
Why the Black-White Test Gap Exists

John McWhorter

In Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America, John McWhorter writes that as the common cold is caused by the rhinovirus, so black students do poorly in school, decade after decade, because of a virus of anti-intellectualism—a by-product of slavery and racism—that infects the black community.

McWhorter is an associate professor of linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley. His academic specialty is language change and language contact, particularly pidgin and Creole languages. In addition to Losing the Race, his books include The Word on the Street (a book on dialects and black English), The Missing Spanish Creoles, and The Power of Babel (a study of how the world's languages arise, change, and mix). He has written on race issues for a number of major newspapers and magazines, and is a contributing editor of City Journal and The New Republic. He holds a doctorate in linguistics from Stanford and a master's degree in American studies from New York University.

He spoke at a Center of the American Experiment forum in January 2002.

Four basic misconceptions underlie discussion of race and education, specifically of black students' lag in grades and SAT scores. These misconceptions have a lot to do with making the discussion so unpleasant and often so circular.

One misconception is that when

we're talking about African American people, we're talking about the poor. We have to resist the urge to think that all African American students live in a ghetto.

According to one study, only about one in five African Americans are what you would call the underclass.

That's still too many, but it's not the majority. According to the latest census reports, less than a quarter of African American families live below the poverty line. A view that I think is overly optimistic says that two-thirds of African American families are middle class. There are people who would say that only two-fifths of African American families are middle class; by most standards, that's low. The truth is, about half of African American families are middle-class people. That's a very different story than it was thirty years ago, and it's important for us to remember that.

A second misconception is that affirmative action in universities is just a matter of a thumb on the scale. Many people think that racial preference policies simply choose the equally qualified African American student over the white one. I wouldn't have any problem with a policy like that, and I don't think most people would, but that's not what's been going on with racial preference policies for a very long time.

In *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*, authors Derek Bok and William Bowen, who both favor affirmative action, make clear that, in a study of over two dozen selective universities, in general, over the past thirty years, African American students have been admitted with SAT scores, on the average, 150 points lower than those of white students.

If you are a white student and your SAT score is between 1200 and 1250,

your chance of getting into one of these universities is 19 percent, less than one in five. If you're black, your chances are 60 percent. So it's not just a thumb on the scale: it is a lowering of standards. The issue, then, is whether we agree with that lowering of standards. There are arguments that say it is necessary, but we have to understand that when we say affirmative action, we often aren't thinking about what's being affirmed and what the action is.

Affirmative action is the lowering of standards for black people. Do we agree with that or do we not?

A third misconception is that the SAT is a meaningless test, that it really doesn't matter, that word analogies and eighth grade math problems don't reflect a student's ability in college. We are told this over and over again, and it is false.

The SAT is not perfect, but many studies—including many pro-racial preference studies—have shown that it does have considerable predictive power. The fact is that SAT scores are particularly predictive of the first year, though they are not as predictive after that. And African American students tend to do less well than their SAT scores would predict, not better.

We're trying to figure out how to make African American students do better, and in doing that, I'm not sure it's useful for us to say that the SAT should not play a part in how we measure. I don't think any school uses only the SAT, and no one anywhere has ever claimed that it should be used as the only indicator of a student's potential. But it is very useful as one component,

and I suspect that anyone who has ever sat on any kind of admissions committee would have to admit this.

Finally, there is a misconception that there is a problem only with tests and not with grades, but studies have shown that there is a grade discrepancy as well. For example, at the University of California at Berkeley, where I teach, before the demise of racial preferences it was found that on the average, black undergraduates had a grade point average of B plus before coming to college, as opposed to pretty much straight A's for white and Asian students.

The point is not just to decry that discrepancy and to say something as simplistic as that everybody needs to shape up. But we have to understand the nature of the problem before we can solve it.

There is a very severe gap in performance between black and white students overall starting at a very young age and continuing in many ways up through postgraduate study. We want to fix it, not just talk about it. How do we do that? The reasons that are usually given for why this discrepancy exists don't really hold up. You're often told these things with great moral indignation. You get a sense that no right-thinking person could possibly not think that Jonathan Kozol's book *Savage Inequalities* is second only to the Bible in its authority, but that simply isn't true. If you look at the facts, you find that we've been had by a lot of data and a lot of the things we're being told. This is important because it ends up leaving black children without help.

