

A Santee Book

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to every American teen enrolled in school who have been marginalized, who have struggled to get along with their teachers and parents, who have questioned the importance of attending school regularly, who have concerns about their education and who finds themselves having to deal with obvious and subtle changes in their education.

This book is also dedicated to every hard working urban classroom teacher who have relentlessly taught students, who have spent thousands of dollars of their own money for supplies and material, who have weathered storm after storm, who have agreed to contract concessions and taken pay cut after pay cut and who continue to teach the students presented before them because they believe they are making a difference.

A Word of Thanks

I want to personally thank each of you for supporting this venture financially. Your decision to purchase this book will help thousands of children and parents experience fulfilled lives. This book is not a fundraiser. You should know that 100% of the proceeds and profits from this book goes directly to the teen authors.

The Importance of This Book

This book is important to me for two reasons. First, it is an intentional effort to report on urban students' views of their education, feelings and reality. Second, this book is important to me because the young authors initially had little interest in writing a book. As they applied themselves and remained active in the Adolescents for Better Learning Endeavors Program (ABLE), they began to realize that anything is possible.

This book was born in November 2014 during a casual conversation that I had with one of the teen authors of this book. He was processing his feelings and describing his daily experiences at school and home. He was not frustrated. He was simply taking an honest assessment of his education and life thus far. He and I agreed that a position paper of some sort needed to be written. It was decided that it would be written during our program's upcoming educational/cultural trip to Toronto, Ontario.

A few days later during our weekly afterschool intervention group, the idea of the position paper was presented to the other program participants. All 14 of the participants agreed that it would be good to document and write about a topic (that would be named later). Having worked with a group of teens previously to write a book, it did not take long for the idea of a book was at the fore-front. Of the participants that thought a book was a good idea, only five followed through on their interest and just three of them finished their writings.

Yours,

Recco Santee Richardson, Ph.D., LPC
Santee Richardson, Ph.D., LPC

Recco

Adolescents for Better Learning Endeavors Program -ABLE-

The Adolescents for Better Learning Endeavors (ABLE) program is community and school based program designed to help school age youth move forward as a result of gaining new skills and competency to successfully participate within the school setting.

The program provides resources, support, motivation and guidance, so as to help participants as they improve their academics, social life, emotional maturity and decision making skills.

The program components include: Individual/Family Counseling, Home Visits, Parenting Workshops, Crisis Management, Incentives/ Awards, Psycho-Educational Groups and Exciting Fieldtrips

ABLE's underlying goal is to address and remove barriers that impede successful school experiences as well as with building positive relationships. Specific training is offered that helps participants address behavioral and emotional issues.

Interventions and support are provided to help improve participant's personal achievement socially, emotionally and academically.

Contents

Introduction of Authors	p. 6
Introduction	p. 8
Chapter 1 My Teachers' Classroom Teaching & Instruction	p. 10
Chapter 2 The Best Teachers & Why They Are So Good	p. 19
Chapter 3 Diversity Matters To Me & My Education	p. 22
Chapter 4 School-Wide Safe Places & Supportive People	p. 28
Chapter 5 Opportunities for Personal Growth	p. 35
Bibliography	p. 42

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Personal Introduction of the Student Authors

By Recco Santee Richardson

Nandi Collins: I met Nandi several years ago when she was in middle school. She and my daughters ran track and played basketball on the school team. Years later as a high school student we crossed paths again when she agreed to participate in our ABLE Program. She is a strong young lady who has untapped academic and athletic potential. She has a way about herself that is sure, yet approachable. She speaks with wisdom beyond her age and a sense of urgency to accomplish something now. She is not afraid of hard work and is an extremely dedicated and faithful person.

Joshua Dubay: I first met Joshua several months ago. He was referred to our ABLE program and I visited his home. During the 60 minute meeting, he made it clear that he wanted no parts of the program, had no intentions of meeting with me again and quickly convinced himself that he did not want to be around other students. Since our August 2014 meeting, he has literally come full circle. Joshua is now a very focused and motivated person with a life plan. He has several short-term and long-term goals that will surely be achieved. He is one of the most active and dedicated participants in our program.

Donnelle Spencer: I met first Donnelle in late August 2014. He too was referred to our ABLE Program and I visited his home. I was immediately taken and impressed by his honesty and ability to verbalize his feelings. Donnell is a poet in waiting and speaks with lots of common sense. His demeanor and presentation often leads others to under-estimate the depth of his insight and personage. Once he sets his mind and heart to something, it is only a matter of time before it materializes.

Introduction of the Guest Authors

Recco Santee Richardson: A visionary, Recco has well developed skills in counseling, psychology, training, business, program development/implementation and supervision. He has touched many lives in a short period of time. An avid writer and golfer, he earned a master's degree in counseling education and a doctorate degree in professional psychology.

Vivian Tate-Hall: I first met Vivian in 2008. She completed her intensive counseling internship at my agency. She is an accomplished limited licensed professional counselor. Vivian is a caring person. Her goal is to help others improve and experience all that life

has to offer. She has the ability to see things for what they are and prescribe the best plan of action. Vivian earned a master's degree in organizational behavior. She also earned a master's degree in mental health counseling. She has taught at the college level and currently is enrolled in counselor education doctoral studies.

Introduction

By Recco Santee Richardson

Written in first person, this book takes a dazzling journey into the heart of each teen author and serves as a reminder to keep the needs of urban K-12 learners at the forefront. “Urban” does not denote or imply inferior, inner-city or superior. More accurately, it designates the location or characteristics of a city. It is held that 80 percent of Americans live in urban areas and attend urban schools.

In a creative manner, this book offers discussions regarding the attributes of outstanding teachers, the importance of school-wide diversity, safe places, opportunities for personal growth and other topics. The writers were given prompts and asked to discuss their views regarding classroom instruction, dealing with learning distractions, how diversity impacts them, what makes them feel safe at school and the importance of personal growth. When possible, they tied their recent educational trip to Toronto, Ontario into their writings.

