

Black student grades demand action

BETTY FRANKLIN-HAMMONDS provided the context when she released the Madison Urban League's newest report on black student achievement in Madison's high schools.

The problem of black student achievement "didn't just start yesterday," she noted pointedly. So the abysmal performance of black high school students in the Madison system is an indictment:

- Of schools that failed to reach students in their younger years.
- Of a society that has segregated people by race and class.
- Of the walls between family and school that too often leave children to fend for themselves.

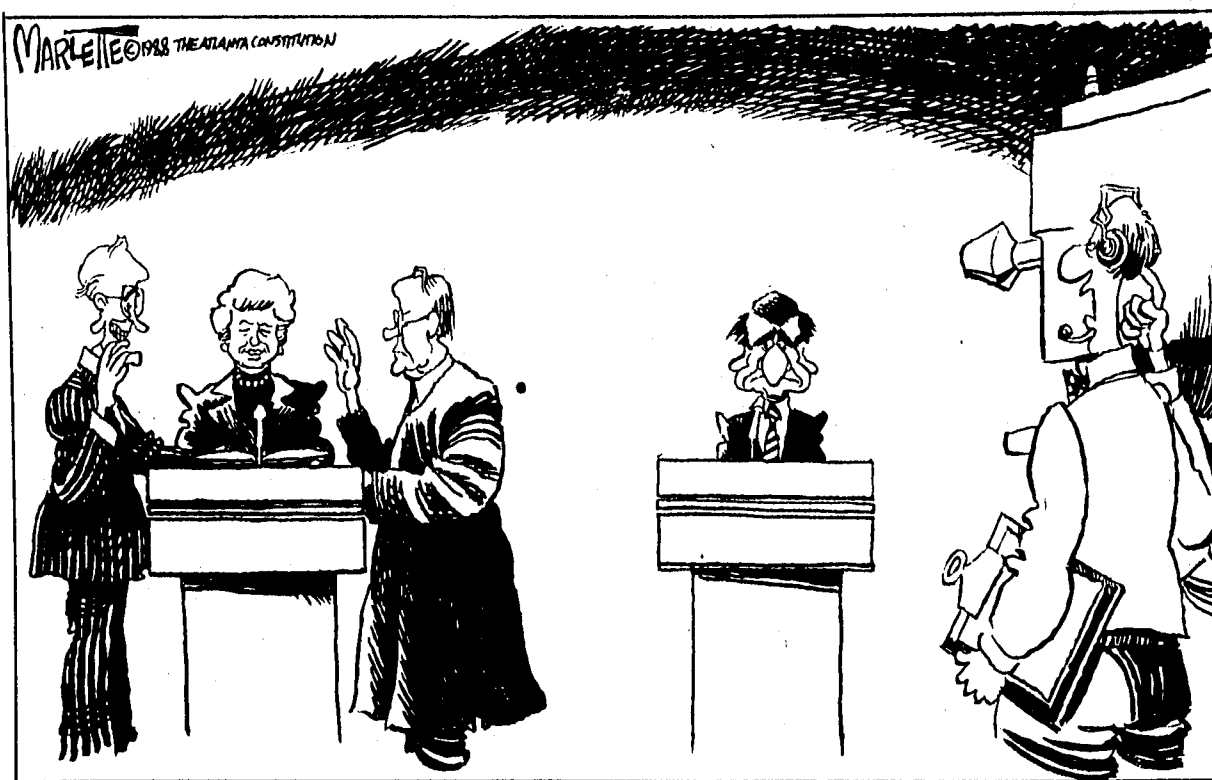
This is an issue that must be of concern to the whole society. It is not just a problem for black students. If any group of people are failing today in the educational system, that spells trouble for the work force of tomorrow, for the fabric of communities, for the long-term welfare of the nation.

Fortunately, Madison has begun to respond.

The Urban League itself has been a catalyst for action. By probing the academic performance of black students, it has risked the displeasure of some people — both black and white — who say that reports like this make blacks look bad. But only by highlighting the problem is there any hope for a response.

The school district has taken some solid steps toward improving minority student performance, steps that include efforts to break down the barriers between home and school. And even though the statistics in the Urban League report are from high school, the efforts at helping any student improve academic performance must start long before the teen-age years.

