The test

Africentric schools could be the key to success for a generation at risk. (Just don't call it segregation.)

Andrew Wallace

The city had been embroiled in a racially charged public debate for months leading up to that landmark night last winter. At 6 p.m. more than 200 people crowded into the Toronto District School Board's headquarters to offer passionate pleas both for and against a controversial idea that'd deeply divided Canada's largest metropolis, in particular its black community. For some, it represented real equity, an attempt to achieve a place for their children in a system that'd historically forgotten them. For others, it represented nothing but race, a new form of segregation that went against everything their forefathers spent their lives fighting for. Either way, they were there to bear witness to history, as on that night, January 29, 2008, the school trustees cast their deciding vote on the proposal to open an Africentric school in Toronto, publicly stating their position on what has become the third rail of educational policy-the racially separated school.

During the public submissions that preceded the trustees' vote, many concerned citizens rose up and spoke out. Donna Harrow, the activist who'd brought the proposal to the board the year before, urged trustees not to be taken in by misinformation about the school's purpose. Her colleague, Angela Wilson, argued that, despite the rhetoric that dogged the idea, a blackfocused school was "not about segregation" but "self-determination," while Winston LaRose, the executive director of the Jane Finch Concerned Citizens Organization, charged that Toronto schools "don't represent the diversity you so much talk about." But others in the crowd fired back, crying out that black-focused schools did, indeed, represent a new form of segregation and were "a half-baked solution to the problems faced by black youth." They alleged the school would further marginalize black children, not empower them as its supporters believed.

The trustees also added to the furor, offering emotional appeals on either side of the debate. Josh Matlow came out strongly in opposition-"We don't believe students should be divided by race, even if it's with the best of intentions"-while Gerri Gershon said that "separating kids by their colour is simply not the answer." Maria Rodrigues countered that she couldn't in good conscience deny "black parents their right to establish an Africentric school," and Sheila Ward, who'd originally opposed the proposal, implored her colleagues to recognize the power of symbolism in supporting something that could give hope to "those who believe time is running out."

When the trustees finally returned their verdict it was after 10 p.m. An evening that had been characterized by fierce emotion had reached its climax, and as the board pronounced its decision, Harrow and Wilson fell crying into one another's arms. Their proposal had passed by the slimmest of margins, 11 votes to nine. For decades, black youth have been dropping out of Toronto high schools at an alarming rate, and now, finally, it seemed the powers-that-be were going to do something about it. The city would create its first black-focused school, scheduled to open in September 2009.

But passing the proposal hasn't diminished the maelstrom of controversy surrounding the school, nor will it. In a country that defines itself by its commitment to multiculturalism, many believe the very idea of a black-focused school runs contrary to everything Canada stands for. Canadians are justifiably proud of a long-standing tradition of inclusion and acceptance, and anything that challenges those notions is considered untouchable. But in the country's most multicultural city the dropout rate for black youth stubbornly sits at 40 per cent. A growing group of activists have forced the issue onto the agenda, and their proposal may just put some of those students back in the classroom. The experiment will soon be underway and the question is now whether it can work-and whether it can even survive.

There has always been a strong, although mostly underground, push for a black-focused school in Toronto. Activists within the black community have been searching for ways to keep young, black students engaged in the public system for nearly as long as there's been a black population in the city. While the current debate over black-focused schools may appear to have dropped from the sky, there is actually a long history of grassroots advocacy behind it. In fact, the Africentric school that's supposed to open next September is not the first of its kind. It's actually the second.

The first black-focused school opened in Toronto more than two decades ago. It wasn't just an Africentric program, a course on African history, or a tutorial service for black students, but an actual alternative school, a legitimate part of the York board of education. It had its own students and staff. It had its own space, at D.B. Hood Community School in the northwest end of the city. And it had its own name: the Afro-Caribbean Alternative Secondary School.