In 2012, Amanda Vazquez and I wrote a scholarly article titled, “Teaching Urban Students: Perspectives & Strategies for K-12 Classroom Teachers & Administrators.” The article discusses several critical teaching and learning concepts. Specifically the article reported that the education of urban students requires a tailored approach in which their unique experiences and home environments are treated realistically, and without condemnation. Urban students are as capable as others, and excel when classroom instruction is meaningful and encourages action. Effective urban teachers have set upon themselves the task of making a difference by expanding beyond traditional approaches and philosophies of education.

The current literature reports that urban areas and minority students are the fastest-growing populations in public schools. “Urban” does not necessarily denote African American or another minority group. Rather, it signifies the location and environment in which the students live; the majority of urban students are Caucasian.

Between 50 and 75 percent of urban students begin kindergarten without the literacy skills needed for reading success (Cartledge & Lo, 2006). Urban public school students do not graduate at the same rate as other student and teacher turnover is very high. This can indirectly impact urban students’ learning outcomes and skill development.

Urban students are no less capable than other students; they simply do not respond well to the passive, ambiguous, low-interaction, and limited autonomy that are typical of some

classrooms. The best approaches and strategies for teaching urban students include: providing contextually rich and varied activities and assignments, focusing on curriculum, involving the community and family members, and taking advantage of local resources.

Moreover, urban students perform best when they are able to construct their own meaning from lessons and are given a chance to integrate real-world situations. Urban students are quick to offer that the best teachers ensured they did their homework, controlled the classroom, were available and willing to help them, explained assignments and contents well, varied the classroom routine, and took time to get to know them.

In closing, this book is an effort to document and take a glimpse into the thoughts of today's urban students and their perspectives regarding education. Much can be stated about urban education. There are sufficient tools and strategies available to ensure every child learns at their optimum level.

At the crux of future urban students' progress is the need for schools of education at colleges throughout America to sufficiently prepare students to enter the teaching arena. Today's K-12 student learner is not the same as the learners of yesteryear. There must be concerted efforts by everyone towards removing remaining barriers and propelling our young learners to higher heights. It can be done and it should be done.

Chapter #1

My Teachers'



Classroom Teaching & Instruction

By Nandi Collins

I have teachers that are not good teachers. When they teach and instruct, they confuse me and others. Because they have a plan they must follow, every day we can be on a different topic. This causes the teachers to skip information while still expecting us to remember what they talked about in class four days ago.

I also have teachers that do a really good job. They are aware that some students do not comprehend well so they teach at a slower pace. These teachers really want us to learn and are willing to slow down to ensure that we understand.

To get the most out of my teacher's instructions and materials, I listen, listen, and listen. I also do my assignments and turn in my homework on time. My teachers' instruction is just part of the equation. To have good success academically and learn what is required, I have found that I must study my notes and study for test. I study for test by rewriting math problems, rewriting English and reading assignments and re-answering questions. Since incorporating these habits, my grades have improved and so has my attitude towards teachers and my family.

To make sure distractions, peers and family issues do not hinder my classroom learning, I have learned to ignore things that distract me. I also work hard to think positive and not negatively. I used to go after my family with terrible words and a horrible attitude. Within the last several months, I have learned to deal with my family and our problems differently. The most important thing that I do now is listen to what my parents are saying. When they are done speaking, I remain quiet and walk away in a mature way. I used to talk back to them and try to be tough or something. I improved my interactions with them because I realized I was wrong and needed to figure things out the right way.

While taking part in an educational trip to Toronto in 2014, I noticed how everyone at the shopping mall was rude and pushing each other. Can you imagine what it was like (a few days after Christmas) seeing thousands and thousands of people bustling in largest mall in Canada? I mean, people were bumping into each other and not even saying excuse me. I got bumped into several times. A year ago I would have been ready to act out or fight somebody for bumping into me. However, the new me simply shrugged off the bumps and rude looks. I decided to let it go because I cannot allow distractions or people to take up space in my life. I'm headed in the right direction and I don't need anything hindering my learning and education.

By Joshua Dubay

I have some teachers that do not do a good job of teaching the material. These teachers expect us to pick up and understand the material too fast. They fail to realize that some students cannot pick up and understand material that quickly. I, and a lot of other students, fall behind in class because after we get done with the assigned work, the teacher gives us more just because we finished the first assignment. I believe that some teachers need to make a longer lesson and give us work that we better understand.

I must say that I have some teachers that do a good job of teaching and making sure I understand the material. These teachers explain the lesson. They plan out the lesson so that there is no way we will not grasp the material. The teachers let us ask questions and let us work through our struggles. They do not give us the answers. The good teachers challenge me and others to grow. They are the greatest teachers because they want us to be successful in life even if we do not understand life right now.

To get the most out of my teacher's classroom instruction, I must pay attention. This is the number one thing to do. If I do not pay attention and listen, I will not learn. School is a place you go to learn and to soak up knowledge that is being passed down. When my friends turn around and try to talk to me, I ask them to be quiet or I do not pay them any attention. I am learning that it is not that hard to go to school every day and get the information that is being taught. In the past, I got kicked out of school a lot or just decided to not go to school for days at a time. Now I go to school every single day because I want to be proud of my grades. I understand the material more when I attend school.

To make sure distractions, my peers and family issues do not hinder my classroom learning, the best thing for me to do is leave it all at home. All the drama and conflict is not healthy for school learning. I look at school as a stepping stone to my future job. I really do not want getting into a fistfight at school or other conflicts to hinder me. The way I see it, the same people that fistfight at school also get into fights and arguments at work. Guess what? Arguing and fighting at work will get you fired. When you are fired, you cannot pay your bills and other expenses. Now what? When you are not working and have no money, you may lose your home or apartment. High school students like myself need to think about our choices before we act. Our high school choices can and will affect us for the rest of our lives.