False Explanations

We have to examine some of the false explanations before we deal with real solutions. Example number one: The situation does not hinge on underfunding of schools. It is not true that students can achieve only when their schools are liberally funded. It wasn't true in the past, and it isn't true now. Nobody should have to go to a horrible school with peeling paint, bad textbooks, lousy teachers, water fountains that don't work, and gunshots outside. Nobody should have to go to a "Jonathan Kozol school." But the fact is that when Southeast Asian immigrants' kids go to schools like that, they do very well despite all of those factors. This has been documented particularly well in California.

It seems logical when we're told that black children cannot do well because they go to terrible, underfunded schools where the teaching is not optimal. Actually, **most** black students do not go to schools like that, but let's say that they did. They would be sitting beside kids who are doing very well. That's not a criticism of African American students; that is to say that the problem with them is different. The savage inequalities argument must be dismissed. It hasn't helped for twenty years, and it never will.

Another false explanation is that it is a class issue. There is a sense that all black people are either poor or working class, and therefore that's the rub. It's true that people of lower classes generally don't do as well in school, but

again, it's often supposed that comparisons with other groups are inappropriate because we African Americans were brought here as slaves and remain hobbled in some abstract way by that legacy. I don't quite understand that.

Look at Korean immigrants' kids. A Korean greengrocer is not middle class. If what you do for a living is run a corner store, you are a working-class person, not middle class. You don't read *Harper's* and watch *Frasier*. Yet the children of Asian working-class people in South Central Los Angeles don't have any particular problems in school.

Or take Jewish people: the Jewish intellectuals in the *Partisan Review* crowd, Ira Gershwin and his lyrics. They grew up in working-class families, but nobody has ever wondered why they went on to become scholars and people of letters.

Once again, I'm not criticizing black students here. I'm just saying that the problem is not simply that somebody who doesn't subscribe to *Harper's* cannot do well in school.

So it's not underfunding and it's not a matter of class. Is it the teachers?

There is a large industry, particularly in the education world, that says white teachers are biased against black students, particularly black boys, and this discourages black students from doing well. Most black people can tell stories about biased white teachers. I can tell you a couple. But the question—which usually isn't asked—is whether that kind of bias condemns you to not being able to do well in school.

Does it? A lot of evidence suggests not. We're often encouraged to sell

ourselves out as very weak people. One teacher doesn't like you and, therefore, the best you can ever do is a B. That's not what I call Black Power, and I don't think it's a realistic view of how these things go.

Laurence Steinberg, who studied nine high schools of different socioeconomic levels in Wisconsin and California, analyzes various ethnic groups in *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*. He found that Latino and Asian students report the exact same amount of what they interpret as bias from teachers as black students do. Let's face it—children these days are trained to frame things in that way, which is in some ways a good thing. All of them—Asians, Latinos, blacks—reported the same amount of bias. Yet the performance differential is with black students.

Once again, I'm not blaming the black kids. I'm showing that some other causal factor must be at work. It's not that Mrs. Smith doesn't call on you, so your spirit is extinguished and you cannot do well in school. That's not a realistic view of children, whether they're black or not. Yes, there is teacher bias, but people overcome obstacles. Black people have always done it, and they still do it. The problem is something beyond that.

Finally, we're told that black students are done in by a myth that black people are not smart, that black students are choking on their work because of this idea. Claude Steele has been celebrated for that thesis. He has been featured in the *Atlantic Monthly* twice, and the

study made its way around the education grapevine immediately because it tells a lot of people what they want to hear. It sounds plausible—and it also doesn't make a whit of sense.

There is a minor literature, which the *Atlantic Monthly* will never write up, that pretty elegantly demonstrates that this is not really as valid a thesis as we're often told. Claude Steele showed that if you tell black students you are giving them a test that measures their mental abilities, and you couch this as a racially aimed test, they don't do as well as they do on a test that is not looking at race.

Why is that so surprising? When white students are told that they're taking a test that will show whether they are as smart as Asians, white students don't do as well. All of us would choke on a test of that kind. The question is whether or not, when black students are doing calculus in their dorm rooms, they are thinking of it as a challenge to their racial identity. We can talk about that, but that's not what the Steele work shows.

