Educational Equity and the President's Initiative on Race

Judith A. Winston

In 1997 President Clinton launched "One America in the Twenty-First Century: The President's Initiative on Race." His major reason for doing so was the opportunity for the United States, living in a time of relative peace, to talk about the ways in which race matters continue to stand in the way of the country's progress in many areas of life. He was also concerned about the real possibility that because of the emerging and increased diversity of race and ethnicity in this country, the U.S. would find itself facing the kind of tribalism that existed in places like Eastern Europe. Demographers had been predicting for some time that by the year 2050 the nation would have no majority race or ethnic group.

The president believed that we needed to do two things to move beyond our racial past. The first was to engage the nation in a "National Conversation on Race," which would study the history of race relations. The second was to begin the process of recommending and promoting policies that would help close the "opportunity gap": the vast disparities that exist across facets of American life such as education, employment, health care, home ownership, and the administration of justice, where race is a marker.

President Clinton described his ultimate goal and interests this way. He said, "Can we be one America respecting, even celebrating, our differences, but embracing even more what we have in common? Can we define what it means to be an American, not just in terms of the hyphen showing our ethnic origins but in terms of our primary allegiance to the values America stands for and values we really live by? Our hearts long to

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answer yes, but our history reminds us that it will be hard. The ideals that bind us together are as old as our nation, but so are the forces that pull us apart. Our founders sought to form a more perfect union; the humility and hope of that phrase is the story of America and it is our mission today."[1]

He appointed a seven person advisory board to lead the effort, and ultimately a small staff of people from within government was brought together to help implement the goals of the Race Initiative. That, in any event, was the plan.

In fact, the effort was fairly fractured from the beginning. The idea of a Race Initiative that, in the one year allotted to it, would tackle the complexity of race relations in the United States, reflected a very high level of naivete.

One of the first discussions was about whether the Race Initiative's sole focus would be the relationships between African Americans and whites. As one might imagine, this idea did not sit well with a number of other racial and ethnic minority groups. Some Latino advocacy groups, for example, were concerned about the very concept of race, because much of the Hispanic community considers its Hispanic heritage to be a form of ethnicity rather than race. The American Indian community was distressed that there was no American Indian representative on the Race Initiative's board, even though the president and his staff said that no group was represented as such - although of course the board included people who identified themselves as belonging to particular racial and ethnic groups.

There was, as we discovered, an extraordinary amount of skepticism and lukewarm support among senior White House advisors. I argued that we needed to start the conversation on race in the White House, but many senior presidential aides believed the Race Initiative to be a lose-lose strategy. Nothing good would come out of talking about race, they believed, particularly because the president had started the initiative when there was no crisis in the country. That, they argued, is the only time Americans are willing to talk about race and solving racial problems: in response to some great conflagration.

In addition, there were policy and turf battles. Quite frequently, when a problem with a racial or ethnic component arose during the fifteen month life of the Race Initiative, the Initiative was given the responsibility for coordinating a response or otherwise handling the problem. My staff and I found ourselves trying to determine where the Department of Race was, so that we could take advantage of its resources! And in spite of their willingness to turn to the Initiative whenever there were concerns with a perceived racial component, the policy staff and the various departments dis-

played a great deal of resistance to us out of fear that we would interfere with the policy directions that they had already established.

Initially, there was no infrastructure to support the Initiative. There was no strategic plan for achieving its objectives. In fact, representatives from the civil rights advocacy community often said that all they expected was lip service because no one knew how to carry the Initiative out and they saw no battle plan on the table. "How do you go about bringing Americans together to talk about race?" they asked. "We don't share a common language in which to do that."

In fact, the speech that the president delivered at the University of California-San Diego to launch the Initiative reportedly was very different from the one he carried onto Air Force One for the trip to California. The one with which he boarded had been reviewed with approval by many of his senior policy staff. The one with which he deplaned had been rewritten in transit with the help of Chris Edley, his advisor on race, and others who felt that the senior staff-approved speech was much too unfocused and timid. The sole objective of the first speech was to have a great conversation about race. By the time President Clinton got off the plane, there was the added goal of actually developing policies and practices to help eliminate the opportunity gap.