I observed several things during my educational/cultural trip to Toronto, Ontario. I was not necessarily trying to notice things. I was just taking in each moment of the trip. What I noted most was that it appeared that the residents were happy. I cannot really explain it; it just seems like people were not uptight. The vibe of the city was positive and the people looked to be ease. Maybe it was the time of year (Christmas). This relates to what my teachers often say. They encourage students to prepare themselves for a fulfilling life that is not dominated by problems and crisis.

By Donnell Spencer

I have teachers that do not do a good job of teaching and instructing material. These teachers spend lots of time telling students' (and other peoples') business. They say inappropriate things; and are rude and disrespectful towards students. In my opinion, they do not care about me or other students. They could care less where students come from. I really feel that ineffective teachers do not care about my feelings. They seem to only care about if I and other students are doing well and behaving in their class.

On the other hand, I have teachers that do a good job of instructing and teaching. They are good at what they do because they care about students. They are concerned about how I am doing. They actually help me and other students when there is a struggle. My good teachers make sure I get my done and they notice me. They take the time to talk with me to ensure that I am okay.

To get the most out of my teachers' instructions and teaching, I sit at the front of the classroom and stay away from friends who will lead me down the wrong path. I take it upon myself to ask questions when I am confused. I also help myself by paying attention and listening when in class. Turning in all my work on time also helps.

I have a plan to overcome problems and family issues that work against my learning. I intentionally try to focus on the positive things in life. My education is important and it can determine my future. As a result, I must not let things affect me the wrong way. I am learning that problems (i.e., family issues) can be dealt with later and when I leave school.

By Vivian Tate-Hall

In my opinion there are teachers that do not do a good job of teaching material. This is because they do not always recognize the issues that often are the cause of students not being able to focus on their school work. When they observe students acting out, they only see the outward effects of behaviors, not the basis of the behaviors. They do not understand that teaching involves understanding, students on all levels.

On the other hand, teachers who do a good job of instructing are not single focused. I believe teaching involves not only providing information concerning academics, but understanding the source of my acting out.

To get the most out of teachers' classroom instruction, students must trust them to actually be concerned. This trust allows student to go to them, when they are upset or concerned about issues. Family issues are often the cause of distractions. While this may be true, students must realize that their determination and focus, along with the teachers' instruction, will be instrumental in their success.

I became aware I possessed the train of determination when I attended a trip to Toronto Canada, after Christmas. I believe the peace of Lake Erie and the quiet voices and behaviors of the citizenry of Toronto made me aware of my internal feelings. I learned that I did not have to respond to loud voices and noise. I could become the person I have long realized I am. During that trip, I did not respond to those around me in a swearing, boisterous manner. The peace of Lake Erie was very effective, and I wondered if the citizens who had access to the beauty of Lake Erie responded in their quiet manner as a result of having the ability to view this beautiful, powerful scene.

By Recco Santee Richardson (excerpts taken from the article “Teaching Urban Students,” Richardson & Vazquez, 2012)

Over the last several years I have become a follower of K-12 education. My interest in children’s educational outcomes stems from my mental health counselor background and raising two daughters. As a professional, parent and community stakeholder, I find that the best teachers realize that knowing about their students’ lives, motivations, resources, and language is essential to effective urban classroom education. In addition, teaching urban students requires a different approach which takes into account their unique experiences. This is true because their environments are filled with adaptations to specific cultures of origin and cultures of thought that may encourage the expression of certain behaviors (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005).

My recent research on students’ education revealed that it is not the number of students being taught, but the character and nature of the environment that most affects students’ reactions to a lesson. I’m finding that the best urban classroom teachers help students’ connect classroom instruction and day-to-day living activities to effective interactive instruction (i.e., white boards, Blackboard, CAI).

Slaughter (2009) reported that the above materials and equipment have the ability to connect students with the material, teachers, and each other because it promotes the free exchange of ideas, clear communication, and critical thinking. The exchange of ideas and dialogue between students and between teachers and students can be intimidating for some teachers. They fear they may lose control of the classroom or the topic, or be seen as inadequate. Critical thinking and progressive class discussions are not how most teachers were trained. As a result, many of them avoid free-flowing learning and exploration that digs into the heart of the matter.

Over the years I have become a staunch supporter of building administrators. I really believe that strong administrative leadership is paramount to effective urban education and must be present when seeking to address and experience success in urban education. I really believe that strong administrative leadership must be present when seeking to address and experience success in urban education. As quiet as it is kept, one thing that benefits teachers’ classroom instruction the most is successful administrators who have learned to constantly juggle, motivate staff, create a positive school environment and maximize their skill set. When that occurs, teachers’ potential to steer the ship effectively is not regularly interrupted and there are few constant sources of frustration.

Mukurla (2002) documented that the role of the building principals in predominately black urban middle schools is vital to learning, progress and the teachers' effectiveness. The building principal sets the tone for parental involvement, structured environments, schoolwide programs such as retained student services and mutual respect among students and teachers. This tone, when not positive, can be counterproductive and promote school dropout.

I have talked with and supported dozens of quality urban teachers over the last ten years. These instructors could just go in and breeze through the material as it is outlined and meet the needs of 40 percent of the students. What stands out about each of them, though, is their willingness to take the time to prepare more interactive activities, intentionally rephrase critical points, create an engaging environment and sell students on the importance of thirsting for knowledge. They realize that by doing a little more, they might be able to reach and teach another 20 percent of the class and capture the imagination of at-risk students.

Teachers all across America are finding the need to adapt instruction so that students can benefit. I think the answer to better urban teaching is simple and right before our noses: teachers and schools that encourage adapting and adjusting of curriculum give students yet another opportunity to learn.