Yet while the ghostly traces of the school's story have slowly disappeared from Toronto's collective memory, in some ways D.B. Hood's tale still haunts the city. In Canada's most multicultural place, it's tempting to think of racial inequity as a relic of the past. But the forces that ultimately killed the black-focused school at D.B. Hood are gathering again. The two stories are so eerily similar that it's hard not to wonder if this forgotten, unhappy history is destined to repeat itself.

Just as it is today, the dropout rate among black youth in the mid-1980s was disturbing. Close to 40 per cent of black students weren't graduating from high school, and alarmingly little was being done about it. So, in 1985, three activists-Jackie Wilson, Afua Cooper and Veronica Sullivan-decided that had to change. At the time, Wilson was pursuing her doctorate at the University of Toronto and working as a teaching assistant. She'd previously been involved with developing alternative programs for black high school students in the United States, and her plan was to initiate a grassroots campaign in Canada for a school tailored to the needs of black students. Like the movement's current advocates, she believed such a school might just re-engage some of Toronto's disaffected youth.

Wilson recruited first Cooper and then Sullivan to join her efforts. Cooper, then an enterprising undergraduate in her early 20s who'd emigrated from Jamaica five years earlier, was a student in Wilson's class, and Sullivan was another teacher interested in black education. The trio began to meet regularly, convening around 10 to 15 times over the course of the year at a small West Indian restaurant on Eglinton Avenue and at the University of Toronto campus.

Their back-room conversations quickly grew into a series of town-hall meetings where parents came and discussed the problems their children were having in the existing school system. They discussed what an Africentric curriculum would look like, who the students would be, and how to gain the supportincluding proper resources and accreditation-of the local school board. They focused their efforts in the then City of York as it had, and still has, a large black population. Within a year the three women were ready to approach the York school board with their concept. Thanks in large part to Wilson's stewardship and what had become a group of roughly 10 dedicated teachers and parents, the board agreed to their proposal and Dale Shuttleworth, then assistant superintendent of programs, announced that in September 1986 D.B. Hood would be home to an Africentric alternative school.

But, like today, the announcement was met with official skepticism and unease. While Shuttleworth and another trustee offered their support, much of the school board, including the then-co-ordinator of multicultural services, Rod McColl, maintained reservations. At the time, McColl contended that isolating any specific group ran counter to integrationist policy and said publicly, "There are a lot of other people [at the board] who are leery of it." He did add, however, that "there isn't anyone who isn't saying, 'If this experiment works, great.'"

While the details of the school's short tenure at D.B. Hood aren't well documented, it is known that the doors opened with a small staff of qualified teachers who taught approximately 45 students in three separate classrooms. Wilson, Sullivan and another teacher, Byron Stephenson, co-ordinated the school. (Cooper maintained her support from the sidelines-she'd completed her undergraduate degree by then and a new job kept her from participating directly.) The student body consisted of predominantly African and Caribbean Canadiansalthough applications from non-black students were also accepted-all of whom were over the age of 16. Every student, some as old as 35, had either dropped out or were having serious difficulties in the existing system. The curriculum, which offered advanced and general-level courses on black culture and the developing world, fulfilled the standard requirements of the York school board, meaning students received regular credits and a standard high-school diploma. The school offered daycare for students with young children and what Wilson called a more supportive and non-intimidating environment. Wilson and Sullivan also began to form relationships with the Toronto Youth Project, the University of Toronto and local community colleges, so that students would be able to move on to post-secondary education. However, despite a positive start, after only 18 months the school was moved from D.B. Hood to George Harvey Collegiate, another public school nearby. With the change in location-the York board said it needed the space at D.B. Hood-the school's resources were also reduced and its status demoted to simply a program, an important symbolic difference. At George Harvey, the school lasted another year before it was unceremoniously shut down. Even today, Cooper remains mystified by the events that led to its closing less than three years after it opened.

"I'm not sure how it went down, but I know the opposition was constant," says the now accomplished author and academic, who is currently a professor in the Department of Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University. "It sort of fell by the wayside, and part of it, I know for sure, was because it wasn't given the proper resources. As an alternative school, it died."

