

## Who's Failing Black Students?

By Hisham Aidi, [Africana.com](http://Africana.com)

The notion that a deep sense of anti-intellectualism holds sway in the African American community has been debated for decades. But is it true?

Over fifty years ago, the celebrated African American novelist Ralph Ellison criticized what he saw as a tendency among black parents to discourage intellectual curiosity in their children, a practice he described as an effort to keep intelligent, outspoken children from running afoul of hostile whites. To “protect the child,” Ellison wrote in 1945, black parents “train the child away from curiosity and adventure,” often through “severe beating.”

The notion that a deep sense of anti-intellectualism holds sway in the African American community has been debated for decades. And with black American academic performance still lagging behind national standards and no definitive explanation for the discrepancy, the debate rages on.

While literacy was represented as a highly coveted asset in early slave narratives, and while millions of black parents have historically stressed education as an invaluable guarantor of success in life, scholars argue that in recent years black attitudes towards intellectual achievement have changed. Anecdotes depicting popular disdain for college students in black urban communities are common, as well as the now infamous assertion that many African American children regard succeeding in school as “white” behavior. But it’s the statistics that are most alarming.

A 1998 study of admission applications at 28 selective American universities found that about 75 percent of white students taking the SAT scored over 1200 (out of 1600), while just over 25 percent of black students passed the 1200 mark. The poor scores cut across class and socio-economic distinctions within the African American community. According to the same study, in 1995 the average SAT score for black students from families making \$50,000 or more was 849, which was the average score for white students from families earning \$10,000 or less.

Different explanations have been put forth to account for blacks’ academic under-performance. Liberals have tended to emphasize socio-economic factors such as mediocre public schools, poverty and racially-based academic standards, while conservatives have pointed to a litany of cultural variables—from the rise of hip hop to the popularity of sports in the African American community.

Ronald Ferguson of Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government recently attributed the drop in black test scores to the rising popularity of rap music, a trend he blames for helping to create a climate of anti-intellectualism in the black community. “There was tremendous progress in the 1980s in reading and math scores for black youth. Sometime between 1988 and 1990 the progress stops. I see a shift in time-use patterns among black youth [related] to this new music produced by hip hop culture,” argues Ferguson, citing a 1988 survey in which

40 percent of black students interviewed said they read regularly for pleasure—a figure that dropped to 14 percent in 1992.

In the controversial book *Darwin's Athletes*, John Hoberman argues that “the cult of the black athlete” and a focus on athletic as opposed to intellectual achievement has had a disastrous effect on the African American community, promoting a sense of anti-intellectualism among black youth that has “decimated their life-opportunities in a knowledge-based America.” Hoberman calls the African American emphasis on sports a “cultural syndrome [that] has subverted more productive developmental strategies founded on academic and professional achievement.”

Many prominent African American scholars have also spoken out against the excessive value placed on athletic achievement in the black community to the neglect of academic success. Black economist Glenn Loury has denounced the “pernicious chauvinism that leads a black to feel himself superior in view of the demographic composition of the NBA.” And author and professor Cornel West, writing about the alienation of black intellectuals, has deplored the popular black attitudes that equate academic excellence with whiteness and effeminacy, and called for “new stylistic options for black men caught in the deadly endeavor of rejecting black machismo identities.”

Michael Eric Dyson, author of *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* and professor of African American Studies at DePaul University, sees the purported black focus on athletics over academics as rooted in African American history. “There’s no denying that obviously, if you live in a culture that demands a certain physical rigor of you, you’re going to be good at that,” he says. “People critique the lack of a serious black intellectual tradition, and say that it’s not as strong as the athletic one or the musical one. Well, it’s not like the slave master was saying, ‘Come sing me a libretto,’ or ‘Come write me an essay,’ or ‘Come read me a book’—they were saying, ‘Come and perform some physical labor for us, and come and perform as entertainers.’ So if physical labor and entertainment were the stock-in-trade and were the means of sustaining your culture in the face of white supremacy, then you’ll be good at that.”

