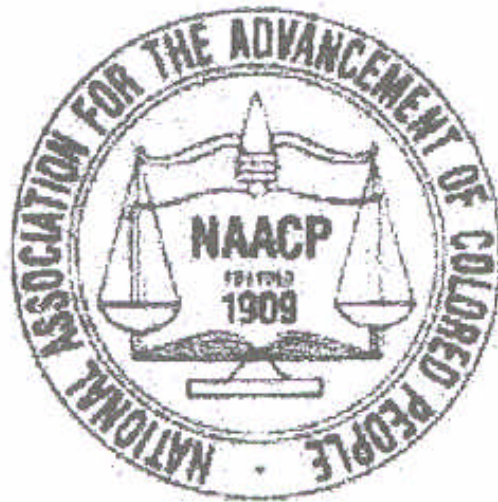


*Broadening African Americans' Participation in Education*

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Luncheon  
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## **Broadening African American's Participation in Education**

Congratulations to the branches of the West Virginia National Association for the Advancement of Colored People on your 40<sup>th</sup> Memphis Tennessee Garrison Life Membership Luncheon. Since the founding of this annual event during Herbert Henderson's tenure as president, this organization has encouraged numerous individuals to participate fully in this nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization: through NAACP Life Memberships you have steadily increased both membership levels, and the nation's awareness of the challenges we face. Being a life member of the NAACP, I thoroughly appreciate your efforts.

The West Virginia State Chapter of the NAACP, in particular, has shown its commitment to strengthening our communities in such areas as increasing the representation of African Americans on the State Police Force and on Grand Juries, as well as addressing acts of hate crime, police brutality and racial profiling.

You have also worked tirelessly to help ensure the desegregation of public schools, restaurants and facilities. Of your many accomplishments thus far, your success in assisting with the designation of West Virginia State College, now West Virginia State University, is possibly one of the most significant. Notably, West Virginia State was the only 1890 land-grant college left in the nation to attain university status. The efforts you put forth to obtain this designation are considerable, and will, no doubt, enhance West Virginia's educational opportunities.

Your commitment to education is further evidenced through this annual event which recognizes Dr. Memphis T. Garrison's accomplishments. Her pursuit of an education through the public school system garnered Dr. Garrison a bachelor's degree from Bluefield State College, graduating magna cum laude. Dr. Garrison went on to teach for over 30 years, initially at a one

room school house. She was a strong leader in education and an advocate for children. She became West Virginia State Teachers Association's first woman president and the vice president of the American Teachers Association. Her vision and philosophy that every child possesses the ability to learn and to achieve success, given the opportunity, firmly positioned her in the vanguard of her profession, enabling her to establish and broaden the foundations of education.

Through her devotion to the African American community, Dr. Garrison organized the first branch of the NAACP in McDowell County in 1921, and subsequently founded 10 other branches on county and state levels, serving in various leadership positions such as the NAACP Field Secretary, the NAACP West Virginia State Conference Treasurer and the NAACP Vice President of the National Board of Directors. She brought to these positions, reasoned judgment and a generous public spirit and commitment to service, aimed at improving black people's lives.

Building on the groundwork laid by community leaders like Memphis Garrison, I want to discuss a burning issue – “Broadening African American's Participation in Education.” Participation – the extent to which people attend a post-secondary institution – regardless of race, ethnicity, income, sex or other factors is, in my opinion, one of the most important and problematic of all education issues today.

I will address the challenges African American children face in grades K-12, which cause them to be ill prepared for college, and the strides we are making to break this cycle.

Broadening African American's participation in education still faces challenges/threats despite *Brown vs. The Board of Education*. As you know, next month the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the landmark decision *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, which struck down de jure segregation, is commemorated. Like some of you here, I lived through the evils of de jure

segregation and racism. And, while inroads have been made, ALL is not well. We still have obstacles to overcome and much work to do.

Growing up in Huntington many years ago, while confronted with segregation and racism led me to wonder about the advantages of an education, my parents taught their children that “There are no obstacles that we could not overcome, that not gender, not race, not income was an obstacle to achieving an education, that we must prepare for a better day.” I am glad that I accepted their advice, and I’m so thankful.

We are now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a highly technological information age. As President Bill Clinton pronounced in his State of the Union address, “The Information Age is, first and foremost, an education age.” The future of black Americans rests on education. Like Robert Hutchins, the renowned educator, founder and president of the University of Chicago, I believe that “the purpose of education is not to fill the minds of students with facts...It is to teach them to think, if that is possible, and always to think for themselves.”

Let’s consider some challenges/threats, trends that impact Black children’s educations.

