all African-American men will enter the state or federal prison system at some point in their lives. Social policies and drug laws enacted by federal and state governments over the past four decades have contributed to the severing of black men from their roles and responsibilities as fathers. Consider this shocking statistic: As many as 1 million African-American men are currently incarcerated, many of them fathers.

In *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, Abigail and Stephan Thernstroms point to research that has identified single-parent households and birth to very young mothers as risk factors associated with lower educational attainment and increased behavioral problems. More than 60 percent of black children today live in households with only one parent, compared to 23 percent of white children. More than a third of black mothers have their first child when they are 18 or younger. Becoming a parent at such a young age not only limits the educational opportunities of the mother, but it has been shown to have a negative impact on the child's educational success.

Roberts is familiar with the cycle of teenage pregnancy; he sees far too much of it. When one of his students learned he had fathered a child and two or three other BRICK members thought they might be “baby daddies” as well, Roberts called a meeting. He told the students that they needed to take responsibility for their actions and step up as fathers to these children, something denied to most of them. Roberts took 25 young men down to the child-support agency and explained the process to them. “I’m going to let them know that the cycle has to stop. Who’s telling them it’s not right? It’s definitely not the videos. It’s definitely not the men they see on the corner who have fathered three or four kids in the same neighborhood.”

Roberts, echoing some of Moynihan’s observations four decades earlier, sees the lack of men in children’s lives as much of what’s wrong in black communities today. “Our young men don’t have male role models in the community, and they definitely don’t have males in their homes,” Roberts said. “If you really want change, you have to have men move back into the city.” Students need to see men going to work, paying the bills, coming home to help with school work. “They don’t want to see ghost men. That’s what they’re used to seeing. They’re used to mentors who come in but run back to the suburbs.”

Students in the Barbara Byrd-Bennett Scholars program know that they need to see more successful male role models in their low-income communities: “We need somebody from here. We need somebody from where we’re from,” said one, when asked what might make students understand that academic achievement is the path to economic opportunity. “If they can do it, I know I can do it,” said another of the need to interact with black businessmen, doctors, scientists, engineers and other professionals. “We can see ourselves in their shoes.”

## Achieving Economic Balance

Without a doubt, researchers are right to point out that low-income schools are at a disadvantage when compared to more affluent ones. Richard Kahlenberg, senior fellow at the Century Foundation in Washington, D.C., and author of *The Remedy: Race, Class, and Affirmative Action*, has written: “Educators know that a school’s quality derives less from per-pupil expenditure as from the people who make up the school community, children, parents, and teachers. Because students pattern their study habits, vocabulary, and levels of aspiration from one another, having a core of middle-class students sets a beneficial tone ...”

Although the focus of our report is culture, this point should not be lost: Low-income students benefit by being exposed to more middle-class values. In the case of Cleveland Municipal Schools specifically, it seems the differing approaches to school reform – class and culture – overlap and may provide a path forward for reform. Roughly 70

percent of students in the Cleveland public schools are black; virtually all come from families that are economically disadvantaged, as evidenced by 100 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunches.

One district that has found success in providing low-income students access to the benefits of middle-income schools is Wake County, North Carolina, which includes the growing metropolis of Raleigh. In 1998, Wake County began working toward an ambitious goal of mitigating economic imbalance among schools in the district. In the 1980s, the district had followed an integration plan based on race. However, court rulings out of other states convinced administrators that the days of racial integration mandates were numbered and that a new plan was in order. The district developed guidelines that took into account poverty and performance:

- No school would have more than 40 percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch.
- No school would have more than 25 percent of students who tested below the “proficient” level.

Bill McNeal, who served as Wake County superintendent until last year, said district personnel assess each school annually based on a “healthy school index,” which weighs economic makeup, the quality of the principal, the mobility of the teachers, economic trends, support from the community, and the state of the facility. When a school is diagnosed “unhealthy,” the district first attempts to determine where the problems lie and then may move to reconfigure the student body to achieve “healthier” distributions. The district, which is about 40 percent minority, achieves economic

balance by drawing students from more affluent areas to magnet schools and busing others. About 85 percent of students attend schools within five miles of their homes; about 12 percent may choose to spend up to an hour on the bus, one way, to attend one of 50 magnet schools; the remainder may be bused.