Current research and data reports that adaption helps to ensure that learning is taking place and remains the focus of instructional time. The focus is not so much to cover the material in a systematic manner, but instead to create blocks of time for meaningful learning to take place. In order to adapt curriculum to meet the needs of urban students, some teachers have learned that they have to get to first base with the students by finding out about their environment and what catches their attention and reactions. Some days it is the hard-core facts and formulas and the next day it might be mathematical humor or life application skills. Preparing several mini lesson plans within the standard lesson plan is sometimes required to increase the chances that the students will attach, react, engage and process.

I often think about my two daughters' previous public urban school teachers. They have never been shy about informing me of the best and worst teachers they have ever had. On good days, they will even offer up who their myriads of friends believe are the best and worst teachers. My daughter's input-driven "arm-chair" best teachers' research results are similar to what Cartledge and Lo (2006) found. They reported that the best student

learning outcomes (regardless of the school district and students) happens when the administration and support persons have achieved a level of expertise and knowledge that is visionary, relationship-focused, and collaborative in nature. They also noted that the material and supportive learning tools are sensitive and reflect the culture and experiences of urban students. Their 2006 study went on to say that the best teachers have a deep conviction and desire to teach urban students and an overwhelming personal dedication to being emotionally, socially, physically, and spiritually prepared for each day of instruction.

My discussions with up-and-coming tremendous teachers and Cartledge's and Lo's research both reveal that exceptional teachers push and are determined to see improvement and academic gain among students now and in the future. The teacher's overall message and emphasis is on students possessing the ability to reach higher levels of learning and personal functioning. That said, I have found that even the best urban teachers still have to deal with unmotivated and angry parents. Despite this, because they know the importance of positive collaboration with parents, the best teachers figure out a way to win parents over to some degree.

Chapter #2

The Best Teachers



& Why They're So Good

By Recco Santee Richardson (excerpts taken from the article “Teaching Urban Students” Richardson & Vazquez, 2012)

I still chuckle when I think about an educational article that I read regarding urban teachers. The article described the teachers as either Gangsta, Wanksta or Rida (Duncan-Andrade, 2007) . The categories of teachers help to conceptualize the needs of the students and the specific skill sets and philosophies of the teachers. Time and space do not allow for addressing each type of teacher. Even so, it would be beneficial to discuss the Rida, as the ideal urban teacher fits the mold of the Rida. These types of teachers are neither born nor created. Rather, they evolve into the unique individuals who comprise the school’s educational pillars. At their core is a deep sense of responsibility, spiritual fortitude, multi-level interest and skill sets.

The article goes on to say that Ridas made a decision to teach urban students (the Rida’s district did not turn urban or minority student-dominate over the years). They teach urban students not because they love kids or want to be part of the solution or were given a chance by the administration. Ridas teach because they deeply believe that their students are the students most likely to change the world. They revere the fact that their students have the least to lose in life and the most to gain. They appreciate and recognize that their students are more likely to take the necessary risks to improve their lives and the lives of others.

Ridas realizes that the students who struggle in school are fertile ground. They also recognize that it is important for them to seek to understand the history of the people and communities where they work. Of critical importance is the fact that Ridas have lived and studied in oppressive settings that shaped their perspective. They do not attempt to create a classroom that mirrors middle-class education, but instead develop practices that respond best to needs of the poor and working classes.

In my profession as a mental health counselor, I have a strong sense of responsibility to my clients and community. Similarly, Ridas have a strong sense of duty to students and the community. Like myself, Ridas views themselves as servants of the people. We maintain positive attitudes and jump at chances to work with challenging clients and students who take extra work and care to reach.

Ridas takes risks with students and the curriculum. For them teaching students is a privilege, not a right. They want to be at the school even when others belittle their efforts. They are not afraid of their students or the nearby community. Ridas describe teaching in

urban settings as a way of life and not a job. On a deeper level, they associate their teaching with the struggle for human dignity and justice.

When students in my master's level courses and peers ask me what is the key to professional success, I reply, "God and preparation." It is as simple as that. The Rida credits their success to preparation. They feel that because of their level of professional and daily preparation, they can be successful with students who were unsuccessful in other classes. Their consistent preparation moves them to believe that they are able to create contagious excitement, release their passion, and demonstrate the learning process. When asked, Ridas cannot quantify the amount of time they spend preparing and teaching because it is a lifestyle, not a job. They regularly stumble upon materials and ideas. Their level of commitment comes from their mentors and previous teachers.

For the Rida, it is fascinating to promote self-examination in terms of recognizing that the unknown exceeds the known. They embrace Socrates' thought, "all great undertakings are risky and as they say, what is worthwhile is always difficult," Malcolm X's view, "the examined life is painful," and Cornel West's affirmation that "the unexamined life is not worth living." The Rida strives to strike balance between confidence and frequent self-critique. They know that from time to time they will take a hit and blow to their personage. The Rida recognizes that extending an olive branch to students is risky and perhaps not worth the little trust that may be secured.

Bingo, that is just it. I know beyond a shadow of doubt that trust is a deal breaker for urban students. The Rida is able to build students' trust. They understand that whatever level of trust they are given must be earned every day because, historically, schooling holds negative connotations for black and poor people. They see their students as their students and not somebody else's child. Within the classroom Ridas create a culture that fosters trust. They do not coddle students and move towards being loved and not liked.

I could go on and on about what the best teachers do and say. I want to leave the following words and thoughts. Effective urban teaching is not for the faint of heart. It takes dedication, emotional letdowns, the overcoming of fears and personal "isms", self-examination, and a passion for teaching.

Chapter #3

Diversity Matters



To Me & My Education

By Nandi Collins

It is important to me to have diversity in my teachers and administrators. The diversity would give me a balanced education. This semester I have one male teacher and five female teachers. I see a difference in each gender's attitudes. Similar to my previous male teachers, my current male teacher is laid back. His focus is let's get the job done. On the other hand, my female teachers seem to always be cranky and are mean sometimes.

