

*Public Policy Lecture Series*  
*Report*  
Sponsored by the  
**Institute for the Study of the African American Child (ISAAC)**  
College of Education  
Wayne State University  
May 8, 2010

This biannual event, geared toward activists, concerned citizens, parents, educators and school administrators, is focused on influencing public policy related to African American children in school. The goals of the PPLS are to:

- Provide organized advocacy for African American children;
- Promote discussion of policy issues among academics and policymakers/advocates affecting African American children;
- Promote development of policies and practices that will enhance optimal achievement of African American children in school.

The long term plan for this component of ISAAC is to secure funding for a Policy Specialist who will be responsible for setting the topics for the lectures, recruiting speakers, making meeting arrangements, and doing lecture follow-up.

The lecture series will yield recommendations regarding collaborative linkages, applications for program development, contributions to the research agenda, and implications for public policy. Attendees will be engaged in advocacy groups in which they will design action plans to address public policy issues. The Policy Specialist will coordinate with groups to ensure follow through and the action plans. Discussions will be recorded, transcribed, videotaped, and posted on the ISAAC website. Actions plans will be posted on the website, with updates on progress and specific achievements.

The Inaugural Program was held on May 8, 2010. The theme was “*Moving Forward: The Next Civil Rights Frontier -- It’s Time for a Plan to Guide African American Children’s Journey Through School.*” This meeting was designed to create a long-term strategy for closing the academic achievement gap that affects African American children. The speakers were:

- Dr. Dalton Conley, Dean for the Social Sciences, New York University, author of *Being Black, Living in the Red*. Topic: “Race, Wealth, and the American Dream”
- Amy Wilkins, Vice President for Government Affairs and Communications, The Education Trust, Washington, DC, an organization with the mission to close the achievement gap that affects low income children and students of color. Topic: “Closing the Achievement Gap: The State of the Art”
- Dr. James C. Young, Professor, Clark Atlanta University, Moderator.

Discussants included:

- Godfrey Dillard, J.D., in private practice in Detroit and Atlanta; lead attorney for the Supreme Court University of Michigan Affirmative Action Case;

- Brenda Priestly Jackson, J.D., Chair of the Duval County School Board, Jacksonville, FL.

Conference chairs included:

Honorary Co-Chair

- Dr. V.P. Franklin, Distinguished Professor and Presidential Chair, University of California, Riverside;

Public Policy Committee Co-Chairs

- Godfrey Dillard, J.D.;
- Brenda Priestly Jackson, J.D.

Public Policy Conference Committee

- Saundra Lamb, Chair
- Debra Brundidge, Co-Chair
- Dr. Ingrid Draper
- Jamika Harris
- Latonya Jones
- Nancy C. Lee
- Dianne Martin
- Peggy Uzzle
- Deborah Winston

The Public Policy Committee will be comprised of a coalition of ISAAC Fellows who guide the work of the Public Policy Specialist and set the public policy agenda of ISAAC.

## Report from the Inaugural Public Policy Lecture Series

The presentations at the PPLS were outstanding. However, it was clear to all that only the surface was scratched in conveying the issues that drive inequality. The half day format was not adequate for truly giving justice to the wealth of information that was presented.

**Dr. Dalton Conley** has devoted a great deal of his scholarship toward understanding social inequality. He has researched inequality in families and in society at large. His basic message is that the education of African American children has been affected by the barriers this society has erected that have prevented their families from amassing wealth. He recommends public policy initiatives that enable African American families to become home owners as a step toward building net worth. The goal should be enabling African American children to secure a college degree without the debt that comes with student loans.

**Dr. Conley** recommends public policies that create a true ownership society. Any policy that targets asset poverty will inevitably be a policy that aids the cause of racial equality – even if it is officially color blind. Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) can become the new affirmative action in the wake of challenges to color conscious policies. He suggests that credit risk formulas be

changed to favor minorities. He called for a national homeownership policy which should include giving an equity stake to residents of public housing. A list of readings in this vein are included in the Appendix.

**Amy Wilkins** was invited to address the PPLS because The Education Trust receives foundation funding from 14 of the leading foundations in America. As we plan our work, we felt that it was important to understand what others are doing in this area. She reported that the activities of the Education Trust are divided into a Think Tank on one hand and a Practice Organization on the other hand that works with school districts. This difference in focus creates a creative tension between the two facets of the organization. She also reported that The Education Trust targets the achievement gap from Kindergarten through the attainment of the college degree. She agreed with Dr. Conley that the attainment of the college degree is the entry ticket to the middle class. In today's world, the high school diploma is not sufficient for earning a living wage.