The debate over black scholastic under-achievement has recently been reignited with the publication of *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* by John McWhorter, a black professor of linguistics at Berkeley University. McWhorter, a self-proclaimed Democrat, maintains that African Americans have by and large failed to achieve academic success for three reasons—the cults of “victimology,” separatism and anti-intellectualism. McWhorter holds that because of African Americans’ sense of victim status, it “has become a keystone of cultural blackness to treat victimhood not as a problem to be solved, but as an identity to be nurtured.” Victimology is a seductive ideal,” he notes, “because there is an ironic and addictive contentment in underdogism.”

He argues that separatism discourages African Americans from engaging in activities, academic or otherwise, not deemed “black.” “Separatism encourages black Americans to conceive of black people as an unofficial sovereign entity, within which the rules other Americans are expected to follow are suspended out of a belief that our victimhood renders us

morally exempt from them,” he writes. Similarly, McWhorter describes “the cult of anti-intellectualism” as the belief that “school is a white endeavor.”

While he feels that blacks tend to blame racism for too many failures, McWhorter is careful to acknowledge that racial discrimination is an ongoing problem in America. “Only naiveté could lead anyone to suppose that racism does not still exist or that there are not still problems to be solved,” he writes. “[But] black Americans too often teach one another to conceive of racism not as a scourge on the wane but as an eternal pathology changing only in form and visibility, and always on the verge of getting not better but worse.”

Rejecting the conclusions of psychologist Claude Steele’s 1992 Stanford University study which argued that black students performed poorly on SAT-type tests because of the “Stereotype Threat,” the fear of confirming insidious canards about black mental inferiority, McWhorter blames black academic failure on self-sabotage. African American students “do so poorly in school decade after decade not because of racism, funding, class, parental education, etc., but because of a virus of Anti-intellectualism that infects the black community,” he argues. “This Anti-intellectual strain is inherited from whites having denied education to blacks for centuries, and has been concentrated by the Separatist trend, which in rejecting the ‘white ‘ cannot help but cast school and books as suspicious and alien, not to be embraced by the authentically ‘black’ person.”

McWhorter notes that the “Anti-intellectual virus” is not endemic to all black communities, as the success of West Indian and African students in the United States amply demonstrates. “We...see this national sense of responsibility in school in Caribbean and African immigrants, whose children often find themselves in conflict with their African American classmates who revile them for working hard in school,” he writes.

McWhorter’s argument has drawn sharp responses. Harvard Law School professor Randall Kennedy, author of *Race, Crime and the Law*, feels that McWhorter’s book grossly underestimates the impact of racism.

“McWhorter minimizes the extent to which racial discrimination continues to impede black Americans, viewing it as an occasional encumbrance, a mere nuisance,” Kennedy says. “McWhorter could have performed a useful service by telling readers what is known about the extent of racial discrimination in American life.... The Urban Institute has performed a series of studies uncovering substantial amounts of racial discrimination in employment and real estate markets, and over the last few years, the *New England Journal of Medicine* and other reputable forums of medical knowledge have published a variety of articles that point to racial discrimination as the most likely explanation for differences in medical care, be it the prescription of pain medications or decisions regarding surgery.”

Like Dyson, Kennedy sees the stifling of a black American intellectual tradition not as a question of collective cultural attitudes, but rather as an artifact of history. And in light of the debilitating legacies of slavery and racial oppression, he says it is remarkable that African Americans have enjoyed as much scholastic success as they have.

“the wonder is not that blacks lag behind whites in education and other indicia of social well-being, but that blacks have managed to come so far so fast in many fields of endeavor,” Kennedy says. “This is a tribute not only to American democracy, which, for all its many grievous faults, has facilitated the incorporation of this once-despised minority. It is a tribute as well to African Americans and their culture—a fascinating, resilient and resourceful culture that has contributed a great deal to making the United States the most powerful nation in the world.