THE NEWEST Urban League report is a strong reminder of the work yet to be done to ensure that race is not a barrier to success in society. It is work that must be done by many actors — the community, the schools, the parents, and of course, the students themselves. Yet the payoff in a stronger society is well worth the effort.



"YOU HAVE ONE MINUTE TO RESPOND, GOVERNOR !..."

Important things to remember before you count Dukakis out

By HAYNES JOHNSON

SUNNYVALE, CALIF. — National network newscasts on the eve of the last presidential "debate" virtually had proclaimed that the 1988 election was over. George Bush had won in an electoral landslide.

On ABC, such pronouncements were especially unequivocal. The past tense dominated reports about and analyses of the latest national polls and voter surveys. The presumptive judgment was why Michael S. Dukakis and the Democrats had failed, how he had lost, what forces had combined to cause his defeat.

Thus was a political obituary presented to the American people well before Election Day and even before Thursday night's final televised encounter between Bush and Dukakis — and this overpowering judgment in a race considered too close to call. The forecasting may prove to be accurate Nov. 8, but a lot of caution is in order.

FIRST, polls and surveys in this presidential year have been marked by an extraordinary degree of contradictory evidence. Second, something more than voter uncertainty and volatility has characterized the politics of 1988. Dead-wrong predictions have been drawn from incessant, public, pulse-taking results:

- Remember Iowa, after the statewide caucus votes, when Rep. Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri was being anointed as the surprising and likely Democratic nominee?
- Remember New Hampshire, on the eve of the primary vote there, when the airwaves were filled with dire predictions of Bush's imminent political demise? Poor wimpish fellow, they said, he

was through. Too bad he had the bad political luck to compete against the strong and commanding Senate Minority Leader Robert J. Dole of Kansas.

- Remember "Super Tuesday" when Sen. Albert Gore Jr. of Tennessee scored well and was pronounced by some political wizards and pollsters as having decisively broken out of the Democratic pack and to be headed for the nomination?

- Remember Michigan, when Jesse L. Jackson had delivered the "knockout blow" to Dukakis and was proclaimed as writing a new chapter in American political history?

- Remember the "brokered-convention" theory and how the weight of "informed" opinion was that the Democrats increasingly were likely to be deadlocked in Atlanta and be forced to turn to someone else.

- Remember, in that context, the "Mario scenario?"
- Remember how Dukakis had it all locked up after Atlanta with that 17-percentage-point lead in the polls?

- Remember how Bush again was pronounced doomed because the latest collective "conventional wisdom" said no one could win after registering such uniformly high "negatives" in the polls?

- Remember how a public backlash against the media created widespread public sympathy and support for GOP vice presidential candidate Dan Quayle and clearly made him an asset instead of a liability?

- Remember when the "low expectations game" surely would prove favorable to Quayle in his debate with his counterpart, Lloyd Bentsen? Obviously, many people don't

remember, which is the operative political point now.

I don't know if the latest national polls and electoral-vote surveys are correct, but I do know that, here in the heart of California's critically important Silicon Valley, this campaign is far from over. On the basis of several days of intensive interviewing, I'm convinced that Dukakis can carry this area and California with its huge bloc of 47 electoral votes.

The reasons are complicated but no more so than the election itself.

While neither candidate has generated emotion among the conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans who live in this highly populous center of America's high-tech industry between San Jose and San Francisco, there's a marked change in tone from earlier interviews with many of the same people at this point in the 1980 and 1984 campaigns.

THEN, IT WAS clear that Ronald Reagan would do extremely well here. Now, many of those who voted for him express deep reservations about Bush, contempt for Quayle, desire for change and interest in Dukakis' views on such issues as education, housing, and health care — in short, his appeal to the middle class.

It's not a strong appeal that Dukakis has made, nor has it been backed by a crisp political organization. Still, it's enough to tilt many voters toward him or leave them genuinely uncertain about their decision. As the 1948 Truman-Dewey race taught, such conditions confound poll-takers, so don't be surprised if there's another political surprise to come.

Haynes Johnson is a columnist for the Washington Post.

Songs of freedom herald human rights

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN had used the words time and again in the 20 concerts in 15 nations during the past six weeks. The goal of this musical roadshow was simply stated, if difficult to attain: "A world without leaders who govern with the blood of their people on their hands."

