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# Beyond Racial Preferences

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*A handful of programs are showing that there is life after affirmative action*

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BY ROBERT WORTH

**L**AST DECEMBER, AT HIS NATIONAL town meeting on race relations in Akron, Ohio, President Clinton had finally agreed to listen to critics of affirmative action. "Americans believe in affirmative action," said Abigail Thernstrom, a demure middle-aged author with silver hair. "They don't believe in preferences." Clinton, never one to miss a sound bite, thrust his oversized microphone into Thernstrom's face: "Abigail, do you favor the U.S. Army abolishing the affirmative action program that produced Colin Powell? Yes or no? Yes or no?"

Clinton seemed to think he had scored a home run. But what does Powell say about how he got ahead? "I benefited from equal opportunity," the general wrote in his 1994 autobiography, "... but I was not shown preference. The Army, as a matter of fairness, made sure that performance would be the only measure of advancement."

Instead of stumping for racial preferences, Clinton should focus on the words Powell used: equal opportunity. Because like it or not, preference programs are collapsing like rotten timber in school boards and courthouses across the country. The Supreme Court recently refused to hear a challenge to California's ballot initiative banning race and gender preferences, Proposition 209. In fact, the court has been moving slowly but surely towards a ruling in favor of Title VII's original meaning: Race and gender discrimination is illegal, unless it is intended as a remedy for specific prior injustice.

Many liberals would deplore this ruling as a return to segregation. But the fact that Bill Cosby's children still have a government-sponsored advantage over those of a white welfare mother makes most voters furious. A recent study published by Harvard University Press found that the mere mention of affirmative action inspires racial animosity in whites. Thir-

ty years after Martin Luther King's stirring call for a color-blind society, the persistence of racial quotas strikes most Americans as an insult to his legacy.

Nor has affirmative action really helped those it was meant for. "Preferential treatment," writes essayist Shelby Steele, "no matter how it is justified in the light of day, subjects blacks to a midnight of self-doubt, and so often transforms their advantage into a revolving door." At mostly white campuses, the dropout rate for blacks and Hispanics is five times the rate for whites. In the workplace, preference programs brand minorities and women as mere tokens, and they may well help to maintain the "glass ceiling" on minority promotions that they were designed to remedy. Even their most ardent defenders admit that preference programs have done little or nothing for the truly disadvantaged black poor.

Worst of all, affirmative action has sucked away political support for need-based programs that would address the most glaring realities of unequal opportunity. Almost one in four American children under six years old is living in poverty today, a vastly disproportionate number of them black and Hispanic, but the programs that might give them a fair start in life are still underfunded. It's not just the schools that are bad; some children never even get that far. "Some of our families have talked about putting out their lights at night, and crawling through certain rooms, because they were afraid of being shot," says Dr. Mary Jo Ward, director of the Heads Up Literacy Project at New York Hospital. "They can't go for a quart of milk, because they're afraid of never coming back." Those aren't exactly ideal conditions for learning to read and write.

Americans don't believe in racial preferences, but they do believe in giving a hand to kids who live in constant fear of being shot. Now that preferences are all but gone, it's time to start focusing again on the pro-

grams that will help to create something like a level playing field for all young people by the time they're 18. In effect, that will mean helping out a lot of minority children — not because we want the world to look like an ad for the United Colors of Benetton, but because we believe in equal opportunity. And as it happens, the institution that produced Colin Powell — the U.S. Army — has been leading the way.

### **Buffalo Soldiers**

Most people know that the Army has been one of the great sources of opportunity for African-Americans, but few understand that it doesn't actually practice racial preferences. Instead, it seeks out promising young minority and low-income kids and enrolls them in aggressive, boot camp-style remedial programs — an example civilian schools and employers would do well to heed. Consider, for instance, the U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School (USMAPS) in Eatontown, N.J. Established in 1916, USMAPS' rigorous 10-month program is designed to bring promising but low-scoring candidates up to speed for West Point, which is still the Army's most prestigious source of commissions. Because blacks score on average almost 200 points lower on the SAT than whites, USMAPS has become an indispensable pipeline for bringing them into the officer corps. Some "prepsters" are enlisted men and women, others are high school graduates who have been identified as promising by recruiters. On entering the prep school's gray cinder-block compound, everyone gets the same rude awakening: reveille at 5:30 a.m., followed by a fierce succession of classes and athletic programs, right up to taps at 11:00 p.m. Classes focus on the basics, English and math, with an unapologetic tracking system: advanced, standard, and fundamentals.

