A Taboo Erodes

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Perk up, everyone. It's true that Jesse Jackson is doing his usual number in Decatur, Illinois. And the Justice Department is threatening to sue Massachusetts over its rigorous and carefully designed statewide tests because many black and Hispanic students do poorly on them. And yes, Al Gore and Bill Bradley both have had kissy-face meetings with the Rev. Al Sharpton. But in fact, it's not just the same old racial scene anymore. Not only is the status of blacks steadily improving; the winds of freedom are now blowing through public discourse on race-related questions.

The shift is subtle, and easy to miss. But think about a phrase George W. Bush has used in two education speeches: "the soft bigotry of low expectations." The cruel (and racially indifferent) dumbing down of American educational standards in the name of racial sensitivity is an issue a handful of conservatives have long raised, and they paid a heavy price for doing so. But times have changed. The word is now out: Black and Hispanic kids do not know enough when they graduate from high school. They have been passed along from grade to grade by schools that pursue a callous, softly bigoted self-esteem strategy.

In its 1978 Bakke decision, the Supreme Court ruled that colleges and universities may consider race only as one of many factors in admissions decisions. No selective institution of higher education paid the slightest attention. Behind soundproof doors, race-driven admissions became the norm. The subterfuge worked for a while, but it couldn't last. Once the facts were exposed, the talk began, and it focused on the core problem: the tiny pool of black and Hispanic high school seniors with strong SAT scores and high grades who could meet the regular admissions criteria at selective schools.

Frank talk, once started, is hard to stifle. It takes on a life of its own. The new intellectual freedom is evident in *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, an important Brookings Institution volume edited by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips. The liberal credentials of Jencks and Phillips are in perfect order, but their voices (and those of their contributors) break with traditional liberal orthodoxy.

For instance, they assert unequivocally that it is lack of knowledge—not white racism—that makes for unequal earnings. They report that among 31- to 36-year-old men with cognitive skills above the 50th percentile on the well-respected Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test, the difference between black and white earnings is a mere 4 percentage points. College graduation rates tell a similar story: Blacks are more likely to earn a college diploma than whites with the same 12th-grade test scores.

Black poverty, racial segregation, and inadequate funding for predominantly black schools are standard items on the list of liberal explanations for black underachievement. Jencks and Phillips dismiss them all. Income inequality, they say, plays a very small role in black test performance; in fact, eliminating black-white income disparities would make almost no difference in the scores of young black children on a basic vocabulary test. Nor does a school's racial mix matter after the sixth grade; it seems to affect reading scores only in the early years, and math scores not at all.

The racial identity of the children in a district does not affect funding, the number of teachers per student, the teachers' credentials, or their pay. Schools that are mostly black, however, have teachers with lower test scores—in part, Jencks and Phillips forthrightly acknowledge, because black schools have more black teachers.

On the other hand, schools are less important than we sometimes think. According to Jencks and Phillips, parents count more:

> Changes in parenting practices might do more to reduce the black-white test score gap than changes in parents' educational attainment or income. . . . Cognitive disparities between black and white preschool children are currently so large that it is hard to imagine how schools alone could eliminate them. . . . Changing the way parents deal with their children may be the single most important thing we can do to improve children's cognitive skills.

This is a tough and startling message. More than three decades after the publication of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, the Moynihan

report that was so terribly distorted by civil-rights spokesmen, it is finally okay to raise the subject of black family culture. Jencks and Phillips suggest social scientists take a close look at: "the way family members and friends interact with one another and the outside world"; "how much parents talk to their children, deal with their children's questions, how they react when their child learns or fails to learn something"; and "cultural and psychological differences." In other words, focus on what's going on in African-American homes. Economic and educational resources are far less important.

Jencks and Phillips might be dismissed as members of a tiny sect called "scholars with integrity." But they have unexpected—and important—company: the ever-cautious College Board. In January 1997, it convened a "National Task Force on Minority High Achievement." Among its members were Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza, and Edmund W. Gordon, the principal author of the dreadful New York State 1991 curriculum guide, *One Nation, Many Peoples: A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence*, which prompted a ringing dissent from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

The group contained no conservative voices at all, so its recently released report, not surprisingly, contains much predictable stuff. For example, it says that the end of racial preferences in some states has harmed the efforts of colleges "to promote the academic development" of minorities; that we're not spending enough on urban schools; and that racial and ethnic discrimination is holding back minority students academically. It indulges in the usual psychobabble about low black self-esteem and feelings of alienation from school.

But the task force also breaks important new ground. The report links black and Hispanic wage levels to poor academic performance, and uses National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) statistics to make clear just how inadequately non-Asian minorities are doing. The document points out that the NAEP results display the same patterns as SAT scores, which correlate well with grades and class rank.

The task force describes the problem of underachievement as emerging "very early" and minces no words about the fact that black and Hispanic kids "at virtually all socioeconomic levels do not perform nearly as well on standardized tests as their White and Asian counterparts." In fact, the racial gap in academic achievement is widest among middle-class students from educated families. The scores of black and white youngsters whose parents lack even a high school degree are more alike.

Proponents of preferential admissions often argue that underachieving black and Hispanic students will catch up in college. But the College Board report admits that the best predictor of academic performance is prior academic performance. Do well in high school, and success in college follows—although black students do worse than their SATs suggest they should. The report refers to the "cultural attributes of home, community, and school," and talks at length about the attitudes toward school and hard work that Asian parents transmit to their children.

There is obviously much overlap between the Jencks and Phillips volume and the College Board report. Both are moving beyond racial preferences as a panacea. In fact, the task force refers to "affirmative development"—a term that implies the need for multifaceted and sustained action to address a problem. No quick fixes, which depend on fudging inconvenient facts. The College Board hasn't given up on race-based programs; it explicitly embraces them. But implicit in the report is an acknowledgment that in many public institutions of higher education, preferences may not survive; and that, in any case, after 30 years of using preferences, black students are appallingly behind whites and Asians in basic, absolutely essential academic skills.

The College Board is no profile in political courage; it would not have issued this report had it not felt safe in doing so. This report—together with the Bush speech, Jencks and Phillips, and other recent writings and statements—signals a change in the framework of the race debate, at least when it comes to education, the nation's most important race-related issue. Tom Daschle can call the GOP "anti-minority"; Democrats can play the race card from now until November 2000 and beyond; but they cannot stop the old rhetorical order from continuing to unravel.

Change the discourse, and the old policies themselves are placed in jeopardy. The whole structure of going-nowhere race-conscious policies—whose proponents have been satisfied with good intentions but few results—may be crumbling. If so, we are seeing the first steps towards honestly and seriously addressing the undeniable problem of ongoing racial inequality. Better late than never.