It has been said by a great many thoroughly credentialed people that women are subtly denigrated in various ways and that there's a stereotype of the mental inferiority of women. Yet, as Christina Hoff Sommers has shown, girls are actually ahead of boys in terms of school performance these days.

A certain modern orthodoxy tells us that human beings cannot triumph over obstacles, especially when they are brown human beings. We've taken this idea too far.

The Acting-White Syndrome

The schools in Shaker Heights, Ohio, are well funded, and in some of them African American students are about half of the student body. A goodly portion of these students would be considered middle class by any metric. There's no ability tracking other than voluntary tracking. Students decide whether or not they want to take advanced placement courses, but nobody is put into an AP track or taken out of one. There is an after-school mentoring program—put together and run by black students—for black students who start to fall behind. There is warmth and continuity. Yet in these schools, year after year, the African American students cluster at the very bottom of the class by the time of graduation. Why is that?

The Shaker Heights story tells us that it's not underfunding, not class, not ability tracking, not confidence, not teacher bias. It's something that has taken root within African American peer culture. If we're going to fix this situation, we have to look this squarely in the eye, as uncomfortable as it is.

Black students in Shaker Heights often report that at a certain point, generally around fifth or sixth grade, they were told by their black peers that to do well in school is to act white. Doing well is selling out. It is white students who do well; a proper black person really shouldn't do well in school.

Kids will tell you this overtly. They will say it into a microphone. It's not a sophisticated analysis of test results. They'll tell you straight out. And it is

not just Shaker Heights. We've now found a similar phenomenon in many school districts across the country: in Prince Georges County, Maryland; in Evanston, Illinois; in San Francisco and Berkeley. The acting-white syndrome has been documented by John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham and others, and many people have mentioned it, but rarely has it been given the sustained attention that it deserves—probably because it is a very disturbing fact.

You cannot grow up African American and not know about the acting-white syndrome. I don't think that any black American who grew up after about 1965 could possibly say that they haven't heard of it. And this is what's important: the acting-white phenomenon is relatively new. It was not happening in the black community before, roughly, the Black Power movement.

I've gotten a lot of mail about *Losing the Race*. I've written other books, but *Losing the Race* is the "mail book." I've started to catalog all of it according to what points are being made, and the thickest file is the "acting white" file. About two hundred African American people have written to me to say that it happened to them. And very consistently, with one possible exception, it was after about 1965. If you were a smart black kid doing well in school in the 1930s and 1940s, you might have been teased for being a walking encyclopedia—that's a cross-racial phenomenon—but you weren't told that you were acting white. One man told me that when he was coming of age in the early 1960s, he never heard that, but then his cousins, who were a few years

younger, were hit very hard by it in the late 1960s.

Where does it come from? It's a response to racism, make no mistake. In the late 1960s, a new ideology rejected the old integrationist ideal and embraced a separatist one, the idea being that the job of black people was to define themselves against the oppressor. That made a whole lot more sense back then—when there was a very overt kind of racism in the United States—than it does now. I was born in 1965, and I did not grow up with the integrationist ideals of early Du Bois.

The Black Power movement had its positive by-products. Black is beautiful. Kwanzaa. A lot of wonderful studies done by people like Henry Louis Gates. Those are all good. But a negative by-product was that around the time of the Black Power movement, black teenagers started telling their friends not to do well in school because it means you are not one of us. It's completely understandable why this happened, but it persists as a problem now. This is a very different America, and this now hurts more than it helps.

The media often interpret me as saying in *Losing the Race* that black people aren't in favor of education. That's not what I meant. It's not that black people don't send their children to college. They do, in increasing numbers. It's not that black people do not espouse the value of education as much as any other group. They do; they always have. The issue is what happens to black students when they're in school, regardless of what their parents are doing to help or not help. It's this

internal ideology that to be a cool black teen is to not be a nerd.

Parents do play some part, because we're dealing with a cultural legacy. The Steinberg study showed that when black students are asked what the lowest grade their parents would allow them to bring home is, they say a C minus. Asians say that the lowest grade they can bring home is an A minus, and even that is trouble. That reflects my experience at Berkeley, where every third student is Asian. They're serious—probably too serious. There's a lot that could be said about this but, clearly, something's up here—namely, a cultural difference that is not imposed from the outside.