The lack of diversity in my teachers can cause me to miss out on important learning and development as it relates to culture, religion and beliefs. I have questions about how in the past blacks, Mexicans and whites got along.

If my school had more diversity in the teaching staff, there would be greater school unity. My school has unity, but more would not hurt. At school, it is pretty cool seeing all the student ethnic groups getting along and being friends. As I think about it, it is better that everyone gets along instead of screaming, fighting and yelling at each other.

While on visiting Toronto, Ontario, I noticed that most people did not have tattoos. There were all sorts of ethnic groups and races living in the city. This all caught my attention because I am used to just seeing people like myself (African-American) and Hispanics and Caucasians.

Seeing the Jamaicans and Chinese and all the other ethnic groups together in one place was amazing and amusing. This relates to my school's wonderful diversity. There are several countries, nationalities and cultures found throughout the building. As a result, I feel that my educational experience is well-rounded. I feel better prepared for the real world. A world that is diverse and full of differences.

By Joshua Dubay

Diversity in my school's teachers and staff is important to me. It gives the school a little flavor. People from different races and genders teach in a unique manner that is good for us all. The lack of diversity in my teachers and staff can cause social problems. For example, the lack of diversity can cause people's views or side of the story to be wrong. This can lead to someone growing up believing something that is not true.

Diversity within the student body helps me because it gives me a taste of what others do and act like. Rather than being told what other people do and think, I can see it for myself. Diversity in my school's student body can help my learning and social development.

All the racism in the world is not good. Nobody respects anyone. It is really sad. In this world, you can get shot down because of the color you are. In school, if you look at another group of students the wrong way, you can get beat up or jumped. because you are not their color.

While recently visiting Toronto, Canada, I saw so many different races of people. I saw blacks, whites, mixed races, Asians and so on. There were all kinds of different languages being spoken. They all seemed to get along well and were civil to each other. It was nice to see a country that appears to have beaten race issues. This is not the case in America. We have not beaten the race issue. To me, in America it seems like places are split up and set aside for each race.

I now understand that diversity really helps the world grow and come together versus break apart and create conflict. Coming together is way better than being at odds. It seems simple but it is probably more complex than what meets the eye. There have got to more diverse places in the world where everyone comes together and gets along.

By Donnell Spencer

Diversity in my school's teachers and administrators is important to me because I can learn a lot about where they came from. I want to know my teachers and staff and how their culture differs from mine. The lack of diversity found in my teachers and staff can cause learning and social problems for me. The lack of diversity limits my learning about other cultures and backgrounds of others. The presence of diversity in my teachers and staff would encourage me to visit other places and learn. Diversity would allow me to understand and tolerate other people better.

Diversity in my school's student body is important to me because I need to meet new and different people. I like sharing and talking about how other people are raised and how their family functions. When talking to diverse people, I can learn how their environment affects them and how they deal with race issues.

On the other hand, diversity in my school's student body can cause problems. The diversity can be a distraction and cause me (and other students) to ask questions that are too personal. My discussions on diversity and culture can get the entire class off the topic. I can also see where diversity discussions can lead to misunderstandings.

I recently took a December trip to Toronto, Canada. While there I took note of their diversity. There were lots of different races and cultures all over the place. This relates to my high school. My school is diverse and is represented by several cultures. Like Toronto, my school comprises students of various ethnic groups and cultures spending time with each other.

While in Toronto I also noticed that the malls and streets were crowded and most of the people were rude. Maybe it was the time of the year. The crowded malls and streets reminded me of my high school's hallways. During transition time, the halls are packed and feature lots of bumping and jockeying. Also the students are sometimes rude and run wild. The main problem with the crowded hallways is the fact that they can cause me to be late for class.

By Vivian Tate-Hall

Diversity in the school's teaching and administrative staff is important to students. It gives students the indication that their district and the teachers are sincere about diversity. It shows that there is a level of respect for people of different nationalities. Diversity is also important to be because it allows for interaction with other cultures. TV is not necessarily the only and best way to learn about another person's culture and ways. Students should experience another culture up close and face to face. The personal experiences have a better chance of preparing them for future interaction with people of other nationalities. They encourage students to grow personally, emotional and intellectually.

On a personal level, my December 2014 experiences while visiting Toronto, Ontario put me up close and personal with diversity. While there, I saw diversity in action. There were thousands of people from all walks of life and from all over the world. I saw people who embraced their Indian, African and Oriental culture. This really broadened my awareness. What impressed me the most was the number of couples from various cultures showing affection toward each other. They were holding hands and in many cases nuzzling one another. For some reason, this warmed my heart and reminded me that we are all human beings.

By Recco Santee Richardson

In K-12 education, I have found that there are topics that can raise eyebrows quickly and turn a pleasant discussion into something else. One of the topics is diversity in the teaching staff and administration. While everyone agrees that diversity is important, not everyone works hard to make sure it is realized. I want to be clear. The hiring and promoting of minority teachers for the sake of having them in place is not the answer. As well, the answer is not to continue the current trend of Caucasian males and females dominating urban classrooms and management.

Over the last 10 years, I have noticed that student enrollment in urban schools is becoming more diverse. The same can be said of school districts located in the suburbs. They too are enrolling more and more students from diverse backgrounds and minorities. I am not ready to say that the recent trend is due to a new revelation or enlightenment regarding students needing diversity within their learning. It is actually due to financial reasons and political agendas that may or may not be in the best interest of students. One thing that is becoming clearer to me is the fact that urban students desire and want diversity in their school district. They want teachers that look like them and classmates that are different than them.

As caring adults, it is our social responsibility to prepare students for the real world. The real world features a requirement to work and learn alongside of people that are of another race and culture. We live in a global economy and worldviews of acceptance of others are becoming a mandatory expectation. At some point, our conscious and good intentions must at the same time produce diversity within the student body and teaching staff of school districts. Surely diversity is happening within the student body, yet for a number of reasons the same is not among the teaching staff.