Although Cooper believes opposition from the York board and the larger white community played a part in the school's demise, Sullivan, who declined to comment for this story, intimated to Cooper years later that the school eventually fell victim to the same segregationist assaults that continue to plague the movement today. She told Cooper that she thought it was vitriol from within the black community that ultimately sealed the school's fate. She said influential people in the community rallied against the project, claiming students were receiving substandard educations and that the teachers were under-qualified; meanwhile, those closest to the school said it was achieving positive results.

Sadly, segregationist rhetoric has consistently hijacked the debate over black-focused schools, overshadowing what's really at stake. Proponents of the concept say it bears no resemblance to segregation, and that they can't afford to worry about the political optics when they have the chance to do somethinganything-to address the crisis in black education in not only Toronto but the country as a whole. "The issue is the 40 per cent dropout rate," says Cooper, who remains active on the issue today. "That number is critical. It's a national disgrace, it's a provincial disgrace and it's a municipal disgrace that you can allow so many children to fail."

Between the Afro-Caribbean Alternative School and the creation of the black-focused school today, there have been a number of attempts to improve black education. The issue gained traction in the mainstream with the release in 1994 of the Royal Commission on Learning, a government report on the state of education in Ontario, and again 11 years later when professor George Dei, one of Canada's leading researchers on race and social inequity, rekindled the cause at a widely attended townhall meeting on black achievement. But despitethe report's call to combat the "crisis among black youth with respect to education and achievement" and Dei's public appeal, influential voices from both within and without the black community effectively put the movement to rest on grounds that it smacked of segregation. These sorts of attacks have repeatedly turned the public discussion about the practical application of Africentric education into an emotionally charged clash over racial inequality. It happened in the 1980s at D.B. Hood, it happened again in 1994 and 2005, and its supporters fear it will happen again in 2009.

The same unavoidable question lingers today: Will segregationist rhetoric once again derail the Africentric cause? While most of the prominent activists, educators and intellectuals involved with black education-regardless of whether or not they support black-focused schools-believe the segregationist comparison is inaccurate, somehow it inevitably takes hold of the discussion.

True to form, the current plans for a black-focused school have already been roiled by accusations of segregation. At the first public meeting on the present proposal in November 2007, about 100 people came to voice their opinions, most in support and some in opposition. "This is not a race issue, this is an education issue," said one person, while another, who has five kids in the public system, chimed in, "Since there is no justice in the schools for our children, this would be a very good idea." But the detractors were also vocal, with one shouting "No segregation!" in the middle of the proceedings.

The next meeting drew even more people-and even louder convictions. A retired teacher declared that black-focused schools were the "very thing Martin Luther King marched against," while somebody else said that discussing the issue amounted to opening up a "Pandora's box."

One parent responded, "Black-focused schools are not about segregation. They're about finding a solution to the problems in the system," before another argued to loud cheers that black students need to receive the same support from teachers as white students do. Later that November a frustrated group of supporters, led again by Donna Harrow and Angela Wilson, shut down a school board meeting after learning black-focused schools were not going to be discussed. About 100 supporters who believed a staff report on Africentric schools was going to be unveiled that night rose up in protest. One supporter, parent Vicki McPhee, strode defiantly into the middle of the room and said, "We are not going to let this happen again." Wilson echoed her sentiment, telling the members of the board that they "should know how we feel," and asked, "Why don't you want our children to be educated?"

The incident proved just how deeply the supporters felt about the issue-but the political and media establishment quickly dismissed the idea. Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty publicly opposed the proposal, telling reporters after the first community meeting, "I don't think it's a good idea. I think our shared responsibility is to look for ways to bring people together. One of those most powerful agents of social cohesion is publicly funded education." Before the trustees' vote in January 2008, the media, which has played a significant part in perpetuating the segregation myth, also weighed in as all three major Toronto dailies condemned the proposal. The Toronto Star argued the "idea smacks of segregation, which is contrary to the values of the school system and Canadian society as a whole," while the Globe and Mail ran a column that called black-focused schools "as insulting as they are ridiculous." Even more vehement in its criticism, the National Post said the "concept of special schools for black students is one of those terrible ideas that refuses to die."