It has also been documented that black parents in many districts are less likely to attend PTA meetings. We're often told that is because black parents might have two jobs. But so do many white parents, and a great many black parents do not have two jobs. There is clearly something else going on.

Many black-run school boards seem to have little interest in teaching children. These people are very different from the black school board members before about 1965. They have drunk in a sense that the three R's are somehow something other people do, the people we don't trust, and that we need to teach our children how to defend themselves against racism in society. That ideology runs through a lot of discourse and a lot of people's thoughts. These school boards often seem to be more concerned with sinecures and salaries and what they call local control. It's like an elephant sitting in the

middle of the room: you want to say, "Local control has left people functionally illiterate for thirty years—don't you care?" Well, yes, they care. But the reason they don't seem to care enough is that they have drunk in the sense that those other things are white things and, therefore, they are weighted less. This explains these school boards' resistance to actually teaching children in a serious way.

I think the acting-white syndrome—and its various effects upon our context such as school boards' priorities—is the main factor in black students' lag in grades and SAT scores. Many people would say, very reasonably, that this is just one explanation, and that there are many factors. Most people who would say that mean, ultimately, that racism is still the major factor. I don't think so. If you look at all of the factors, the acting-white syndrome is the defining one. If we took that away, it would be like removing a card from a card house: the rest would fall down. No, all white teachers are not perfect. Yes, there are confidence problems. Yes, many schools could use more money. But if you pulled this one factor out, that would be it.

One way we know this is that the children of Caribbean and African immigrants do not have the problems with grades and scores that I'm talking about, and these children have the same experiences with residual racism and underfunded schools that black American children do. All those things are true and all those things are real, but we're told that they are our destiny. I don't think they are. Haitian kids do

very well in terrible schools in Harlem. The real issue is a cultural one.

Cultures can work against themselves as much as they can work for themselves. That's a human issue, not a racial issue. It would be strange if we African Americans were perfect, and one of the imperfections within our culture is a sense that to study, for example, Galileo or ancient Greek or physics or the Chinese language is external to what we really are. That sense plays a role in how well one does in school.

Some people might say that acting white is not the issue at all, that it isn't really what we need to be thinking about. But I think most people would admit that this is real. You cannot be black and have missed it unless you didn't happen to grow up among very many black children. I think we can agree that the phenomenon exists. So why would it not be the issue? If, at a certain point, in order to be cool you have to reject school, most kids will do it. Why would that not be a very serious problem?

Changing the Culture

So what do we do? The first thing is to realize that when we aim solutions at the educational problem, we have to divest ourselves of a basic impulse to suppose that what we need to do is fix whiteness. That hasn't been working for the past thirty years. Teaching white teachers not to be biased won't work. Putting more money into schools won't work; it wouldn't be a bad thing, but we would still have the same issue. We have to aim our solutions at the fact

that as a legacy of racism in this country—and I have to stress that: it's a legacy of racism—we have to address the fact that a great many African American kids, and not just poor ones, as they become teenagers are going to be inculcated into a sense that to do well in school is to be an immoral human being. We have to face that squarely rather than thinking of it as a marginal factor.

Oddly enough, that means that a little segregation can go a long way. Small, all-minority schools are a great antidote to this problem. We see this all over the country: about 150 kids, most of them African American, very few of them white, and high standards and innovative, committed teachers. In schools like this, black kids tend to do very well, in part because there are no white children to compare themselves to. It's hard to say that you're just acting white when, well, nobody is white.

These all-black schools are a salvation. If I could wave a magic wand, all black students, for at least the next thirty years, would go to schools like that. They make black students high achievers and discourage that identification against the oppressor. What changes human behavior often is a change of environment.

Also, if you're in favor of improving black students' education, you have to be in favor of vouchers. It's not about allegiance to a political party, and it's not about ulterior motives. People should be able to voucher themselves into all-black schools. There is no possible romance for the old public school if we're really trying to help most

African American kids. We need to get black kids into programs that work. Therefore, vouchers are a good thing. To resist them in favor of coddling teachers' unions ends up condemning a lot of people to failure. Unfortunately, over the next couple of years, vouchers do not seem to be a viable issue with our government, though they could help African American children to get some decent teaching for the first time in thirty-five years.