I have been around long enough to know that discussions on hiring practices and race relations can bring school projects to a complete halt and divide loyal persons and close-knit communities. In general, most of the time minorities overestimate the importance of minority teachers' availability and Caucasians underestimate the value of minority educators in urban districts. It goes without saying that the race and ethnic makeup of the school district's teaching staff should move swiftly towards reflecting the makeup of the student body.

Chapter #4

School-Wide



Safe Places & Supportive People

By Nandi Collins

On one hand, my school does not have adequate safe places and supportive people. I say this because the teachers and principals state that they want us in the classroom and school to learn, but if you do the smallest thing you will be given unpleasant consequences like in-school suspension. To me, being punished for minor things doesn't make any sense.

On the other hand, my school does have adequate safe places and supportive people. I would say that most of my teachers (and other teachers) get to know students and can relate to our everyday living. These teachers try their best to help students understand assignments and life. They are willing to stay afterschool and help us. They are willing to assign additional practice work in order for us to build our skills and confidence.

For me, safe places and supportive people are important to my education and development. These two concepts can create an atmosphere that encourages me to learn and broaden my knowledge. It is difficult to concentrate and learn in an unsafe environment. Personally, supportive people at my school help me see things from a different perspective. They help me notice and consider things that I would typically miss or ignore. With an open mind, students like myself are able to learn something from everyone.

During my educational/cultural trip to Toronto, I noticed that the Eaton Centre mall was packed with people from all over the place. I felt safe, but then again I did not. The mall was crowded and it was common for people to bump into each other. When unintentional bumps happened, the person at fault would look at the other person as if he or she was the villain. I rarely saw someone turn around and apologize for bumping into someone. No one said "I'm sorry" or "My bad." There is nothing wrong with apologizing.

This relates to issues of safe places and supportive people at my school. Even though the hallways and cafeteria can get crowded quick, I feel safe at my school. Everyone is moving and bustling with the hopes of being on time. It is expected that from time to time I will get bumped or shoved a little. I do not like when this happens but it helps when the offending person apologizes. I always encourage my friends to not fly off the handle with someone bumps them accidentally in the hallways. I tell them instead of getting angry, let it go or tell a teacher or administrator.

By Joshua Dubay

I'm glad to be able to say that I have teachers that take pride in their work and are concerned about my safety. When they enter the school building they expect to make a change in students' lives. These teachers make their classroom a safe place where students can vent or work their issues out. Good teachers create a safe and supportive environment.

There are teachers (and other adults) in my school that are not viewed as support people. I say this because some teachers just come to get a pay check and leave. They do not care about the students or making the school a better place. Teachers who care get to know their students and seek ways to help us with our issues. Their goal is to help us feel safe and learn at the same time

I usually do not think much about what I need or want. I sort of just deal with what has been given to me. Safe places and supportive people are not something I think about a lot. Writing this book has forced me to at least give consideration to it and how it impacts my education. To be honest, I am not sure how it impacts my life. I do know that I really do not feel safe in my neighborhood but that doesn't mean I don't feel safe in my school.

While visiting Toronto, Ontario, I noticed that the city appeared to be a very safe place. I spent several days in the city and saw police officers everywhere. They were at the mall, walking the streets, standing in parks and riding in their patrol cars. To be honest, I do not think most cities in America are safe. In some cities, it can take the police upwards of 20 minutes to respond to an emergency call.

Now that I think about it, maybe safe places and supportive people are important to me. Later in life, I want to live and raise a family in a city where we feel safe and have supportive people around.

By Donnell Spencer

On one hand my school does not have enough adequate safe places and supportive people. I say this because sometimes when I and other students try to vent to an adult, they do not listen or appear to not care.

On the other hand, my school does have adequate safe places and supportive people. I say this because sometimes when I am in school, I feel and know that I am safe. I really believe that my school ensures that unknown people do not enter the building. I also feel safe because my teachers lock our classroom doors so as to keep out unwanted surprise guest out who mean us harm.

Besides my teachers, there are several, several supportive people in our building. My friends and the security guards are easy to talk to when I am having a problem or feeling down. I feel like there is a lot of people in my school that care about me.

For me, safe places and support people are important to my education and development. Without them, I would not be able to focus and would walk around school scared and in fear. I do not need to feel or believe that I can get physically hurt at any time.

Having supportive people at school helps me to avoid sadness and experience more happiness. I have individuals at school that know how to take me through difficult situations. Without support and caring people in place, I would probably walk around school angry and depressed.

During my recent stay in Toronto, Ontario, I noticed there were lots of police officers and security guards throughout the city. This caught my attention because the presence of the police officers made me feel safer. There is nothing like feeling protected. This small experience in Toronto relates to there being safe places at my school. My school's hall monitors, security guards and others are in place to ensure that the school is safe. I feel safe and supported in my school. On a daily basis, I have lots of things on my mind that contend for my attention. The last thing I need is to worry about not feeling safe and supported in school.

By Vivian Tate-Hall

I believe schools do have the safe places and support in place, but the students need to utilize those areas and not purposely find places where they can find harm. Safe places and supportive people are very important to the child's education and development for, without this assurance of safety he or she cannot focus solely on their academics. The source of safety is also important in a child's life, because safety and support is not always prevalent in their home.

It needs to be noted that respect for sources of safety and protection is important. Children will often face certain areas of concern in their lives, and many of them have never experienced feeling respected or valued. Trust is a real issue as well. Therefore, those who work with students must recognize this and present themselves as role models to be emulated. In doing so, it will encourage students to experience a sense of warmth and safety.