Springsteen, the American rock legend, was one of five principal acts on this world tour designed to raise awareness about human rights around the world and to mark the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Amnesty International sponsored the 35,000-mile tour.

At each stop along the way, the singers tried to tie into concerns in that region. So at the finale in Buenos Aires, Argentina, for instance, the British singer Sting called on stage two dozen mothers and grandmothers whose husbands and sons had disappeared during the era of Argentina's repression.

There was lots of glitz to this 35,000-mile tour, drawing a million people across five continents.

Springsteen, Sting, Peter Gabriel, Tracy Chapman, Youssou N'Dour of Senegal are big names in the music world.

The reality they were singing about is far less glamorous. In its latest report, Amnesty International noted the state of human rights in 1988:

- At least 80 nations lock up people who human rights groups consider prisoners of conscience.
- At least 90 nations torture or otherwise mistreat prisoners.
- Death squads have executed thousands of people in numerous nations.
- Some 39 nations — including the United States — executed 760 prisoners in 1987.

THE ROCK tour showed that there are ways to draw attention to these horrors of the contemporary world. Amnesty International has shown there are ways to improve the human rights records of individual nations. Reaching the goal depends on the actions of human beings willing to make the effort to make a difference.

Michael Dukakis hasn't learned being right won't get him elected

LOS ANGELES — Among the great applause lines of American politics, this year has inadvertently produced two.

The first was uttered at the Democratic National Convention by the loquacious Gov. Bill Clinton when he said, "In conclusion." The second came from George Bush at the presidential debate here:

"There will be no more debates." A grateful nation can only say amen.

For Michael Dukakis that firm statement must have come as a relief. In two debates, the Massachusetts governor conducted himself as if he were running for First Dentist. He came across as an uninspiring man with a scolding demeanor who is given to talking about "tough choices" — like that between sweets and sound teeth. Who can knock his logic? But who wants to hear it over and over again?

Dukakis' response to the first question put to him was characteristic of his debate performance. Asked by CNN's Bernard Shaw to deal with an obscene hypothetical — "Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?" — Dukakis offered a restrained No — "No, I don't Bernard."

No! "No" is not the answer. The answer is yes — death at the minimum, preceded by the most horrible kinds of torture imaginable. That is what the average person would want for the killer of his wife. Dukakis should have said he would feel that way too. But then he should have acknowledged that it is for precisely that reason that courts, and not victims, decide these matters. Vengeance is not a noble instinct, but it is natural as a sneeze.

DUKAKIS may be Greek by heritage, but the cold Brookline winters have stolen his Mediterranean sun. Within moments, he had dismissed Shaw's question and gone straight to boilerplate: a recitation of his crime record and a call for a hemispheric summit on drugs.

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In tone and spirit, the answer was similar to the one he gave when he was asked about his contemporary heroes. "Some of them are in public life in the Senate, the Congress. Some of my fellow governors are heroes to me." Governors? Senators? What kids play "Senators and Governors" — and who are the good guys?

The standard indictment of Dukakis is that he is passionless. Maybe. But the more telling charge is that he lacks instincts. He has suffocated them, swaddled them in thought and second-thought — policy, plans and options. He seems to be in a closet of his own construction.

Instinct would say that you express horror when someone mentions the murder or rape of your wife. Instinct says that it does not take a month to get angry when your patriotism is impugned or your record misrepresented.

THE AMERICAN people will forgive mistakes. What they will not forgive is a man who seems to hide his humanity, who withholds the emotional glue that bonds a leader to his people.

Bush, on the other hand, appeared both natural and confident. He even said so. Asked if he had a list of Supreme Court nominees, he said he was confident — "but not that confident." In his own goofy way, the vice president joked, one time entering a mock plea for more time when Dukakis partisans interrupted his delivery.

In contrast, Dukakis seemed to lose stature as the debate progressed. Twice in his closing remarks, he mentioned his running mate, Lloyd Bentsen — once by al-

lusion and once by name. The references were telling. A presidential candidate who has to lean on his running mate is conceding his own limitations.

Theme is important in a presidential debate. A candidate must somehow say why he is running for president. He must communicate vision. Only by comparison with Dukakis did Bush manage to do that. His vision is an extension of President Reagan's — more of the same. To those who think Reagan's legacy is debt and the diminished capacity of government to solve the nation's problems, Bush made an unconvincing case for himself. The best he could say is: Don't rock the boat.