The results speak for themselves. Students who last through the program end up with SAT scores that average 110 points higher than when they started. Enlisted "prepsters" earn higher GPAs at West Point than direct-admits, even though they start out with lower SAT scores and grades. Above all, black prep school graduates have a higher graduation rate from West Point than any other group, despite the fact that outside the military the black college dropout rate is 22 percent higher for blacks than it is for whites.

These numbers would appear to vindicate the prep school's remedial mission, which has allowed West Point to maintain its high percentage of minority cadets without lowering its standards. Nor do the prepsters suffer any stigma when they arrive at the academy. If anything, they're held to a higher standard,

thanks to their early taste of military rigor. "You've been given an extra push, so they expect that much more of you," says one graduate. Another cadet recalls: "When I showed up at West Point the squad leader took me aside and said, 'I expect you to help me carry my squad through.'"

Of course, USMAPS is expensive: between \$40,000 and \$60,000 a year per student. Some critics also claim that its successes are inseparable from the Army's authoritarian and hierarchical nature, and can't be replicated in the messier world outside. But in fact, some very similar methods have been showing up in one of the oldest and messiest public school systems in the country.

### **Under Pressure**

The Puritan elders who founded the Boston Public Latin School in 1635 never dreamed that it would someday run a "boot camp" for minority applicants. The school's graduates include John Hancock, Samuel Adams, and Cotton Mather (Ben Franklin dropped out early to work for his father), and it is still the toughest of Boston's three competitive-entry "exam" schools. Nat Hentoff, who attended five decades ago, remembers it as a melting pot heated by fierce academic standards: "We were all at risk of not making the grade, and that created a bond among youngsters who otherwise were from neighborhoods often engaged in tribal warfare."

But by the '60s the school's lily-white racial composition was in stark contrast to nearby Dorchester, which is poor and mostly black. In 1974 a federal desegregation order forced Boston Latin to modify its admissions process to ensure a 35 percent black and Hispanic student body. Although the failure rate for minorities soon doubled, the policy stood until 1995, when the father of a white girl who had been rejected sued the school board. Instead of fighting the suit, the board admitted the girl and dropped its 35 percent quota in 1996. But its modified preference policy, which was designed to maintain an 18 or 19 percent minority enrollment, has also been challenged (the case is currently in court). "The issue in the current case is whether we value diversity," says Charles Ogletree, a Harvard Law professor who was on the committee that wrote the new policy. "And if we really value diversity it will be reflected in a student body that looks like the Boston public school system."

Maybe so, but the school board isn't counting on it. Boston Latin headmaster Michael Contompassis is putting his hopes into what he calls "academic boot camps" held during the summer between 5th and 6th

grade, with another week of preparation at the start of the school year, just before the kids take the entrance exam for Boston's three magnet schools. The program runs three hours a day, four days a week through the month of July and part of August. Like USMAPS, it attacks the fundamentals — English and math — and is openly geared towards improving scores.

"We're working under the assumption that all set-asides will be removed," says Mike Danziger, who runs a nonprofit that is working with Boston Latin on a supplementary boot camp that will start running at another local school this summer. "But we're not an affirmative action program; we're open to all kids who wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity."

For many of these kids the most important step is just finding someone — anyone — who can point them in the right direction. "There are lots of smart kids in the public schools who just don't have any idea they could go to college," says Joel Vargas, the son of poor Mexican and Chinese immigrants and now a doctoral student at Harvard. Vargas was getting his A's at his local public school when a teacher told him about Summerbridge, a nonprofit that seeks out children from low-income families, puts them through tough after-school programs, and guides them through the bewildering process of applying to competitive schools. In the end, Vargas got a scholarship to a private school, but even afterward, "I needed to be pushed — there were some real gaps in my education. It was a slap in the face to see how far behind I was and how unfair the system was."

For kids who don't have the good luck to get a scholarship to a private school, as Vargas did, the system is even less fair. "To get an education, our kids have to go to one of the exam schools," says Boston School Committee Chairman Liz Reilinger. With only three exam schools and a student population of over 63,000, the odds for success are pretty bad. "What makes this unique is that you have a different responsibility at this level," says Contompassis. "Students at the University of Texas law school [where another landmark preference program was struck down] are going to get in someplace. The question for us is, how are we going to get kids into the pipeline to go to college at all? There isn't a level playing field."

Not by a long shot. Boston Latin's students go on to the nation's best universities, while half of the city's public school kids would currently fail the state's new minimum graduation requirements. Eighty percent of those kids are minorities, and 85 percent of them are poor enough to qualify for the free lunch program. Clearly, there's a need for programs that would do more than shoehorn a few bright kids into an exam school.