Another issue that follows directly from the actual nature of the lag in black test scores and grades is this: racial preferences in universities as well as in selective high schools must be abolished. In saying that, I am often misinterpreted as tossing my hat into a certain ideological ring. Not true. My problem with racial preferences is very specific: they end up condemning black students to failure. It's as simple as that, and here's the reason: if you lower the bar for any human beings, they will reach just that high. That's human nature, not race. Wherever you set the bar, that's about as far as people will go, because that's all they need to do. Occasionally—but only occasionally—someone will leap over the bar. If you raise the bar, people will rise with it.

White guilt has lowered the bar for African American students. Asian and white kids are told that they have to do very well, but if you're black, you just have to do pretty darn good—and then we're surprised that black students only do pretty darn good.

We are being underestimated. We are being condemned to this sort of failure. It doesn't surprise me at all that

in 1995, exactly 184 black students in the United States scored over 700 on the verbal portion of the SAT—not enough to fill an airplane. Why? Because that's about as much as black students are expected to do.

When black kids are already telling each other that to do well in school is to step outside of being a morally authentic and legitimate human being, there's nothing worse we could do than to have a policy that says they only have to do so well. It's like riding a bike with training wheels—it's not really riding. There comes a point when you just have to be left to do it yourself, without the training wheels.

That's my answer to people who say that we should wait to take away racial preferences until performance is equal. Once you get to a certain point, you can only learn to hit the highest bar by doing it. That's true in all activities, and there's no exception when it comes to African Americans. African American students will learn to do as well as, say, Asian students when they have to. These students are not going to do as well as everybody else if we let them into the best institutions in the nation when they do less well.

Affirmative action sounds good, and there is a sense that it absolves the guilt of what happened in the past, but it also condemns African American students to failure—especially when it is combined with a legacy from the past that says to excel is inauthentic. This cannot stand.

African American culture has been encouraged to reject something because of the horrors of the past, horrors that in

some ways continue into the present. But if we're going to solve the problem, we have to resist the urge to think of the solution as changing white attitudes. What we have to change is a culture. And we can't change that culture by just preaching to black students they have to do better in school—that's not how human beings change.

We have to set up a context in which the only way to get the best fruits that society has to offer is to do well. This is the only way that it will get around on the vine—among African American parents, among guidance counselors, and among African American students—that a change in the culture is necessary. I believe that this would take much less time than is often thought, and for both white people and black, it would be the humane thing to do.

After his speech, John McWhorter took questions from his American Experiment audience.

Dale Beihoffer: One of the most important influences on any culture is the media: the news media, rap music, MTV, movies. How can you get the media to start sending the kinds of messages you advocate?

John McWhorter: We do not need to try to stanch messages; it wouldn't work, and meanwhile it would alienate the very people we want to help. What we need, simply, is for there to be two kinds of discourse on race in the media, just as there was in the era of W. E. B.

Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Du Bois urged blacks to strive for the best and agitate politically; Washington urged blacks to build their own communities, seeing agitation as futile. Back then, there was no general consensus that either one of these men had a lock on "authenticity"; the two were seen as alternates that one could choose from.

But right now, if you're a black conservative, a great many people think you're some sort of freak. Getting rid of that notion would help, and I think it's already happening. The Fox Network, for example, seems to understand that you can be a black conservative and not be an opportunistic moron. We just need younger people to grow up seeing two dialogues. It's not that they have to lean to the hard right or the hard left.

Popular culture will change as the ideology changes.

Al Gallmon [a member of the Minneapolis school board]: Do the data show that African American students do better in traditionally African American schools than in non-African American schools? And do you think that there would be resistance from non-African American individuals to African American schools coming together and being predominantly African American and nonwhite?

John McWhorter: I don't know of any study that makes the direct comparison you're asking about, but I know of some reports that show that reading scores are much higher than average at those schools. I've never seen a com-

parison to black students in other schools; I don't think any exist yet.