BUT MOST Americans do not see the Reagan years as a disaster. On the contrary, polls tell us that they are by and large content — and favorably disposed to the president. For these voters, Dukakis had almost nothing to say. Over and over he used the phrase "tough choices."

Surely, the choices facing the country are as tough as Dukakis says — but being right is not the same as being popular, or, as it may turn out, president either.

A presidential debate is first and foremost a television production. Perhaps that's as it should be. As any preacher knows, the medium can be used to inspire. Somehow Dukakis lacks that touch. His intelligence is not in doubt and for many people neither are his policies.

What he lacks is what Reagan has in abundance and what Bush increasingly has shown since the Republican National Convention — warmth, humanity, a willingness to declare who he is as a person.

Dukakis hides from us. Maybe he hides from himself. Bush did him a favor. There will be no more debates. Mike Dukakis can stop hiding.

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Bush learned how to woo votes

BOSTON — Last June, a group of pollsters rounded up some women in New Jersey for a sophisticated game of Knock-Knock.

Let's imagine the candidates coming to your front door, the pollsters said. Knock-knock, who's there? First comes Dukakis. What do you think would happen next? Well, said the women, he'd come in, have a cup of coffee, sit down and talk.

Okay, Knock-knock. This time it's Bush. What happens? One of these women answered for the group: Bush would come in and say hello, but he'd keep the car motor running.

This is the way it was in the early days when the women's vote ran deep and swift for the Democrats. There was the sense among a majority of women that Bush didn't understand their lives, didn't make a connection with them.

But what a long, long way from June to October. In the last polls, a modest gender gap remained, but the advantage among women had slipped away. By the end of Thursday night's debate, the images of the two candidates had almost flipped.

What happened to the women's vote was simple: The Democrats took women for granted. It was the Republicans who came knocking at the door.

From the beginning, the Republicans knew that Bush needed a biography that women would relate to and so they presented it. The Republican National Convention was a Bush family reunion. He was no longer the man with the resume. He was the grandfather.

THEY KNEW he needed a language that resonated in women's ears as well, something better than

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"the value thing," and so they scripted one for him. His speech writer, Peggy Noonan, crafted a speech that presented him as caring, a man who wanted "a gentler, kinder nation."

The original fuel behind the women's vote, what prejudiced them in favor of the Democratic camp at the outset, was their sense of economic vulnerability. It is not news that women suffered more from the Reagan era cuts and profited less from the Reagan era prosperity.

The gap between the rich and the poor would have been greater if women hadn't kept their families above the line by going to work. But it came at a cost in anxiety about family life, about good jobs, about their children.

"On a whole set of issues, women have a Democratic profile," says Ethel Klein, a Columbia University professor who has tracked the women's vote. "But the campaign's silence on the domestic agenda really hurt."

The Democratic pitch to women's sense of economic vulnerability was slow and haphazard. The Republican pitch to women's sense of personal vulnerability was hard-hitting.

Using the language of values, Bush spoke to their fears of crime and environmental pollution. He issued one proposal for day care and another to encourage public

service in young people. However specious an attack, however dubious a fact, however modest a proposal, he was in the kitchen, talking.

DUKAKIS, on the other hand, continued to present himself as the son of immigrants rather than the father of a modern family, a man who knew firsthand the cost of food at the supermarket and the difficulties of finding time for your family. He said that he cared "very, very deeply." But women in particular look for other clues and didn't find them. They have been harsher than men in judging the Democrat as unlikely.

Every piece of the Republican strategy for the women's vote was telegraphed well in advance. But the Democrats in '88, like the Democrats in '84, ignored the signals or directed their message elsewhere.

Even in the debate Thursday night, Dukakis talked about "tough choices" while Bush again talked about "values." When asked a "hot" question — how would he feel about capital punishment if his wife had been raped and murdered? — Dukakis answered much too coolly for the wives listening.

KLEIN says the candidates at this point are like two potential suitors. "Here's a guy, Bush, who's not offering women much, but he's still asking them out. And here's another guy, Dukakis, who's asking them to stay home and sit by the phone. He may be the guy they really want to go out with. But you get pissed off waiting."

Knock, knock. Ellen Goodman is a columnist for the Boston Globe.