African American students compose 12,765 of West Virginia’s 280,561 students. Of the 19,982 teachers, 291 are African American. This means that the percentage of African American children in West Virginia stands at 4.55, while .46 percent of teachers are African American. Notably, 18 of West Virginia’s 55 counties have no minority teachers – Calhoun, Clay, Doddridge, Gilmer, Grant, Lewis, Morgan, Pendleton, Pleasants, Pocahontas, Preston, Putnam, Ritchie, Tyler, Wayne, Webster, Wetzel and Wirt, even though students within these school districts reflect ethnic diversity – Hispanic, Asian and Native American. It is not uncommon to hear black students say that all of their teachers are white. Significantly, in West Virginia’s 775 schools, only 22 principals and 10 school counselors are African American. Thank heaven, we

have Bill Smith, an assistant superintendent in Cabell County. Today, a child goes through 12 years of schooling, and experiences on average 35 different teachers. Our children's education is jeopardized when we fail to have culturally sensitive educators and community members in our schools. Studies have shown that they are the best mentors and role models for our children.

Black students are disproportionately guided into special education programs, or into non-academic curriculum tracks, which amounts to de facto segregation. The 2002 Council for Exceptional Children report relates that during the 1998-1999 school year African American students "were 2.9 times as likely as white students to be labeled mentally retarded (in today's language MILD Mentally Impaired), 1.9 times as likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed, and 1.3 times as likely to be labeled as having a learning disability." The CED profoundly notes that the "overrepresentation of African American students in special education is a problem that undermines efforts to provide equitable education for all children in this country." With respect to Cabell County, 10.3 percent of African Americans are classified with Behavior Disorders and mild mentally impaired; six percent are classified in the gifted population.

The Minority Students Strategies Council, appointed in August 2000 by Governor Bob Wise, was charged with addressing the growing academic disparity between minority and non-minority students in the West Virginia school system. The Council explored issues such as the increasing number of African American students in special education as well as the low number of black children in the gifted programs. In the report recently released, the Council stated that only 41 of West Virginia's African American students, grades 3-11 "scored above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile on the Stanford Achievement Test." Fifty-nine percent of white West Virginia students scored above the midpoint, and 80 percent of Asians. Ten percent of black West

Virginia students are ranked “below standard” in grade school, but 83 percent are ranked “below standard” in high school, while 100 percent of Asians are ranked “above standard.”

The causes of low African American achievement are complex, often interwoven in ways that cannot be disentangled in research or in the experience of individual students. “Low student achievement is associated with increased delinquent behavior, higher drug use and pregnancy rates.”

The great challenge before all of us is this: we must work to ensure that every African American child has the opportunity to progress through elementary school, middle school, high school and on to college. This starts in the cradle, and with a quality education. We need to constantly affirm and reaffirm our faith in black children’s abilities. As Memphis Tennessee Garrison demonstrated, each of us must be treated as a unique and valued human being with his/her own special dignity, and as a person deserving of respectful adult interactions.

We need to do everything that we can do to address the educational needs of black children. The education of our children, instead of being relegated solely to schools where they maybe misguided because of ignorance, insulting condescension, prejudice and low expectations (no one rises to low expectations) must continue to be our responsibility – organizations such as the NAACP, churches, schools, clubs, sororities, fraternities, etc. We need to rekindle our commitment to increase African Americans’ participation in education, in order to prepare them for the challenges of this global society.

The chancellor of the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, Michael Mullen, noted at Marshall’s Commission on Multiculturalism meeting last December that West Virginia does relatively well in terms of its 15-24 year olds acquiring a high school diploma, but he questioned how well they were prepared for college.

Entitled “Public Schools Must do More to Prepare Students for College,” a recent **Herald-Dispatch** article, reveals that only one in three 18 year olds are even minimally prepared for college in the tri-state area and other areas of West Virginia.

Of the students who enrolled in higher education in fall 2001, 35 percent of West Virginia high school graduates required developmental or remedial courses in college. According to the West Virginia Higher Education Report Card, 2002, math was the greatest area of weakness. Concerning West Virginia adults – 25-64 years-old, only 16.5 percent obtained bachelor’s degrees, placing West Virginia “dead last” nationally. Chancellor Mullen also reported that “West Virginia’s black males with only a high school diploma have lost ground over the last 20 years; disparity based on race has gotten worse.” At the same time, the West Virginia prison population is fast growing; blacks constitute 29 percent; we are only three percent of the population.

A recent report by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development indicates that the United States is no longer the world leader in college participation leading to a baccalaureate degree; in the last decade the nation fell from first to 13<sup>th</sup> among developed nations: nations such as Norway, Britain, and the Netherlands have surpassed the U.S. “Stagnant levels of post secondary participation and attainment keep the U.S. in a holding pattern while other nations soar ahead observes Sandra Ruppert, program director of the Education Commission of the States. That is “unacceptable,” she said, “to those who understand that education is the key to both economic health, and to personal growth and development for all our citizens.” And, education is the best route for any individual to move out of poverty and reach his/her potential.

In this knowledge based economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – where a college degree is a prerequisite for success – student access to a college education is vital. Our African American children need to be educationally prepared and readied for college.

College affordability is another threat and increasingly, students are becoming less able to afford college. It is predicted that “over four million qualified high school graduates will not be able to afford a four-year college education in the coming decade.” Unfortunately, many of these are low income, minority or first-generation students who depend on financial assistance. The federal government has cut appropriations to states, affecting financial aid such as the Pell Grant; states are in budget shortfalls; as a result, higher education is faced with declining state financial support, and in response universities are being forced to increase tuition. West Virginia University and Marshall’s tuition will rise 11 percent in 2005. I’m afraid that such tuition increases will freeze the poor out of higher education.