As far as resistance goes, there will be some resistance to the idea of black students being inculcated in the more nutty kind of Afrocentric ideology. Most of the schools that I'm aware of don't do that, however. And I think the case can be made pretty easily. Many nonblack people care very much about this issue and will understand this solution if it is presented in the proper way.

Carol Johnson [superintendent of schools in Minneapolis]: The National Commission on Teaching in America's Future suggested that almost half of the predictive value of student performance is the quality of teaching. I'm curious that you believe that a voucher alone would be sufficient to guarantee the kind of results you propose. I also have a question about whether you believe charters represent an answer to that, or whether it really is not the sort of structural changes of either charters or vouchers, but really something much more significant, the quality of teaching combined with this notion of doing something about the identification problem that students have.

John McWhorter: You're in the business and I'm not, and so I say this with the fullest respect. My sense is that many public schools are not going to see quality teaching for a good long time. In Oakland, where I live, that's obviously hopeless until hundreds of people retire. If it takes twenty years, that's another generation of lost kids. I

favor vouchers because, presumably, people choose schools where the quality of teaching is higher.

Mary Ann Nelson [superintendent of schools in the Minneapolis suburb of Fridley]: Shelby Steele, in an editorial reprinted in the [Minneapolis-based] **Star Tribune**, equated white guilt with black power. Could you talk about what writers like you and Shelby Steele and Thomas Sowell have experienced as you bring this message to a culture that may not want to accept it?

John McWhorter: The culture *does* want to accept it—but that's a good question. Shelby Steele is right: many black people take advantage of white guilt, though I don't think that they are as cynical about it as he thinks they are. Most of them sincerely believe that crying victim is what it means to be a black person.

I hear that Shelby Steele has taken an awful lot of hard knocks for being a black conservative. But I've only been abused that way in person once so far. You do have to have a thick skin. You can't be somebody who requires everybody to like you. But I don't have audiences yelling at me, I don't have bricks thrown through my window, I haven't had any death threats. I get the occasional crazy e-mail or letter, or I hear through the grapevine that such-and-such a person doesn't like me, but I think that *most* African Americans agree with most of what Shelby Steele says and, for what it's worth, most of what I say. It's just a matter of how you put it and getting people used to hearing the truth.

In private, many African Americans are deeply committed to self-empowerment, but there's a sense that one is not to talk about that too much in public because we're afraid that white people may take us back to the past. I don't think there's much danger of that in 2002, and I don't think most black people do, either. Thomas Sowell and Shelby Steele were pioneers. We're moving along.

John Stenglein: If you had your druthers, all African American kids would go to African American schools. I think that's a great idea, but what happens when they join the workforce?—let's say this gentleman here goes to a black-only school and I go to a white-only school, and then we get into the workforce together.

John McWhorter: To tell you the truth, there is in the workforce a wariness of whites that I think often comes from—and this is a Shelby Steele point—a deep-seated insecurity. Black schools give black students a real sense of achievement based on having achieved, not on somebody telling them that black is beautiful and their ancestors were warriors. Nothing can replace concrete achievement and confident ability in preparing one to deal with the outside world. Blacks who have really done well in school are able to approach their colleagues on a more honest level.

Kim Crockett: I did quite a bit of tutoring in Cabrini Green in Chicago, and I saw everything that you've talked about played out in a very poor community. There are some complicating factors. One thing you haven't addressed that I think was huge in the Cabrini community is [the lack of] marriage between black women and black men, and the families they create. Could you address that?

John McWhorter: Ideally, children would grow up in two-parent families. That's part of the issue, and it does help a student to do well in school. But in terms of trying to forge social change, I try to be as pragmatic as I can be, and I can't wave a magic wand and fix that one. Welfare reform seems to have helped, but we're still jimmying with it and making sure that it can work well. And, once again, it's that twenty-year factor. I'm more interested in what we can do in, say, three years. I want to know what we can do even if illegitimacy is more prevalent among African Americans, particularly of certain socioeconomic classes, than it would be ideally. Sheer pragmatism keeps me from addressing that issue.

My aim here is not to condemn African American culture. What would be the point of that? My goal is to call attention to an underplayed problem that has to be addressed, and to say that we might benefit from changing our habits of thinking. ■