But refuse to die it does. The movement scored a significant victory with the trustees' endorsement last year, yet there remains a bittersweet mood amongst its grassroots advocates. While Harrow, Wilson and their colleagues were thrilled at the board's decision, they recognize that an Africentric school is not a panacea to the problems facing black youth. For one, even with the vote of confidence from the board, the provincial government refuses to budge. McGuinty reiterated his earlier opposition, stating he was "disappointed with the board's decision" and that his government would neither support nor fund it. As Harrow said, "the struggle continues," and Wilson added, "it should have happened a long time ago, and it shouldn't have brought all this pain back to our black community."

While the proposal put forward by the current board remains vague, the principles it's founded upon are reminiscent of those of the original Africentric school at D.B. Hood. Like the three activists' vision in 1986, the new school is intended to reflect the black experience. But that concept is often misunderstood. What remains a frustrating constant is that now, as then, a disproportionate number of young black men and women do not graduate from high school.

"What we're talking about is an educational philosophy," says George Dei, who's now the chair of the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. "We're talking about creating a sense of belongingness for the students in the school environment. We're teaching them about values-about respect, responsibility, community and history. We're affirming their identities and talking about having a very complex understanding of what it means to be black or African."

Although an academic, Dei, like Jackie Wilson before him, is pragmatic in his beliefs. An Africentric school is not an ideological or political symbol for him: it's a real measure designed to combat a real problem. He is quick to point out that black-focused schools are not a cure-all for the problems facing black youth but an integral part of a larger web of fixes. What's important is that the rest of the country-and, in particular, the different levels of government-recognize the urgency of the situation and finally act.

The black-focused school that will open at Sheppard Public School in September 2009 is a step in that direction. While the school itself is more vision than reality at this point-the board has made its "guiding principles" public but has yet to establish the specifics of the curriculum-the process is underway. The school, called the Africentric Alternative School, will offer classes from junior kindergarten to Grade 5 and is designed to teach both content and values. According to a draft document that the board plans to distribute to prospective students, those values will be the same ones Dei and other activists have been advocating for decadesinclusion, responsibility, community and leadership, only all in the context of the black experience.

"If you have to break down alienation and marginalization among students, you have to first respond to their human and emotional needs," says TDSB Executive Officer for Student and Community Equity Lloyd McKell, who is currently in charge of the Africentric Alternative School's development. A longtime advocate of black-focused schools, McKell became the first-ever equity officer at a Canadian school board in 2005 and immediately courted controversy when he expressed his support for the initiative in a sweeping interview with the Toronto Star. "We're stepping outside the box to create new environments that promote success for different groups of students. In terms of the curriculum itself, that's going to be under development over the next several months."

Once the board has hired the school's principala process that will begin in earnest this month-that person will work with a team of teachers and community members to create content for each of the six grade levels. As part of the Toronto board, the school is under the mandate of the Ontario public system and still has to satisfy the standard provincial requirements. What's different is that both the approach and content will reflect the concept of what McKell calls the "African Village."

The idea is not as lofty as it may sound, though. It's more an attempt to refocus and refine the existing curriculum with a specific student body in mind. In approach, that means restructuring the classroom so that students are given opportunities to take leadership roles at every stage of the learning process. In content, it means students will not only study European history and the creation of European identities, but also African history and the creation of African identities. It's not as simple as inserting a few black faces into the textbook, but the deliberate inclusion of African history and people is a starting point.

From there the board's plan is to grow the content in stages. Essentially, the school will follow its first set of students through the system. As the original fifth-graders move onto Grade 6 next year, the school will add sixth-grade programming. As the sixth-graders move onto Grade 7 the following year, the school will add seventh-grade programming, and so on. Sheppard Public School can only house classes up to Grade 8, however, and the board has yet to look into the feasibility of a black-focused high school. But McKell says it's in the works. The goal, he says, is to eventually evolve the concept to the point where curricula are in place for kindergarten all the way through to high school. Opening a secondary school is a critical step since the project must re-engage high school students who've dropped out of the existing system and prevent others from dropping out in the first place.