## The End of the Rainbow Coalition

Most of the students at San Francisco's Martin Luther King Middle School live in Hunter's Point, a neighborhood that is dirt-poor, crime-ridden, and literally toxic: The air reeks with deadly fumes from an old Navy yard dumping-site. Many of them come from what headmaster James Taylor calls "very impacted backgrounds, like what you would see on a TV special about crime in America." So many of their parents are addicts or abusive or just plain absent, that lately Taylor has begun arranging for some of them to live at the homes of staff members, where they will at least be safe and able to do their homework.

But on Saturday mornings a bright yellow school bus stops in front of the front doors at MLK and picks up about a dozen students to drive them over the Bay Bridge to Berkeley. They step off the bus into an immaculate world of plazas and fountains, and walk into the Bechtel Engineering Building. There they are met by two or three cheerful Berkeley undergraduates who will tutor them in math and science and assure them that they too, if they work hard enough, can go to college.

"It is not an exaggeration to say the process of selection of who will go to college begins in the first grade," declared University of California Chancellor Robert Berdahl at a press conference in January. "With each passing year, students denied equal access to challenging classes and ultimately to college-prep courses see their chances of college admission decline." The remedy, Berdahl added, lay in a redoubled outreach effort for poor and "underrepresented" students at schools like MLK, all the way from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Ironically, this sudden hunger for equal opportunity grew directly from what most California liberals saw as a disaster: the UC regents' 1995 decision to ban the use of race and gender in hiring and admissions. The deans at Berkeley had spent the previous decade crafting a multiculturalist paradise by cutting the percentage of white undergrads in half and swelling the size of the Asian, Latino, and black presences on campus. Almost half of every freshman class was judged on race and ethnicity as well as merit — a process they defended in the name of diversity rather than past injustices. Now their treasured rainbow was about to wash away, or so it seemed, unless they could find a solution before the new rules kicked in for the entering class of 1998.

Their answer has been to unleash an army of tutors — both faculty and undergraduates — on local public schools. "What we're really doing is opening up a whole new range of interactions between

campuses and schools,” says Karl Pister, a UC emeritus professor who is overseeing the new plan. “You often hear people talk about the educational continuum, but there really hasn’t been one. Now we’re trying to give some substance to that myth.”

You can smell the hype, but beneath it is a real ferment of ideas about reaching out to low-income students. UC San Diego is actually building a charter school right on campus, designed to boost under-performing children from poor families into the UC system. The school staff will include undergraduate tutors who will get “public service” credit for their teaching. “This is not about lowering the gates,” says Cecil Lytle, the UCSD provost who introduced the idea. “Affirmative action has not elevated the academic achievement of minority youngsters, and that’s what we’d like to do with this program.” Lytle wants other campuses, at UC and around the country, to follow suit. “Every major city has four or five major universities right in the hood,” he says. “They’re already providing expertise for agriculture, law, medicine. Why not use them to improve the schools?”

In the meantime, a number of UC campuses are already running a number of programs for local schoolchildren on campus. “We think we’re the answer now,” says Mike Aldaco, statewide director of the Math, Engineering, Science, and Achievement (MESA) program. “Essentially, the regents took away a tool for maintaining diversity, so the key for us now is working intensively with minority students at the precollege level, making sure they can clear the bar by a healthy margin.” MESA arranges for buses to take children to the campus after school and on Saturday mornings, where an undergraduate or professor drills them on math and science. It’s too soon to say what effects this will have in the long term, but Aldaco claims that 80 percent of the local minority kids in public schools who went through the MESA in its early years wound up in college, compared to virtually none of those who didn’t.

But with over 500,000 public school students in the Bay area, there’s a limit to what Berkeley — or any UC campus, for that matter — can do. “The university

can’t make up for the failure of the public school system,” says Ryan Tate, a Berkeley senior who sat in on the UC Outreach Task Force, a 32-member panel charged with finding new ways to maintain student diversity without preferences. “They’re trying so hard to make up for 209, but there’s a real danger that they could try to do too much and spread themselves too thin.”

And some education researchers are skeptical about what the current crop of programs can do for low-income students, particularly if they focus exclusively on remedial education. “Most programs for minority kids focus on weaknesses, and the kids never really

become motivated to excel,” says Uri Treisman, a mathematician who has taught at Berkeley and recently won a MacArthur Foundation grant for his own educational program work. “They may have the rhetoric of high intention, but no system to help achieve it. That’s very dangerous.”

