

History and Background on Student Achievement in Madison by Kaleem Caire

In 1965, as a part of her Master's Thesis, Cora Bagley conducted a study on the academic achievement of African American students. In her thesis, she reported that a low level of academic achievement existed among Black students. On standardized achievement tests of language usage, 68% of African American high school students scored "below the standard level" in language usage. Similarly, 54% scored below the standard in math and 39% scored below the standard in reading.ⁱ

Ms. Bagley also reported that 26% of African American students entering Madison's high schools failed to graduate, that females were more susceptible to dropping out of high school than males, and that "Negro students not only fail to complete high school but many of those who finish do not pursue higher education." Among the 29,000 students attending the University of Wisconsin at the time, Ms. Bagley reported that only three African American students gave Madison home addresses and only one had graduated from a Madison high school.

In a January 31, 1965 Wisconsin State Journal article entitled "*Madison Negroes still face entrapping circle*," Sharon Cody wrote that there was a prevailing belief that "Madison Negroes still faced the entrapping circle of disprivileged homes, poor education, few employment opportunities, and inadequate housing, but legal obstacles were disappearing." Curiously, in Dr. Naomi Lede's 1966 report, *Madison's Negro Population*, she shared that her surveys of Madison's White and Black residents indicated that "there is no prevailing atmosphere of racial conflict in Madison," with most leaders from both groups reporting that everyone appeared "to get along" with one another.ⁱⁱ

Despite poor educational outcomes among Black students at the time, Ms. Lede found that "relatively few, if any, of Madison residents expressed any anxiety concerning the integration of Madison's schools." She said 52% of African Americans "were satisfied with desegregation in the schools, even though the majority of Black children were assigned to Franklin Elementary, Lincoln Middle, and Central High Schools. The other 48% had "no thoughts on desegregation." African Americans seeking social and professional advancement cited limited employment options that offered social and professional advancement as the most important challenge facing the Black community. Many of these African Americans were college educated or worked in government and other professional jobs. At the same time, lower-income African Americans identified a lack of access to quality housing as the most important issue. The majority of these residents worked in blue collar jobs.

A 1966 research survey conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Social Work further highlighted the employment status of African Americans. It found that seven out of 10 African Americans in the labor force who resided in South Madison held blue collar jobs. Of the 143 households interviewed (94 men and 67 women), 110 (77%) had one or more persons employed full-time. Eighty-four of the African American men interviewed were head of their households and held full-time jobs (89%). There were also 42 wives who held full-time employment and just 12 employed women were heads of their households (29%).

The study also found that 49% of African Americans who were employed full-time had no formal job training, while 27% had vocational school training, 19% had on-the-job training, and 5% had “in-service training”. Seven percent also reported job training in the armed forces and 8% mentioned receiving business college training as well. Of those who were unemployed, eight were not working because of injury or illness: 7 because they had young children and one who was laid off. The report goes on to summarize that “the picture that emerges from this data is one of a predominantly blue collar group in which the unemployment rate is not high.” Still, a high percentage of respondents who said they would like to change their job (66%) “revealed [to the researcher] that [the respondents] are not satisfied with their present jobs” and “76% said they would be interested in learning about job training opportunities.”ⁱⁱⁱ The differences in these reports, and the private comments that African Americans shared with the researcher about how they really felt, were attributed largely to fear of causing trouble or being marginalized in Madison for speaking out.

During the 1970s, as affirmative action took root on college campuses across the United States, the University of Wisconsin-Madison saw a surge in enrollment and college completion among African American students. It was during this period and into the early 80s where this new group of college educated African Americans began to give greater voice to the voiceless and significantly increased advocacy for social change and equal opportunity among Madison’s Black community. Individuals such as Betty Latimer, Kwame Salter, Dr. John Odom, Betty Franklin (Hammonds), Reverends James C. Wright, Betty Banks, Eugene Parks, Dr. Richard Harris, Anthony Brown, Joseph Thomas, Nelson and Marlene Cummings, Will Smith, Henry and Theresa Sanders and a young Ed Holmes, to name a few, began to join forces with elder leaders in the African American community to speak out publicly and advocate for the concerns of African Americans through the church, NAACP, Urban League and other groups and associations. Unfortunately, African Americans’ progress in college enrollment and community advocacy was stymied by dramatic economic changes and backlash against affirmative action policies and practices at that time.

The economic recessions of the 70s and 80s combined with the dramatic displacement of unskilled, manual labor jobs with employment opportunities that required more specialized skills and professional education and the outsourcing of jobs to other countries, left many under-skilled, under-trained, and under-educated African Americans out of work and out of the labor force.

In 1988, ULGM published the *Report on the Academic Achievement of Black Students* (1987-88), which “conclusively proved that there was an education gap” between African American and White students enrolled in the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD). Through the Urban League’s advocacy, as well as other community members’ efforts, MMSD created the Equity & Diversity office, helped establish parent-school liaisons in Madison elementary schools and launched a tutoring program.^{iv} Additionally, the Urban League, along with the local NAACP and other groups, requested that MMSD seek to recruit and employ more teachers of color and re-establish a middle school on Madison’s South Side. This advocacy led to the creation of Wright Middle School, which was supposed to be a high tech school that prepared its mostly young

people of color with high tech skills to be leaders in a high tech future. It also led to the establishment of MMSD's *Grow Your Own* program, which identified paraprofessionals and teachers of color who were interested in becoming teachers and principals, and provided them with tuition support to help them secure education and credentials to be teachers and leaders in Madison's public schools. Both programs realized some success but no longer exist or have the same mission.

