

Are Afrocentric schools segregation or advancement?

This is merely a sorely needed attempt to boost graduation rates



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point

Over the past week, an Afro-centric school that was recently approved in Toronto has been the subject of headlines country-wide.

Faced with dropout rates as high as 40 per cent for English-speaking students of Caribbean descent, leaders of the city's African-Canadian community pitched the idea of an all-black school to the Toronto District School Board in July in an attempt to raise graduation rates. The proposal was approved last Wednesday and was met with heavy criticism, with many of its opponents labeling the school as a return to segregation; however, this couldn't be further from the truth.

The fact of the matter is that Toronto in 2008 isn't the same as Little Rock in the 1960s. Whereas segregation was used by whites as a means to marginalize the black minority, this is an initiative spearheaded by the black community to decrease marginalization through education.

The critics also forget one very important detail: this is a choice. No student is being forced to attend this school or prevented from re-entering the wider public system if the school doesn't suit their needs. In fact, it's likely that the vast majority of students will remain in public schools.

To have a clear and meaningful discussion on this issue, the stigma attached to skin colour needs to be dropped. Whatever critics may want to believe, the core issue at hand isn't one of ethnicity, but of the whopping 40 per cent of students in a specific demographic who aren't even receiving a high school diploma. To put it bluntly,

society is failing these people, and to not even try to improve the situation for fear of being called a racist, however wrongly, is pure cowardice.

What the critics forget is that this idea is far from unprecedented. For example, the Edmonton Public School Board opened Amiskwaciy Academy, a school tailored towards Native students and culture in an effort to increase graduation rates. In fact, this is just one program among many—such as Catholic schools, bilingual programs, all-girls schools, and academic programs—that target a specific type of student.

This wide variety of schooling comes from the understanding that we're not all the same—a fact that's reinforced by the wildly varying graduation rates between different groups. There's no reason to believe that people with highly dissimilar cultural backgrounds will succeed in a school system oriented towards fully integrated Canadian children.

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The proposal of an afro-centric school was brought up to provide students an opportunity to learn in an environment geared towards their specific backgrounds and within the context of their culture. It's just unfortunate that a racial term was used to refer to a group of people with similar ethnicities, obscuring the legitimate sociological basis behind the idea.

No one knows for sure if this idea will work. What's clear, though, is that if no action is taken, large numbers of black students will continue to drop out. Unless we're willing to try new tactics, social and economic marginalization will continue where racial oppression no longer exists.

This just reinforces differences and undermines multiculturalism



CODY
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counterpoint

While the Toronto School Board may have the best interests of black students at heart, such a move clashes with the concept of multiculturalism, a fundamental tenet of Canadian society. And perhaps the best way to foster multiculturalism is through ethnically diverse schools where students of all backgrounds can learn and grow together. Assigning a specific school to students of a certain ethnicity accentuates differences and serves to divide rather than integrate.

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Advocates argue that a need for special programs emerges from the fact that only 60 per cent of students of Caribbean descent in Toronto are finishing high school. The thought that ethnicity is the only variable at play here is both outrageously offensive and clearly bogus. That's exactly the kind of generalization that leads to prejudice.

It's questionable how exactly Afro-centric schools are supposed to help black students. The school board believes that somehow being immersed in an all-black environment will apparently make them better students. However, what they're actually doing is spitting

in the face of black students and implying that they collectively aren't competent enough to acquire an education without being surrounded by racially tailored programs. It suggests that they can't make it in multicultural and universal public schools, and fails to prepare these students for the real world—because when they graduate, it's not as if they'll be able to get all-black jobs.

If our education system is failing to provide instruction that's accessible to all, we should figure out why and fix the problem—not divide them among demographic groups. If, for example, the public school system is too Eurocentric as far as history classes are concerned, then a focus on African and Afro-Canadian history should be added for the benefit of all, rather than only offering it to those who opt in.

It must be noted that students of all backgrounds would technically be allowed to attend, but in reality it's highly unlikely that a Caucasian or Asian family would be feel the need for their kids to attend an Afro-centric school. Even if it isn't officially mandated segregation, it will end up that way in practice because you can't have equality and segregation.

A further problem is that ethno-centric schools assume commonalities that don't exist while emphasizing superficial differences that do. Lumping "blacks" together as a homogeneous group separate from all other ethnicities does more damage than good to everyone. There's no commonly held black culture or background—Haitian-Canadians and an Ethiopian-Canadians clearly don't share the same heritage.

Thinking that an Afro-centric school will solve dropout rates is nothing more than wishful thinking. Let's not allow some misguided individuals to set Canadian multiculturalism back a few decades and hack away at the values that our country is based upon.

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