**“We have tried to make certain that all students can take advantage of what suburban kids have. I’m trying to create the kind of involvement that every child should have.”**

**Bill McNeal, former Wake County, N.C., superintendent**

Middle-income schools tend to have better quality of teaching, more involvement of parents, and a larger pool of volunteers, McNeal said. Middle-income schools also tend to have a higher level of expectations regarding academic goals, such as honors and college preparatory classes. When poverty levels increase, many schools begin to lose their best teachers, administrators, and students, who find better options elsewhere, he said. Higher poverty schools tend to have less parental involvement, will not have the same level of PTA money available, and likely will have fewer after-school programs. “We have tried to make certain that all students can take advantage of what suburban kids have,” he said. “I’m trying to create the kind of involvement that every child should have.”

Along with its integration plan, the district set a goal of 95 percent overall proficiency by 2008, and each subgroup needed to show high growth. When McNeal left to become executive director of the North Carolina School Administrators Association in 2006, the overall proficiency level stood at 92 percent, with proficiency levels of 80 percent for African-American and Latino students and 77 percent for students eligible to receive free or reduced lunch.

The district has gained national attention for its efforts to level the economic playing field for students. In 2004, *Forbes* magazine placed Wake County third on its Top 10 list of the Best Education in the Biggest Cities. That same year, McNeal was named the National Superintendent of the Year. However, McNeal refuses to attribute students’ gains solely to the district’s economic integration efforts. That’s too simple an answer. “The key still resides in the quality of teachers, parents, and the principals,” he said.

Could other school districts replicate the success of Wake County? “You can’t do it if there is no will in the community,” McNeal said. “It’s going to be a tough, tough deal at best.”

Cleveland is no Wake County, North Carolina. Wake County and the Raleigh city school district merged in 1978 to form one countywide district. Wake County consists of 137 schools and educates about 130,000 students. Cuyahoga County consists of about 30 separate school districts and is home to about 250,000 school-age children. Although at one point there was a Cuyahoga County school district, of which some of the area’s top districts today were part, it’s hard to imagine such unification now. Given the affluence of many suburban districts, a unified Cuyahoga County school district would allow for the creation of economically balanced schools in the region and could provide Cleveland students the benefits associated with a middle-income education. However, despite the potential benefits to the tens of thousands

of Greater Cleveland schoolchildren, many of them black, trapped in poor schools and the potential savings to local taxpayers through the elimination of redundancies inherent in 30 different districts, it's hard to imagine that such drastic reform will occur in Cuyahoga County. To use McNeal's terms, the region lacks the "will."

Therefore, Sanders' proposal to create innovative new programs that will attract students outside the district is critical for inserting the expectations and benefits of middle-income schools into this low-income district. The Cleveland School of Science and Medicine already has such an aim in mind. The school, which opened in fall 2006 as one of three small high schools in the newly renovated John Hay Building, hopes to be able to attract students from the inner-ring suburbs within the next two years, while at the same time giving the district's best students reason to stay. The school, which partners with Cleveland Clinic, University Hospitals, and Case Western Reserve University, selected 100 freshmen from 145 applicants for the first year. Next year, the school will add 100 more students, from an applicant pool that Weber hopes will top 500, and continue to grow over time to a student body of 400. Ninety percent of current students are African-American.

To be enrolled in the school, students must complete an application and provide reference letters from their math and science teachers. Students are expected to maintain a 3.0 GPA. The school day runs 1½ hours longer than most of the other Cleveland schools to accommodate a daily double dose of science and math. The 160-minute daily science sessions will allow students to complete their academic requirements in two years and study under Case professors – for college credit – their last two years of high school. In addition to a longer day, the school year at CSSM lasts three weeks longer than other Cleveland schools. As an "option" school, students must choose to attend. "Some take three buses," Weber said. "A lot of kids come here leaving their friends behind."