This history is especially important in the context of education equities. I admit that in many ways I shared the naivete that characterized the early conceptualization and implementation of the Initiative. Although I was not involved in the initial stages, and was given all of one day to learn about it and two to decide whether I would accept the offer to become its Executive Director, I decided this was too important an opportunity to be on the outside looking in. What I did not realize initially was that the goals we had established, while noble and important, simply could not be achieved in the allotted time frame. In addition, of course, no one anticipated that six months into the Initiative, the president's ability to lead on issues of race and education and morality would be crippled by the Lewinsky scandal. By January 1998, the president was not able to be engaged significantly in this effort.

What did the Race Initiative do to address educational equity and why? Our first step was to take advantage of the comprehensive education reform agenda that the president and the Department of Education had laid out – an agenda that was the subject of a number of policy initiatives. We wanted our efforts to be, and to be seen as being, seamlessly aligned with the president's goals. In 1994, for example, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act had been reauthorized.[2] That, in my view, con-

stituted the education legislation revolution. The Act represented the first time the federal government attempted to develop a legislative scheme that would align education reform efforts in the larger community with the reforms of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which focused on the education of poor children.[3] The legislation made clear that states and school districts would be held accountable for helping their poor children achieve the same high standards that were being developed and implemented for other children. There were to be no second class achievement goals for poor children. Standards had to be developed, and so did assessment instruments that would measure the extent to which poor children enrolled in Title I programs were being taught to meet those standards. That, at least, was the expectation and hope.

The advisory board held a number of public meetings around the country on behalf of the president. Some involved a single board member while others involved the full board. Many were convened to share information with the public at large about the racial disparities that existed and exist in educational achievement, with the additional hope that the information would be picked up and disseminated by the media. We and the president believed that an American public that professed to value education would want to do something about the wide achievement gap among racial and ethnic groups, once the facts were brought to the public's attention in a compelling fashion.

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What we failed to realize was that although there are 250,000,000 Americans in this country, too few of them beyond the president and the Race Initiative advisory board and staff were crying out for a conversation about race and racial disparities. It was not an easy task to get anyone to come to the table, and the people who did come were primarily those who were already engaged in the effort of reform and racial reconciliation. (Others were people who, thinking we were akin to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, brought their complaints about racial and ethnic discrimination to us for resolution.)

After these public meetings, however, the board made several recommendations to the president for strengthening education policy to benefit poor children and children of color. It identified promising practices around the country that its members thought could be emulated, assuming additional funding. It recommended that the president work hard to develop and fund programs to increase the number of well-prepared teachers going to high poverty and high minority schools. It noted the work of people like Dr. James P. Comer in educating teachers of teachers.[4] It suggested expanding existing pipeline programs such as the GEAR UP Program, which con-

centrates on interesting young children of color and poor children generally in doing what is necessary to go to college.[5] We also were able to sit in on all the domestic policy staff's meetings about education to help ensure that the racial dimensions of the problem were addressed.

It was fifteen months of great adventure. I and my band of thirty staff members were not only focusing on educational equity issues but on all the other race-related issues, working to help the advisory board and the president solve the problem of race.

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There were a number of people around the country who were energized by this effort, and who did in fact do a great deal in their local communities. They worked in coalitions to develop plans for resolving some of the significant educational problems faced by black and Hispanic students in big school systems. Often, however, they found themselves facing the challenges and issues that have been described by Douglas Reed and Jeffrey Henig, in which race was a significant and daunting component. Essentially, the end result of our efforts was the advisory board's 266 page report to the president.[6] It appeared on the same day that Kenneth Starr issued his report to the nation,[7] and so it was as though we had said nothing at all.

Looking back, I have identified four challenges to and paradoxes in the effort of the Race Initiative, and efforts at the federal level in general, to resolve educational inequities characterized by race. The first is this country's unwillingness and/or inability to confront and understand the extraordinary complexity of race in the United States and the role that race has played in creating today's educational inequities. The inequities did not just happen; governments at all levels, federal, state and local, were intimately involved in creating them. They are the result of what the courts have called societal discrimination.

The second problem, as Douglas Reed implied, is the virtual abandonment of effective equal educational opportunity remedies by the judiciary after *Brown II* in 1955.[8] As new cases attacked segregation in the North and West, the Supreme Court began to order increasingly weak remedies for the dismantling of unconstitutional separate but equal systems. Those decisions, from *Brown* to the more recent affirmative action cases, have made it almost impossible for public entities to use race as a factor in remedying racial discrimination.[9] Look, for example, at *Alexander v. Sandoval*, a Court decision that prevents parents and their children from suing public education systems whose policies or practices effectively discriminate on the basis of race.[10] This means there is no longer a private right of action when, e.g., a school district disproportionately assigns black children to special education classes without having an adequate educational justification for doing so.