This is why the calmness I observed from the citizens in the Toronto mall was so encouraging to me. I say perceived because although the urgency shown by the police officers indicated an emergency of some type, there was no upset to the general activity of the public and most of the shoppers appeared to not be aware of the situation. Everyone kept talking, laughing and holding hands. The police officers' response also indicated the care and concern for maintaining safe and supportive places for the shoppers.

I was further inspired as a mental health therapist to strengthen my perceptions of the value of showing trust and concern for others. Based on the police demonstrating respect for the citizens, the respect was reciprocated and the people remained calm. The same mutual respect should be true in the classroom between teachers and students.

By Recco Santee Richardson

I have come to believe that critical to outstanding teacher instruction and urban education is a safe school environment. An atmosphere of safety is the single most important aspect of the school day for students. Yet, most schools receive very little guidance or assistance in their attempts to establish and sustain proactive discipline that ensures safety (Sugai et al., 2000). Students must feel safe. When safety is not a concern, students allow themselves to release their thoughts and inner feeling more easily. When there are threats of bullying, regular fistfights in the hall way, conflict between groups of students and a general disregard for others, students can shut down for periods of time and distance themselves from the learning process somewhat. Feeling unsafe, vulnerable and at risk of emotional, social or physical harm, can wipe out students' intentions to learn before the first bell rings.

Let us face the reality that feeling safe in the school setting is not as important as feeling safe in the home. So far, this book has made little mention of parents and their responsibilities associated with their child's education. Well, here it is. It is a parent's job and duty to ensure that their child is protected and feels safe in the home. Period. To experience an optimum urban education, students must first feel safe at home. This is because the home environment can have a positive or negative impact a student's ability to learn. Researchers have reported that urban student poverty, parent education and home resources can work as the perfect storm hinder student learning. I believe that there is a disconnect between how urban students perceive school based activities and the day-to-day activities occurring in their home.

Day to day activities that impede student learning and cause students to not feel safe at home or school are the presence of abuse/neglect, family chaos, poverty, inconsistent parenting, inadequate housing, grief/loss, violence, the loss of a parent, physical/sexual abuse, changes in the primary caregiver, household discord, alcohol/drug abuse in the home, disruption of family, limited, finances and employment problems.

"Impede" is an interesting word. Since I am on the subject of students needing to feel at home, I might as well tie feeling safe at home and home environment into graduation rates. I make this connection because troubled home environments can encourage students to disconnect from the learning process. I would dare to say that the majority of students that fail several classes a semester come from a home environment that has multilayers of issues and problems that directly or indirectly impact them. After running

its course in full, the stated home life issues and problems can leave students at first feeling unsafe. The same student may take his or her feeling unsafe to school and consciously or unconsciously help create an unsafe school environment via their attitude, perspective, fears, dislikes and unsuccessful attempts to cope with his or her home life.

Yes, there is a relationship between a student's home life environment, feeling safe at home and school and passing a class (or graduating on time). I am finding that urban students tend not to recover from failing a class or being retained. As a result, there should be more of a sense of urgency for urban schools to assist such students. Retained students who are not afforded additional support, mentoring, skill building and constant sources of motivation, may remain at risk of future dropout. There is a relationship between being retained, school dropout, and school suspensions. Something happens to a student morally and socially when they are retained or suspended from school

Chapter # 5

Opportunities for



Personal Growth

By Nandi Collins

My school provides plenty of opportunities for me to experience personal growth. I say this because there are dozens and dozens of clubs and groups for students to join. For example, my school offers the Muslim Student Association. Any student can join and learn more about the Muslim culture and religious beliefs.

I personally have benefited from my school's myriads of opportunities. I know that being involved in activities allows me reach my full potential. It helps me to change where I need to improve. My participation shows me areas that I need to focus on before a major problem arises. I really do not want to get caught with my guard down and end of doing nothing with my life.

Since enrolling in high school, I have participated on the track team and basketball team. Team sports help me get away from the pressures of life and blow off steam. A sport also relieves my nerves. When I run track or dribble the ball, my problems and other distractions are not so large anymore.

I wish more students at my school participated in student organizations. Way too many students simply attend school and go home. Maybe if a student interest poll was given, we could find out what type of activities and clubs would encourage students to get involved more. I would say that most students are more than willing to share what would interest them as an afterschool or summer activity.

My trip to Toronto was awesome. There are several aspects of the trip that continue to stay with me. The elevator ride and visit to the top of the CN Tower stands out the most. It was an amazing feeling being 112 building stories (1,500 feet) above the earth. As I looked out and about so high up, I could see as far away as upstate New York (90 miles). The people and cars on the ground looked like small ants.

The entire trip and visit to the CN Tower showed me that with imagination and hard work, big results are possible. The visit was a time of personal growth me, as I had never traveled to Toronto or even Canada before. I have since decided that after graduating from college, I will travel extensively. My future travels will expose me to different cultures, increase my knowledge of the world and strengthen my social skills.

By Joshua Dubay

I feel that my school provides opportunities for me to experience personal growth. I say this because we have after school programs and academic electives that encourage personal growth. I have grown in several areas such as personal knowledge, internal strength and anger management. My school's options have helped me grow as a person and move forward.

Like any teenager, I wish my school provided even more opportunities for personal growth. Students need a variety of opportunities. In addition, some programs should be opened up to all students. Right now there are a few program at my school that are very selective or something has to be wrong with you in order to be able to participate.

I truly believe that the more involved in school activities a student is, the more likely he or she will grow as a person. Personal growth is important to me because I do not want to stay the same. I want to grow and progress. I do not want to stay the same. To accomplish this, I and other teens must take advantage of opportunities that are placed before us. I am starting to believe that the exposure can lead to places and ideas that are well worth my time and effort.

During my educational and cultural trip to Toronto, I noticed a lot of personal growth in one of the students in our group. Toward the end of the trip, he was not getting into as much trouble as he did at the beginning. When he found out that his behaviors would keep him from attending future trips, he turned everything around and put forth better effort. This student's improved behaviors caught my attention because it relates to me and how I used to act.