"As we develop this concept, I think we're going to appreciate that this changes us and gives us a new sense of possibilities," explains McKell. "The pedagogy is not restricted to content. I think it will be an opportunity, once it gets established, to help us learn some things that we'll try in other schools. Because our ultimate goal, my goal, is to have a truly inclusive school system."

In this sense, the Africentric project is designed not only to empower marginalized students but also to transform the traditional approach to public education. Notably, none of the school's most prominent advocates see it as a permanent solution. Their desire is to help those who need it while also changing the way children are taught everywhere-regardless of their race. That's why enrollment in the Africentric Alternative School is open to any student who wants to go there: the point is to use the school as a pilot program, one that will establish lessons and pedagogies that can eventually be transferred to the wider public system. The larger project is to create a truly inclusive institution. Whether that's a realistic objective is what remains to be seen.

"If the school is about advancing or helping the situation of students who are not doing well, we have to start thinking about pedagogies that relate to those students," says York University Professor Carl James, who has been involved with black education projects both in the academy and on the ground. "Education is not a simple thing. It's very complex. It's not teaching subjects but teaching people. That means thinking of them in terms of their race, their class, their community, everything. You have to build a program around those realities."

For its proponents, a black-focused school is not something that will perpetuate inequity and injustice but a corrective measure intended to help right those past wrongs. They argue there is a fine but important distinction between forced segregation and separation by choice. "We separate students based on their education needs all the time," says James. "What's interesting is that as a society we have difficulty with the translation. People are only seeing the 'black' part of the school, which makes it only about race, and we don't want it to be that way."

Dei echoes that sentiment, pointing out that the school is defined more by the principles it's founded upon than anything else. "Sometimes people miss the point," he says. "It's part of the confusion and misinformation around the issue. There's a difference between an oppressive act and one that's intended to deal with a long-standing problem." Yet what makes challenging the segregation claim so difficult is that the idea of separation-by choice or otherwise-threatens to undermine the multicultural policies that Canada has cultivated for decades.

"I think there's a feeling out there that we're a very inclusive society and anything that attempts to question that is something that we don't want to hear," says Dei. "We always want to live with this sense of complacency-that we're an integrated society where the school system is supposed to work for everybody." The idea that Canada is a diverse, inclusive and integrated nation is an important part of its identity, and Toronto, so often touted as the most multicultural city on Earth, is supposed to embody those ideals. The reason Africentric schools are such a lightning rod is because the idea not only critiques the poor experience of black students in an education system that's letting them down, it questions decades of received wisdom about the social fabric of our country. Which is not to say multiculturalism isn't a good and noble thing. But it's not above criticism.

"There is no doubt that we all want an integrative system and we all want to be in an integrated environment," says Dei. "But we cannot continue to hold the flag or the banner of integration and not be concerned about the outcomes of our practices." Lost in the ideological battles is the key issue that the country must morally answer for: 40 per cent of black youth in Canada's most populous and diverse city aren't graduating from high school. The reality is that there are already gaping inequities in the public system, and they need to be addressed. It was the case 22 years ago when the Afro-Caribbean Alternative Secondary School attempted to make a change at D.B. Hood, and it's still the case today. Those behind the black-focused school movement both then and now advocate doing something-anything-to combat this disturbing reality. Black-focused schools are an important option that have never been given a fair chance.

"We won't know to what extent this will work unless we try," says Dei. "Sometimes people ask where is the evidence that it works. But I want to know where is the evidence that it doesn't work. We must continue to search for the solution and this is one of many things that can be done. If the solution will work for the students, that's what we should be driven by." James agrees: "Such a school might fail the students-we don't know. Of course, we'll never know unless we try something. If you have 40 per cent of your children failing, I'd say it's important to try something."

Because if history is allowed to repeat itself and the polemic over black-focused schools comes to overshadow the urgency of the reality they're meant to address, it's Toronto children that suffer. And it's the entire country that's to blame. T