The third problem is the very limited leverage the federal government has over public school teaching and learning. The federal government provides only about 9% of all funds spent on public education. Even so, the funds have been used relatively effectively, through legislation such as Title I, to push school districts to do some things that they might not otherwise have done. There is also the lever of civil rights enforcement, but in recent years the enforcement effort has been severely hampered by court decisions and inadequate funding.

The fourth factor, mentioned by Jeffrey Henig, is electoral politics. Every two, four or six years people in state and federal legislative bodies go looking for votes and the constituency that is most likely to keep them in office. They pay very little attention to the issues that we are addressing here. The problem is that the perceived face of poverty in this country is black. While there are vastly more poor white children than poor children of color, black children and other children of color are disproportionately poor as compared to white children. If you begin talking about programs and policies that will create educational opportunities for poor children, legislators tend to see black faces. Legislators ask, who votes? Not those children's parents. Who is in a position to make campaign contributions? Not those children or their parents. That certainly is a major factor in the way we address education.

This is the link between the failure of school desegregation cases and school finance cases. Increases in school budgets depend upon the willingness of state legislators to appropriate and apportion funding, and they are not eager to direct a lot of capital to places where the face of poverty is black. Victories in litigation will not guarantee effectively implemented remedies if those remedies are dependent upon the action and good will of state legislatures.

The result is a country that is creating major problems for itself by ignoring the implications of the demographics of the future. We expect that 25% of the total population in the year 2050 will be Hispanic, for example, but thirty percent of Hispanic youth currently drop out of high school. Think about the possibility that the rate of Hispanic dropouts will continue into mid-century. Can we sustain prosperity in a country where a substantial percentage of our population in 2050 will not have a high school education?

Franklin D. Raines, former head of the Office of Management and Budget and current CEO of Fannie Mae, recently spoke at Howard University about a Washington newspaper's four part series entitled "Black Money." Reading one of the articles, he commented, one would conclude that life for African Americans has never been better and that the quest for

racial equality is complete. The article noted that a majority of Americans believe that black Americans are doing as well as whites when it comes to jobs, income, health care and education, so Mr. Raines had his staff do some calculations based on that assumption. If in fact African Americans were doing as well as white Americans, African Americans would have two million more high school degrees, two million more college degrees, two million more professional and managerial jobs, $200 billion more in income, $760 billion more in home equity value, $200 billion more in the stock market, $120 billion more in retirement funds, and $80 billion more in the bank. These figures add up to about $1 trillion more in wealth.[11] Its absence constitutes the legacy of race and racism in this country.

NOTES

1. "Remarks by the President at the University of California at San Diego Commencement," June 14, 1997, http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0897/ijse/clint11. htm.

2. Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, P.L. 103-382.

3. Amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 2701 et seq.).

4. Dr. James P. Comer, the Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine's Child Study Center, is the author of seven books including *Waiting for a Miracle: Why Schools Can't Solve Our Problems, And How We Can* (E.P. Dutton, 1997) and *Child by Child: The Comer Process for Change* (Teachers College Press, 1999).

5. The mission of GEAR UP is to significantly increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education, by focusing on cohorts of low income students and creating partnerships among government, colleges and universities, schools, and outside organizations. See http://www.ed.gov/gearup/.

6. President's Initiative on Race Advisory Board, *One America in the 21st Century: Forging a New Future* (Government Printing Office, 1998). Also see *Pathways to One America in the 21st Century: Promising Practices for Racial Reconciliation* (Government Printing Office, 1999).

7. Kenneth W. Starr, Referral to the United States House of Representatives pursuant to Title 28, United States Code, § 595(c), Submitted by The Office of the Independent Counsel, September 9, 1998 (Government Printing Office, 1998). See http://www.access.gpo.gov/congress/icreport/.

8. *Brown v. Board of Education*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955).

9. See, e.g., *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 (1974); *Richmond v. J. A. Croson Co.*, 488 U. S. 469 (1989); *Adarand Constructors v. Pena*, 515 U.S. 200 (1995).

10. *Alexander v. Sandoval*, 532 U. S. 275 (2001).

11. Franklin D. Raines, "Charter Day Address," Howard University, March 8, 2002, http://www.howard.edu/Charterday2002/address.htm.