**Amy Wilkins** feels that the focal point for closing the achievement gap must be changing the schools. She felt that Dr. Conley's emphasis on wealth could discourage educators from recognizing how important the schools are in producing educational outcomes. She compared writing assignments in a classroom with African American children and Caucasian students demonstrating the lack of rigor for the former. She identified teacher effectiveness as being a more important factor than class size and maternal education. Having the best teachers teaching African American children would close the achievement gap. This certainly is supported by the educational progress of African American people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the educational levels of families were low or non-existent. Children of illiterate families were taught by dedicated teachers under impoverished conditions (Hale 1994).

**Dr. Janice Hale** felt that all who are concerned about closing the achievement gap must have a historical perspective and a societal perspective so that we understand how the situation evolved. She pointed out the value of Dr. Conley's scholarship in pinpointing when in the 20<sup>th</sup> century public policies were put into place that prevented African Americans from amassing wealth and the impact of those policies on today's children. There is a "blame the victim" tendency in American discourse that clouds the extent to which policies are created that circumscribe the futures of African American children.

**Amy Wilkins** also made the point that ineffective teachers are not neutral. Most children do not receive an ineffective teacher as a singular lifetime event. They are assigned to ineffective teachers two and three years in a row. This can be the kiss of death in early childhood. She also presented some very interesting data that examined the fortunes of African American children in college. She presented data that revealed the graduation rates of African American children from groups of colleges which were very similar in configuration but produced vastly different outcomes for African American students. She also presented data that revealed that African American students are not being assisted by 2 year college institutions. Only 15% of Black students who enter 2 year colleges actually finish their degrees. These facts fly in the face of conventional wisdom that suggests that attending a 2 year community college benefits Black students. In fact, Attorney Godfrey Dillard in previous presentations for ISAAC, gave the opinion that community colleges were the answer for Black students. Attorney Dillard was not able to appear as a discussant because of a schedule conflict. Hopefully, in the future, he will have an opportunity to discuss this issue with Ms. Wilkins.

**Amy Wilkins** also suggested that Black students need to graduate from college in 4 years. She said that there is an “opportunity cost” for dragging out the years taken to complete the bachelor’s degree beyond 4. Her conclusion is that today’s young people are not better educated than their parents.

**Brenda Priestly Jackson** has spoken on two public policy panels for ISAAC. She has pointed out that the entry point for tracking the unequal funding of schools that educate Black children is state boards of education. The state legislatures fund education and pass the money to the state school boards who pass it out. They use criteria that seem to be fair on the surface, but in actuality, maintain the unequal status quo. For example, money is passed out to affluent suburban school districts that have teachers with high salaries because they are certified, have advanced degrees and numerous years of service. Inner-city school districts receive less money for salaries because they have high teacher turnover (fewer years of service), fewer certified teachers and teachers with fewer advanced degrees. The result is that the affluent school districts have more qualified staff and are able to offer International Baccalaureate Programs and Advanced Placement classes. The criteria seems to be fair on the face of it, but it results in inequality in distribution of resources and in outcomes.

At the 2009 Round Table, she presented a chart that groups states of the union on the basis of their own chosen level for educational quality. This grouping can be cross-referenced to educational outcomes for children from those states which would give ISAAC a criteria for selecting states to target for improvement.

**Brenda Priestly Jackson** made many important points given the time constraints of her presentation. She noted that even though the states promised that the income from the Lottery would go to education, that money did not augment funding for education. It just replaced money that was drained off to fund Medicaid. She stated that the federal government promised school districts a \$3.4 billion infusion of money, but the mandates are prohibitive in terms of what you have to do to get the money. It can cost a school district \$8 million to access the money.

**Brenda Priestly Jackson** suggested that we differentiate *Equity* from *Adequacy* considerations. The achievement gap will be closed when funding is provided to meet the needs of African American children -- adequacy. Equity gives everyone the same amount of funding. Children who come to school with more needs should have the resources that enable them to master the curriculum and move to excellence. She also pointed out that there are “hidden” resources in schools that educate affluent white children. For example, in schools in Duval County, there are mothers who are certified teachers who do not work, but volunteer in their children’s schools. Having 20 such “volunteers” in one school is a big boost to the achievement of all of the children. This observation supports the discussion of the white mothers as comprising the Instructional Accountability Infrastructure discussed in *Learning While Black* (Hale 2001).