The school attempts to keep its students away from negative influences as best it can by reducing the amount of unsupervised time. "Idle time in a city may not always be put to best use," Weber said. Despite the already longer school day, many CSSM students stay an hour or more later to participate in after-school activities.

"The culture here is to be successful and to be safe," Weber said. Students find themselves in trouble for small infractions, such as chewing gum or failing to comply with dress code. "The environment is a lot less tolerant of interruptions to academic excellence." Parents like the strict discipline, and the students are responding to the higher expectations. One CSSM freshman said: "Last year our teacher didn't really care how we did." Another said: "Our math teacher, she came like twice a month. We'd be in the gym. Not learning math." In fact, students at CSSM said they minded that standards for them as Cleveland public students seemed to be set lower than for students in suburban schools.

## Separate But Better

Schools like CSSM and others that Sanders plans to bring online may succeed in retaining Cleveland's best students and even attract some from beyond the district borders. However, it's not likely that the district will be able to dramatically alter the economic realities of its student body. As such, Sanders would do well to learn some lessons from schools that have demonstrated success in raising the achievement levels of low-income black students. In *No Excuses*, the Thernstroms focus on a handful of schools that have cultivated oases of learning in high-poverty, high-minority areas. Although the Thernstroms found traditional public schools that were doing an excellent job reaching and lifting disadvantaged students, their examples are charter schools, which they say have more flexibility to experiment with and refine curriculum, environment, and personnel. That doesn't mean the schools are simply siphoning off the best and brightest and leaving traditional public schools to deal with the more difficult students to teach. Two examples – KIPP, an acronym for Knowledge Is Power Program, and Amistad Academy – select students by lottery. However, it must be noted that, although open to all students in the cities served, these programs are self-selective. There is an application process, which serves to weed out students and parents unlikely to commit to the school's rigorous standards, longer school days, and longer academic year.

KIPP began in Houston in 1994 and now has 52 schools in 16 states and Washington, D.C. Of the 12,000 students served, 95 percent are African-American or Hispanic and 80 percent are low-income. A KIPP school is expected to locate in Columbus in 2008. Choice and commitment are central to KIPP's success; no student is forced to attend.

Unlike the example of Wake County, North Carolina, which has demonstrated success by ensuring that low-

income students have access to the advantages associated with middle-income schools, schools such as KIPP and Amistad Academy believe the needs of low-income, largely minority students are such that they require separate schools – separate and better. Because black, low-income students arrive at school already far behind their white, middle-income counterparts – a third or more of black kindergartners tested in the bottom quartile for reading and math, according to a 2000 report from the National Center for Education Statistics – their needs are different and greater. The schools’ successes seem to underscore their point: Nearly all the students – 98 percent – at Amistad Academy in New Haven, Connecticut, are black or Hispanic, and nearly 70 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch. Yet eighth-graders at Amistad Academy exceed statewide proficiency averages, which are among the nation’s highest. At the KIPP Academy Charter in the Bronx, nearly 92 percent of eighth-graders passed the state math exam in 2005, compared to 33 percent at a neighborhood public school.

Although the examples of Wake County and Amistad Academy may seem opposite in their approaches to helping low-income students succeed, they agree that academic success hinges on great teaching. “It all boils down to the quality of the teachers and administrators,” McNeal said. “Quality personnel, that is the key. Quality personnel will do what they need to do to ensure that all students succeed. I start and end there.”