One of the few programs that has proved consistently effective with high school children is Advancement Via Individual Determination, or AVID, which was founded in 1980 by a high school English teacher in San Diego named Mary Catherine Swanson. Swanson wanted to find a way to accommodate the torrent of poor, underprepared black and Hispanic students who were bussed into her school that year as part of a federal desegregation order. She knew the program would never work if minority students felt stigmatized by it, or saw it as a “nerdy” activity better suited to whites and Asians. She had to find a way to create a forum for intensive academic work that the whole school would respect.

Her solution was to bill the program as an elective offered during school hours rather than afterward, and to focus it on core subjects. The students involved would end up studying fewer subjects and knowing them much better. It was “not an affirmative action program,” she says, though its prerequisites — economic hardship, parents who didn’t go to college, low (but not failing) grades — landed her a majority of blacks and Hispanics. Four years in, the entire



PHOTO COURTESY OF USMAPS

**A USMAPS class at Fort Monmouth in Eatontown, NJ**

# The Washington Monthly Journalism Award

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**DECEMBER 1997**

**WILL ENGLUND  
AND GARY COHN**

**"The Shipbreakers"**  
*The Baltimore Sun*

*When the Navy began selling off obsolete ships at the end of the Cold War, a new industry was born: shipbreaking. As Englund and Cohn report in their series, the pay is meager, the hours are bad, and the work is dangerous. The men who do it — mostly migrant workers or illegal aliens — have little protection against toxic sludge, asbestos fibers, lead, and collapsing hulls. Many have died, and many more have been permanently injured. The contractors who hire them often have dismal records of exploiting workers and dumping dangerous pollutants. Yet neither the Navy nor the Department of Defense makes a serious effort to oversee the scrappers. And though the most dangerous work is done abroad, the authors make it clear that conditions in a number of ports throughout the U.S., including Baltimore, are abysmal.*

**MARY FRICKER**

**"Insult to Injury: Workers Compensation"**  
*The Santa Rosa (Cal.) Press Democrat*

*Fricke spent a year finding out what happens to California workers who are injured on the job. The answer: legal hassles, delayed benefits, and despair. The state's workers compensation laws were last overhauled in 1993 in response to widespread allegations that fraudulent claims were pushing costs for employers and insurers through the ceiling. But Fricker finds that the charges were exaggerated, and that the system's real and continuing injustice lies in its unfairness to workers. Injured people often spend days or weeks just trying to reach a claims adjuster, only to be treated rudely and forced to settle for drastically reduced compensation pay. Fricker reviews the weaknesses of the new system in her comprehensive series and argues that the first step towards reform lies in an effective system for monitoring claims.*

school showed a 35 percent gain in basic math skills, and a 46 percent gain in languages.

"Part of the genius of AVID," says Treisman, "is that it's not focused on race. It breaks down stereotypes in an environment of common challenge." In other words, AVID is a kind of civilian analogue for USMAPS. It's no surprise that the Department of Defense took an interest in what AVID was doing with minority kids in 1990, and asked Swanson if she would extend the program to DOD schools at U.S. military bases around the world. Eight years later, AVID is being used in 580 schools in 11 states and 13 foreign countries. Of those students who go through the program, 93.8 percent go on to college. And they stay: According to research by faculty at UC San Diego, 89 percent of AVID graduates stay on after two years, in a state where 50 percent of college students drop out after freshman year.

Still, programs like AVID will never fill the gap left by the eclipse of preferences. They're too small and too few, and they cannot do much more than skim off a group of students who might have made it anyway. The only way to make sure that all poor kids have a fair shot at success by the time they finish high school is to start much earlier and push a lot harder. And believe it or not, there's every reason to believe the government can help us do that.

## **True Colors**

On May 17, 1965, Lyndon Johnson stepped into the Rose Garden to introduce a program called Head Start. "Five and six year old children are inheritors of poverty's curse and not its creators," he said. "Unless we act, these children will pass it on to the next generation, like a family birthmark." The president's new program was designed to provide decent primary care for children who might not otherwise get it, and to start them reading early so they wouldn't fall behind in elementary school. After he left office in 1968, Johnson would often drive across the creek from his Texas ranch to the local Head Start center to take the kids out for candy in his white Lincoln Continental. He was intensely proud of the program, which reminded him of the lessons he had learned about "the high price of poverty and prejudice" as a young school-teacher in a town near the Mexican border.

Thirty years later, Head Start is still underfunded. Despite its proven success at helping poor children, it only serves about 40 percent of those who are eligible. Critics have claimed that the IQ gains it brings to children tend to disappear a few years later. But that has less to do with Head Start than with the miserable quality of the public elementary schools most of