**Brenda Priestly Jackson** discussed the result of the policy of rewarding teachers with bonuses for the achievement of children in their classes. On the face of it, this sounds like a good thing. In a keynote address before the annual meeting of the National Black Child Development Institute (Atlanta, 2009), Secretary of Education Arne Duncan received a standing ovation for declaring that the most federal money would be given to schools with the highest performance throughout America. Ms. Jackson pointed out that in her school district, teachers of Advance Placement classes are given \$100 for every child who passes their class. Schools that receive a grade of A (making

Annual Yearly Progress) give \$3,000 to \$3,500 bonuses to the teachers. The state legislatures are giving nationally certified teachers \$10,000 bonuses. These incentives are called “performance pay.” Ms. Jackson questions why teachers deserve performance pay for the achievements of children who have never been behind. Such policies over time will reinforce the notion that there is no incentive for teachers to work in challenging school districts. Why do teachers deserve bonuses for the performance of children that barely need to be taught? Increasingly state legislatures are jumping on the bandwagon to tie compensation for teachers to the children’s performance on tests. No adjustment is suggested for differences in the starting point for children at a variety of socio-economic levels.

### Lessons for ISAAC

More time needs to be allocated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Biannual Public Policy Lecture Series planned for 2012. The speakers for the Inaugural PPLS need to be kept in the mix because we only scratched the surface of the information they had to share.

**ISAAC will host a Think Tank in October 2010 utilizing teleconferencing.** All participants will convene online, through their computers for face-to-face discussions. Everyone can download Skype at no cost. We will also use the W.E.B. Du Bois Chat Room on the ISAAC web site for a progressive written chat. All, as well as those who cannot participate in the live discussions can contribute ideas in writing through the chat room. Those who are interested in participating signed up at the PPLS. Additional opportunities will be extended to those who are members of the ISAAC online communities. An invitation to sign-up will be extended at the Round Table at WSU on July 17<sup>th</sup>. This group will be provided with readings and the intent will be to create an informed coalition that will become the ISAAC Public Policy Committee. Once we are able to secure staffing for the Public Policy Component, the direction of our initiatives will be formed.

One area in which ISAAC can make a contribution to the work of organizations such as the Education Trust and the Children’s Defense Fund is in the area of providing an explanation for patterns in data. It is clear that patterns of underachievement have been identified by data gathering organizations. However, ISAAC can accelerate the pace of solutions by offering incisive interpretations of the data.

For example, Dr. Hale was invited to participate on a consulting team to ascertain why the performance of African American children in a Texas school district was so far below that of Native American, Hispanic and the white children. One example of going behind the data was in evaluating the 8<sup>th</sup> grade disparity in performance in mathematics. She raised the question of how much math the children in the various ethnic groups had taken by the time they take the 8<sup>th</sup> grade math assessment test. There were no official data available to make that calculation. However, with the assistance of individual teachers, they were able to ascertain that the majority of the white children who scored highest on the test had completed Algebra I, Geometry and were taking Algebra II when the test was taken. The majority of the African American children were taking Basic Math when they took the math assessment test. So, the question becomes the issue of where does a child have to be in his math sequence in order to score well on the test. This is the kind of analysis that is needed to extract policies from the data. This is the window of opportunity for ISAAC to make a contribution moving forward.

## Appendix

### Public Policy Lecture Series Reading List

- Alexander, M. (2010). *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.
- Anderson, C. (1994). *Black labor, white wealth: The search for power and economic justice*. Edgewood, Maryland: Duncan and Duncan.
- Brantlinger, E. (2003). *Dividing classes: How the middle class negotiates and rationalizes school advantage*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Conley, D. (1999). *Being Black, Living in the Red*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Conley, D. (2009). *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* New York: Pantheon Books.
- Conley, D. (2000). *Honky*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Conley, D. (2004). *The pecking order: Which siblings succeed and why*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hale, J. (1994). *Unbank the fire: Visions for the education of African American children*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hale, Jr. (2001). *Learning while Black: Creating educational excellence for African American children*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lacy Karyn R. (2007). *Blue chip Black: Race, class and status in the new Black middle class*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Oliver, M. L. (2006). *Black wealth/white wealth: A new perspective on racial inequality*. New York: Routledge.
- Pershkin, A. (2001). *Permissible Advantage? The moral consequences of elite schooling*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Shapiro, T. M. (2004). *The hidden cost of being African American: How wealth perpetuates inequality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.