The schools also seem to agree on the need to raise the level of expectations for low-income students and allow them to see the benefits of education. Wake County addresses this by enveloping low-income students in the advantages of middle-income schools; Amistad and schools like it have dedicated themselves to “rescuing” low-income students by rewarding academic excellence, projecting that all students can learn, and expecting students to come to school ready to achieve. No excuses. Amistad and KIPP also stress the importance of order, both in classroom behavior and in personal appearance. Students at the schools wear uniforms or are required to “dress for success.” Just as athletes must work to improve their skills, students “practice” the behaviors of learning. KIPP students are taught to SLANT: Sit up. Listen. Ask questions. Nod to show interest and understanding. Track speakers. It may seem trivial, this insistence that students be active participants in learning by keeping their eyes glued to their teacher and attentively sitting up in their chairs, but school personnel insist that such small changes in behavior can bring big changes in attitudes and achievement. Students feel more actively engaged in the process of learning. Achievement First, an Amistad offshoot dedicated to using the school’s principles and successes to spur reform in the nation’s lowest-performing schools, contends that schools must “sweat the small stuff.” To succeed in creating a culture of learning, schools must insist on standards of behavior and respect from the students and teachers. “Achievement First recognizes that dramatic academic achievement can only occur in schools with a no-nonsense, structured, positive, achievement-oriented, college-focused environment,” the group’s Web site states. “AF schools will be relentless in their focus on the small details (shirts tucked in, silent lines in transition, sitting up in class) while fostering a true culture of academic achievement.”

Critics counter that the very fact that parents and students are willing to go through the process necessary to be selected makes them atypical of low-income, urban schoolchildren. However, in the context of culture, the question must be asked: Why would students and parents not be willing to take such steps to achieve academic success? Supporters contend that the take-away message of the successes of innovative schools such as Amistad and KIPP is hopeful: Schools in high-poverty areas can be fixed. Instead of focusing on the economics, focus on the attitudes; all students, regardless of income levels, can achieve in an environment of quality instruction, high expectations, and self-discipline.

## What Does This Mean for Cleveland?

Despite the low percentages graduating high school and going on to college, Cleveland students say that education is important. This corresponds with findings from a 2005 study of 1,300 18- to 25-year-olds called “Life After High School: Young People Talk about Their Hopes and Prospects.” The survey found that most young African-American adults valued college as much as their peers, despite the prevailing view that black youth look down on education and despite the high dropout rates. “We already know that dropping out of high school is lame,” said one Cleveland student. “The key to success is education beyond high school,” echoed another. One Barbara Byrd-Bennett Scholar said the program had opened his eyes to options beyond the troubles he sees around him: “I want to go to college. Before this program, we were just in school because we knew we had to go. I probably didn’t even think about going to college before the program. It opened our minds up.”

The Scholars program, which is a partnership with Baldwin-Wallace College, has exposed the students to what it takes to succeed in life beyond high school. It also has shown them the steps necessary to get to college and to find a good job. “I know a lot of kids that don’t know about applications or the steps,” one student said. “They just don’t know where to go to get help.”

The program also illustrates that changing the lives of urban black students takes effort – and time. The Barbara Byrd-Bennett Scholars program selected 33 underachieving black eighth-grade boys in 2002 and promised them a four-year scholarship to Baldwin-Wallace if they graduated in the program. Program director Norris said the students came to her with GPAs ranging from 3.0 to 0.7. Her task has been to motivate them to do better in their studies – and keep them away from temptation. She provides study tables after school. When the city of Cleveland opted to close the neighborhood recreation center on Saturdays, she got the college to provide a van so she could keep the scholars busy with service projects and field trips. She has gone to their birthday parties, funerals of family members, and meetings with social workers. The Scholars have her cell phone number and often will call in the evenings just to talk. The Scholars give up their summer breaks to spend five weeks taking classes and living on campus at Baldwin-Wallace, and then Norris finds them jobs, preferably connected to their fields of interest, for the rest of the summer. “A lot of that was borne out of keeping them busy with positive things to do,” she said. “We schedule every minute of their time.”