In 1994, the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute (WPRI) conducted a much deeper review of MMSD policies and practices as it pertained to supporting and educating students of color. This report, *"Dual Education in the Madison Metropolitan School District,"* set off new alarm bells among Madison's African American and civil rights communities. The business community took notice as well. The President of WPRI wrote in his forward to the study:

What is surprising in this report is the lack of achievement among minority students. The perception of the Madison school district in Wisconsin and around the country is that it is one of the top urban districts...it is perplexing to find that Black students are doing as poorly [in Madison] as they are in Milwaukee and Racine....It appears as though there is some sort of dual system in the Madison schools. If you are middle-class White, you can apparently get a good education. However, if you are Black, that is not going to happen. Madison also seems to be following a trend found in other large urban districts around the country, where Black students are placed in special-education classes in numbers disproportionately higher than White students....It is very difficult to understand how this lack of Black achievement can be tolerated in a school district that many people point to as a national model. The answer may be Madison has no more idea on how to educate Black students than Milwaukee. Considering that Madison over the next decade is going to see a large increase in Black students, that does not bode well for Madison or the rest of Wisconsin.^v

WPRI's report received significant attention from the local media and instigated a greater level of community courage and advocacy around the needs of institutional reform in MMSD to more effectively address racial achievement gap.

In 1996, in response to WPRI's report and significant community engagement and pressure, MMSD established the Equity, Diversity, Advocacy Task Force. ULGM's current President & CEO, Kaleem Caire, Dr. Gloria Ladson Billings, Vice Chair of Madison Prep's Board of Directors and former ULGM CEO Stephen Braunginn were members of the Task Force. It was this group that defined three priorities for MMSD to adopt to reduce the achievement gap:

1. All children will be proficient in reading by the end of 3rd grade.
2. All children will successfully complete Algebra by the end of 9th grade.
3. All children will maintain at least 95% attendance annually.

Over the next 10 years, MMSD invested heavily in efforts to reduce class size, boost reading scores of elementary school children (focusing all of its Title I funds on elementary school children), increase the number of students completing Algebra, and provide related professional development to educators.

Despite its efforts, MMSD has fallen short of its learning goals for all students, particularly young people of color. The Urban League of Greater Madison does not believe that MMSD's inability to achieve its objectives speaks to neglect on the part of the school system. ULGM believes MMSD has tried to address the issues. Superintendents such as Art Rainwater dedicated significant resources to activities that they felt would close the achievement gap.

The Urban League believes several things must happen in order to improve the educational outcomes of all children, and particularly Black and Hispanic youth:

1. Every student should be taught by an effective teacher who loves and inspires them, is deeply passionate about what they teach, and cares deeply about their students' personal well-being, educational performance, and future. Students should also have educators who they can identify and connect with educationally, socially and culturally. Ensuring diverse educators are in the classroom must be a priority.
2. The most effective schools are customized to meet the educational needs, interests and aspirations of its students. MMSD's student population has changed, but its general approach to addressing its challenges have remained the same. Schools must be designed to meet the challenges and opportunities of today's learners and take full responsibility for ensuring students are equipped with knowledge, habits and skills to succeed in college and the workplace. Whatever it takes.
3. The schools that are most effective in eliminating the achievement gap take a *culture before curriculum* approach to education. Too often, schools focus on modifying standards and curriculum, changing teacher practices through professional development, and increasing instructional time as the key ingredients to improving student achievement. These things are all necessary. However, if a student does not feel welcomed, supported, engaged and a part of the school community, and if they do not see clear connections between what they are learning and what their future could be, curricular efforts to produce high levels of student achievement are often ineffective. Schools must operate with a set of meaningful core values and expectations that are consistent with students needs and aspirations, and omnipresent in all aspects of the school community.
4. Parents must be actively engaged in their children's learning and know how to partner with schools and educators to help them succeed. They must also know how to identify and take advantage of community resources and resource-persons to support their children's learning goals and needs. Schools that create a comfortable space for parents, have high expectations for parent involvement, and invest in efforts that help parents

engage meaningfully in their children's education often yield greater returns in student achievement.

5. Schools, and the communities in which they are located, cannot ignore the social and economic conditions that facilitate or inhibit high-levels of student achievement. They must embrace the needs and aspirations of their students, and partner with other organizations and individuals who can address or eliminate inhibitors that children bring into the classroom, and inspire them high performance. Again, "Whatever It Takes."

ⁱ Bagley, Cora. Some Factors Affecting Academic Achievement Among Negro High School Students. Madison: Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1965, pp. 1-4, 39-45.

ⁱⁱ Lede, Naomi. Madison's Negro Population, A report made for the Community Welfare Council of Madison and the National Urban League. St. Louis: Urban League of St. Louis, April 1966.

ⁱⁱⁱ O'Reilly, Charles. The Negro Community of South Madison. Madison: University of Wisconsin School of Social Work, 1966.

^{iv} Rhone, Shauna. Forming the Struggle 1963-1978, a chronological history produced for the Urban League of Greater Madison.

^v Dual Education in the Madison Metropolitan School District by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, February 1994, Vol 7, No. 2.