I used to not care about getting into trouble or what outcomes my decisions and behaviors produced. A few months ago, I decided to change. I wanted different experiences, so I altered my actions. I like the person that I am today. I am proud of who I am.

By Donnell Spencer

I must say that my school provides opportunities for me to experience personal growth. I say this because we have a variety of activities during and after school. The activities help to build our esteem, teach us leadership skills, provide and understanding of the world and promotes independence.

What I like most about my opportunities to develop and grow is the fact that I can branch out and try new things. There are things and activities I have always wanted to try. Very often my school provides me access to such activities. What stands out most about my school's activities and efforts to help me grow as a person is the chance to meet new people. As a result of getting involved in various programs, I meet new and interesting people.

While there are several activities to get involved in at school, many students fail to do so. My peers defend their reasons stating that they do not want to be judged. Some say they avoid getting involved because they are made to feel uncomfortable by other students. I guess it is common to feel unwanted or unwelcomed in a student group by some student members.

Opportunities for school based personal growth are important because they help me learn about myself and others. I have started to learn who I really am. Through my school's offerings, I can grow as a person. I can find my own way and my own personality. My decision to be active in things is teaching me how to lead others and not settle for being a follower. This is important because there is a part of me that wants to help and guide others.

While on visiting Toronto, Ontario, I noticed that amongst the citizens there were a lot of different cultures and personalities. This caught my attention because as I looked at various people and their clothing, I could figure out their personalities. This relates to issues of my personal growth and personality. My school's administration has a strict dress codes. They will not let us wear certain things. I know they mean well but the restricting of attire hinders the true expression of my personality and my development. I want and need to feel free, not restricted and like a carbon copy.

By Recco Santee Richardson (excerpts taken from the article “The Disappearing Act, Helping Depressed Children/Teens, Richardson & Morgan, 2011)

I will always give my vote of approval and support to urban schools that offer non-classroom opportunities for students to grow as people. Such schools are setting themselves up to help students learn from others and learn about themselves. As I look at it, students grow as a people from a consistent diet of school-sponsored opportunities such as peer tutoring, athletics, student clubs, early childhood education, spirit week and multicultural programming.

Opportunities for personal growth can move an average student toward leadership duties and honor roll status. Moving students forward is what it is all about. Parents, teachers and administrators do what we do so students continue to move forward and achieve at their peak. Every student cannot earn an academic scholarship, dunk a basketball or sing in the school play like a heavenly bird. However, every student can reach his or her own peak performance. One of the main reasons why students do not reach their peak is a lack of personal growth in their emotional life.

As a practicing mental health therapist, I can tell you that most school-age children are not reaching their peak academically and socially because of depression. Emotionally, they have yet to hurdle and defeat it. Depression can cause low energy and concentration difficulties (Olsson, Nordstrom, Arinell, & Knorrning, 1999). At school, this may lead to poor attendance, a drop in grades or frustration with schoolwork (especially in formerly good students). Today’s society almost requires urban schools to put forth school-based or school-funded personal growth opportunities that help students address their depression.

When consulting school districts who wish to address the emotional needs of their students, I often suggest they incorporate mental health prevention/intervention services in their afterschool program activities. The services are an excellent way to address students’ depression, negative attitudes, impulsive behaviors, social isolation, discomfort with sharing their feelings, psychosomatic illnesses, and drama.

Depression has become a common experience for students. For them, depression is one of the single most reported causes of ineffective and unfulfilled experiences, poor school efforts and unsatisfied relationships. To overcome the ills associated with depression,

students must have a clear understanding of depression, be able to identify themselves and their triggers and have the support of caring adults such as educators and parents.

Opportunities for student personal growth should focus on addressing depression because it is one of the most common psychological problems and it should be taken seriously. Depression can interfere with daily living, school learning, social functioning and well-being and, if not treated, can lead to suicide (AACAP, 2008).

Depressed students live in our neighborhoods, attend our churches, sit in our classrooms, date our children and are members of our immediate families. Depression is a host of mental health symptoms and an illness that can lay dormant for years (Costello, Erkanli, & Angold 2006). Depression is no respecter of persons in that it “can and will” show up in any age, race of people, gender, religion or social class (Patterson, 2011).

The research literature is filled with statistics and facts regarding depression. For example of all children/teens that struggle with emotional and behavioral problems, only 30 percent seek intervention or treatment. The other 70 percent simply struggle through the pain of mental illness or emotional turmoil (AACAP, 2008). It is held that during adolescent years, upwards of 28 percent of girls and 14 percent of boys report struggling with depression (Avenevoli, Knight, Kessler, & Merikangas, 2008).

The consequences of untreated depression can include increased depression in adulthood, involvement in the criminal justice system and possibly suicide (AACAP, 2008). The research reported that to address their depression, youth need to be prepared emotionally and socially via training, mentoring, social support, self-respect and personal empowerment (Pettit, Lewinsohn, & Yaroslavsky, 2011).

For urban and suburb families, the word depression has several meanings and typically denotes something negative. The first thing K-12 students should know about depression is that there is nothing wrong with them that cannot be addressed. They need to know that they are not crazy, weird or doomed. What is most important for them to know about depression is why they struggle with it. They also need to know how to cope with it and how to bounce back after a bout with depression.

Likewise, it is critical that students know that with effort and a plan, they can overcome depression’s blues and live a fun-filled life. It is necessary for them to know that treating their depression is important and that their symptoms can be managed now and for the rest of their lives.

Students need school district-supported opportunities for personal growth that helps address their depression. When students are depressed, their families may not have the means or courage to seek help on their own. As a second or third- tier resource, school districts can be of assistance and help depressed students see the light at the end of the tunnel. With no doubt K-12 sponsored depression intervention services are critical to the overall growth of students and high school graduation rates.

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