The Promise Scholarship further illustrates challenges/opportunities for our students. Last year, only 37 black students received this merit based scholarship that pays tuition at West Virginia Colleges. The requirements have been changed this year. To be eligible for the Promise Scholarships, students must “achieve a 3.0 grade point average in their core and overall coursework, as well as a minimum score of 21 on the ACT (with a minimum sub score of 19) or a 1,000 on the SAT (with a minimum score of 470 in the English section and a 460 in the math section).” While this is not an official figure, I have learned that about four black students are likely to receive the Promise Scholarships in 2004.

While there is no single educationally enriching model or blueprint that can positively impact the lives of black children, there are several creative and innovative ways that education

is being approached in West Virginia. Let me describe a couple of these. What sets these programs apart is their focus on educating lower socio-economic groups and minorities:

Last month, just before the West Virginia legislature ended, House Bill 4669 was passed. The substance of that bill is that the State Department of Education will establish three professional development schools in 10 counties with the largest minority student populations: Berkeley, Cabell, Fayette, Jefferson, Kanawha, Marion, Mercer, Monongalia, Ohio and Raleigh. This special five-year demonstration project is to begin July 1, and the State Board of Education will work in collaboration with higher education and community organizations like the NAACP to develop and implement strategies to improve academic achievement; hopefully, this model will be successful and replicated in other public schools throughout the nation.

This is truly a victory. How did this come about? A coalition was formed, composed of the WV Chapter NAACP, MAACK, (Maximizing the Achievement of African American Children in Kanawha County), the Black Ministerial Alliance working with Legislators like Senator Plymale, Kay Goodwin, Secretary of Education and the Arts, Troy Body, Deputy Commissioner of the WV Division of Culture and History, Dr. Pat Kucimo, among others. These organizations did not merely sit around and meet, eat and greet. They defined the need, backed the need up with hard data, developed a plan of action, and worked feverously to get that legislation passed. MAACK and the NAACP expect to be actively involved in developing new job descriptions for teachers who participate in the demonstration projects as well as the new curriculum for students.

Perhaps you have heard that the acclaimed state program, the Health Sciences and Technology Academy (HSTA), unique to West Virginia, and with which the state has had ten years experience, has expanded from 22 counties to include Cabell and Lincoln.

This academically enriching program provides minority and socio-economically disadvantaged children enhanced educational opportunities in science and health fields, through after-school and summer university-based programs. Among the many benefits of this program are the increased economic advantages for students and the prospect of equalizing health care representation in our communities. The HSTA program, under the auspices of local governing boards and a state-wide governing board, begins with 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and continues throughout undergraduate, graduate and doctorate levels, tuition free, by supporting, encouraging and academically challenging the participants. HSTA figures show that 51 percent of West Virginia's high school graduates attend college, while 97 percent of HSTA participants become college students. Notably, West Virginia ranks 50<sup>th</sup> out of 50 states in percentage of college graduates. HSTA's successes, in conjunction with other programs, will, no doubt, dramatically influence these numbers.

As we go through this decade, we realize the magnitude of our work. Indeed, with the continuing work and support of the branches of the West Virginia NAACP, we can help our children overcome the academic achievement gap.

We need to remove as many obstacles that confront our children's being educated as possible, and with a sense of urgency. We need to give our African American children what they need to live up to their God given-capacities. We must give our children what they need to be great! Who knows what they will do; they may blaze new trails in the global struggle for PEACE AND EQUALITY.

As I close, I am reminded of the great educator, Mary McCleod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College and The National Council of Negro Women. As an advisor to

President Franklin Roosevelt, she held the highest government office ever attained by a black woman. In her last will and testament, concerning education, she said:

“I leave you a thirst for education. Knowledge is the prime need of the hour. More and more, Negroes are taking advantage of hard-won opportunities for learning, and the educational level of the Negro population is at its highest point in history. . . . If we continue in this trend, we will be able to rear increasing numbers of strong, purposeful men and women, equipped with vision, mental clarity, health and education.”

The world is fast shrinking, and the need to educate our black children cannot be overemphasized.

Touching also on the subjects of love, hope, support, harmony and responsibility, Ms. Bethune noted that “the world around us really belongs to youth for youth will take over its future management. . . [, and] they must not be discouraged from aspiring toward greatness, for they are to be the leaders of tomorrow.”

Building and improving the capacity of our children to succeed in school and pursue a college education successfully, we enhance the capacity of black families which leads to strong black communities.

The need is especially urgent now that we are into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a truly mosaic society undergoing rapid technological and cultural changes.

We face the future with a confidence born of a deep awareness of the NAACP’s contributions past, present and future – to the education of our children. We face the future

because our children are counting on the branches of the West Virginia National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the rest of us. If we don't do it, no one else will.

Thank you