“Basically, the program is our life,” one Scholar said. The scholars say they often stay at school from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., or “until they kick us out. If we do leave early, we don’t feel right.” The Scholars talk of each other as a family. “We’re all like brothers. Most of our mothers talk to each other.” Their participation in the program has raised their mothers’ expectations for them: They now expect Bs, not the Ds they were used to seeing, one scholar said. Even outside of class and extracurricular activities, the scholars tend to hang out together, relying on each other for support. Many of these tough, streetwise kids who have seen drug deals go down, experienced gang activity, and even been shot themselves have taken to heart the fact that they now are scholarly role models for their classmates. “We’re supposed to be setting an example,” one said. But “we’re not perfect students,” another admitted.

Despite the efforts of Norris and the Scholars, it’s hard to call the pilot program a rousing success. Of the original 33 eighth-graders, 24 are still in the program. Only a handful will actually take advantage of the promised four years at Baldwin-Wallace. Norris said it was naïve to think that the college would be right for all the students. Some want the nurturing environment of a historically black college. Others want a school with more athletic opportunities. Still others are not academically ready for Baldwin-Wallace. Some plan to start at a two-year college.

Norris said the vision of 33 black young men heading off to a private, predominantly white, liberal-arts college shouldn’t be the measure for the program’s success. “They’re in school. They’re coming to school,” she said of the Scholars, alluding to the high dropout rate among African-American males in the city. All but one are still in school, and he has already earned his GED. “They’re on track to graduate. That was the purpose. Anything after high school was a bonus.” One of the Scholars voiced just how much progress that is: “I don’t know where I’d be [without the program]. I think I would have been kicked out.”

## Conclusion & Recommendations

A number of challenges – poverty, poor schools, single-parent households – significantly impede academic performance and positive self-determination in African-American communities today. However, another powerful force derails the promise and potential of far too many young black students: Culture.

Hip-hop culture has come under scrutiny of late, following the racist and sexist comments by radio host Don Imus. Much of the attention has focused on misogynist, violent images pervasive in the industry. However, we consider

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anti-education messages often found in the music equally harmful. These have led far too many African-Americans, particularly boys and young men, to believe that academic excellence is undesirable, or simply not “cool.” The excesses of music artists, along with the exploits of athletes, have contributed to a false sense of confidence among urban youth that other opportunities abound for those who do not take their education and responsibilities as young men seriously.

**“They’re in school. They’re coming to school. They’re on track to graduate. That was the purpose. Anything after high school was a bonus.”**

**LaDonna Norris, coordinator  
of the Barbara Byrd-Bennett Scholars**

This cultural deficiency is leading to the destruction of communities, families, and individual hopes, dreams, and aspirations. When the potential of these young men goes untapped, the moral fabric of our cities begins to deteriorate.

For too long, the corrosive nature of low expectations has eaten away at young people’s ambitions while community leaders, educators, and reformers have shied away from shining a spotlight inward on behaviors and attitudes in the African-American community itself that have held our children back. We can no longer stand by as so many of our young people, our future workforce, drop off the surest path toward economic stability: education.

The No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2002 with the intent of improving education and achievement in America’s schools through increased accountability for results, emphasis on doing what works best based on scientific research, expanded parental options, and expanded local control and flexibility. As Congress takes up the issue of reauthorizing the NCLB Act, the timing is right for a candid discussion of the reforms necessary to ensure that students in Cleveland and other urban centers are not left out of the knowledge economy.

Based on the research and observations presented here, we believe it is imperative that NCLB focus more on those students most vulnerable to falling behind: African-American males. As stated earlier, African-American males face significant challenges in attaining the education and skills they need to succeed in life. Choices they make as teenagers have long-term impact on their own lives, as well as on the economic well-being of the city, state, and nation. Given that the nation can no longer afford to allow such untapped potential, we suggest the following policy recommendations to better serve the specific needs of African-American males:

- Add African-American males as a distinct category of students to be served, similar to the way Indian children are specifically designated. African-American boys drop out of high school at higher rates than any other demographic group in America, and NCLB should specifically address this at-risk group in its categorization of students, as well as how it funds and evaluates programs.
- Schools in distressed communities that have significant numbers of African-American boys should have a longer school year and extended instructional time throughout the school year to help close the achievement gap. Providing enriched and accelerated programs for African-American boys will be difficult and will require additional resources, but, given the correlation between low educational attainment and high levels of unemployment, poverty, and incarceration, the additional investment should pay off in improved employability and decreased rates of poverty and crime.
- Elevate the quality of instruction and provide professional development for teachers who work in schools with significant numbers of African-American boys. All such teachers should have access to professional development that introduces them to cultural awareness and sensitivities associated with this population. Unique teaching approaches need to be developed to assist this population in moving from dead last in academic performance to more respectable levels of achievement. Special incentives should also be developed to attract more African-American male teachers to serve this student demographic.
- Set aside at least 8 percent of the School Drop-Out Prevention budget to try to get more African-American males to finish high school. Because African-American males drop out at higher levels than their peers, higher percentages of the \$125 million designated for the program should be directed toward distressed school districts that have significant numbers of African-American males.
- Add a fourth category under the school improvement subhead to include local educational agencies that

serve the highest percentages of African-American males. Currently, the designated priorities for allocating funding are for educational agencies serving the lowest-achieving schools, agencies that demonstrate the greatest need for funding, and agencies that demonstrate the strongest commitment to helping the lowest-achieving schools meet goals for academic progress.

Refining and improving the NCLB Act is important. However, policy changes alone will not bring about true education reform. The achievement gap that persists between black and Latino students and their white peers will not be closed without an examination of the personal attitudes and lifestyle factors that hinder instead of promoting academic success. Therefore, in addition to the aforementioned national policy changes, we propose a “Policy of Personal Responsibility” aimed at local students, parents, educators, government and business leaders, clergy members, and anyone who recognizes that the problem of low educational attainment has ramifications for us all. In Cleveland, we must encourage:

- **High expectations among parents and teachers.**

African-American youth need to be challenged to excel at the highest levels. Parents need to be supportive of educators and consider themselves partners in the educational experience. Teachers must show a passion for African-American male students and a willingness to give them the extra time and attention that they need to be successful. If children can clearly see that their parents, guardians, and teachers value effort and self-discipline, student behaviors and actions will more than likely meet that challenge.

- **More involvement from parents.**

Recent research published by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory indicates that students with involved parents, no matter their income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades, have better test scores, enroll in higher level programs, pass their classes, attend school regularly, have better social skills, adapt well to school, graduate high school, and go on to postsecondary education.

- **More African-American male role models.**

African-American boys need African-American men to be role models. Because 70 percent of African-American children are born to single mothers, many young boys grow up without ever having a positive and consistent role model to learn from. Schools have limited numbers of African-American male teachers, which further exacerbates the problem. African-American men must be deliberately sought out to address this challenge.

- **More community volunteers willing to be mentors, tutors and life coaches.**

Caring, loyal, and strong-willed mentors and tutors are needed to assist African-American boys to develop. The alternative is peer pressure, which will consistently fall short of maturity, wisdom, spiritual direction, and responsibility. Adults need to mitigate negative cultural influences by providing mentoring, tutoring, and life coaching that helps youth to make smart decisions about their lives. Churches, social agencies, corporations, clubs, and community groups should all commit to addressing this critical issue.

- **Self-discipline among students to reject negative influences and demand more of themselves.**

African-American young men will have to develop a self-discipline that helps them to make tough choices about what is good or bad for their long-term success. Self-discipline applies to a number of categories that are important to everyday life for young men, including academic study, health, relationships, employment and peer pressure. Teaching students self-discipline will help young men set boundaries and goals and hold themselves accountable.

Despite the problems plaguing the nation’s urban centers, and Cleveland in particular, we believe there are reasons for hope. Schools in high-poverty areas can be fixed. Instead of focusing exclusively on the economics, focus on the attitudes; all students, regardless of income levels, can achieve in an environment of quality instruction, high expectations, and self-discipline.



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