PART ONE

In the Classroom

1

"You Can Tell If They Care"

Why Students Need Caring and Highly Qualified Teachers

I've spent much of my life in classrooms: first as a K–12 student, next as a college undergraduate, then, eventually, as a master's student, and much later as a doctoral student. More than two decades ago, as a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa, I also visited an elementary and a secondary school and observed what was going on in classrooms there. When I returned to the United States, I spent fourteen years teaching in "urban-fringe," predominantly minority junior high and high schools, and since 1998, I've taught graduate students—mostly individuals earning education degrees—full-time. Moreover, a few years ago, I created and ran an after-school literacy program for struggling third, fourth, and fifth graders at two schools, including a low-income, predominantly black school. Despite the extensive amount of time I've spent in classrooms, teaching wasn't my first career choice; writing was. The truth is, I entered the teaching force out of necessity at a time when I was a single parent who needed a steady income in order to feed my child.

So, thinking that it would only be a temporary job, I started working as a substitute teacher in 1984. After I "subbed" for a semester, a junior high school principal offered me a long-term position that was contingent on my immediate enrollment in a teacher certification program at a local university. Because her offer equaled job security, a regular monthly paycheck, and medical benefits for my daughter and me, I couldn't refuse it. But even though I became a full-time teacher "by accident," when I accepted the principal's offer, I made two promises to myself.

First, I would strive to provide my students with the best education that I could. Back then, and even today, my model of outstanding teaching was wrapped in nostalgic memories of my sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Susan Tessem. Not only was she effective in making the curriculum comprehensible to the students at our predominantly black elementary school, in which many of us—including myself—were on welfare and from single-parent homes, but more important, Mrs. Tessem had a lifelong impact on me and others. In fact, even though I was only in elementary school, she was instrumental in convincing me to go to college, which changed the course of my life.[1] What is most interesting about Mrs. Tessem is that as a young white woman from suburbia who taught at a low-performing inner-city school, she faced many of the work-related problems that numerous current teachers aren't able to handle.[2] Yet, in spite of these problems, she made a decision each day to teach to the best of her ability. She refused to let the problems plaguing our community, and inner-city communities nationwide, prevent her from doing an outstanding job, or force her to lower her expectations. Neither poverty, community problems, the low prestige of our school, the low expectations of many of her colleagues, nor widespread teacher apathy could convince Mrs. Tessem that we were anything less than "college material."

The second promise I made to myself when I accepted the job offer was to set a personal goal related to payday. Each month when I collected my paycheck, I wanted to be able to look squarely at myself in the mirror and say honestly, "I *earned* this paycheck. I'm not merely *collecting* money that I don't deserve."

Even though my K–12 teaching career was often rocky, painful, and disillusioning, for the fourteen years that I taught, I tried to keep these two promises foremost in my mind. For me, they were the "big picture," and despite the fact that I made many mistakes during my journey to become an effective teacher, when I left the K–12 system to teach full-time at the university level, I left with my head held high and the belief that I'd lived up to Mrs. Tessem's example of excellence—but not perfection. Perfection is an elusive

goal for human beings, for none of us is perfect. This is an important message for all teachers, especially idealistic new teachers, to remember.

Today, in my graduate school classroom, I continue to hold the same definition of teaching excellence that I learned from Mrs. Tessem: subject matter competency; a cohesive, comprehensible, challenging, and relevant curriculum; high expectations for students; multiple means of assessment; an engaging style of delivery; and the overall objective of not only equipping students with the skills they need to advance toward their personal goals but also encouraging them to use their education to bring about social justice—especially for America's stepchildren. Of course, not everyone agrees with my definition of excellent teaching.

In fact, the list of definitions of what constitutes effective teaching is quite extensive. For example, in "Good Teachers, Plural," Cruickshank and Haefele described ten different models of good teaching and noted a lack of consensus on which model is best.[3] Darling-Hammond, who has done extensive research on teacher quality, found that teachers with full certification who also majored in the subjects they teach are more likely to produce high-achieving students than teachers without full certification and those who didn't major in the subjects they teach.[4] Haycock, the director of the Education Trust, said that among other characteristics, good teachers have strong verbal and math skills and extensive knowledge about their subject matter.[5] In the Carnegie Challenge 2001 report, *Higher Education's Challenge: New Teacher Education Models for a New Century,* Grosso de Leon maintained that effective teachers must have subject-matter mastery and be knowledgeable about curriculum, instruction, classroom management, and learning theories. They must also have an understanding of their students' community, beliefs, concerns, and interests; an ability to evaluate students' learning; clinical training; technological training; and a ". . . set of metaphorical bridges between the teacher's subject knowledge and the implicit understandings brought to the classroom by the learner."[6]

One of the most recent models of what is required to become an effective teacher was created by the U.S. Department of Education as part of NCLB. In *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge*, Rod Paige, former secretary of education, defined a highly qualified teacher as one who "has at least a bachelor's degree, has obtained full state certification or licensure, [and] has demonstrated subject area competence in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches." All teachers should be "highly qualified by the end of the 2005–2006 school year."[7]

Like NCLB itself, the U.S. Department of Education's definition of a "highly qualified" teacher and its related timelines generated controversy and disagreements.[8] However, even though policymakers and researchers may fail to agree on a uniform model or definition of effective teaching, the "experts" tend to agree on two points: there are too many underqualified teachers in classrooms, especially in low-income and high-minority schools, and there is a strong connection between teacher quality and student achievement.

The U.S. Department of Education has repeatedly emphasized that "Good teaching lasts a lifetime. . . . A teacher's mastery of the academic content of what he or she teaches is critical to engaging students and inspiring them to academic excellence."[9] In her extensive study on teacher quality, Darling-Hammond made a similar point. She found that teacher quality had a stronger link to student achievement than teacher salaries, class size, or spending levels.[10] In his Carnegie Challenge report, Grosso de Leon put it simply: ". . . good teaching is the single most important element in determining student achievement."[11] In another Carnegie report, deCourcy Hinds wrote, "Several bad teachers in a row can derail a child's education, and research also indicates that teachers are so influential that variations in teacher quality alone can explain the differences in achievement of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds."[12] In "Good Teaching Matters . . . a Lot," Haycock said candidly, ". . . much of what we have blamed on children and their families for decades is actually the result of things we have done to

them. As a nation, we have deprived our neediest students of the very ingredient most important to learning: a highly qualified teacher."[13]

Like Haycock, education "experts" and policymakers throughout the nation, by and large, agree that there are too many underqualified teachers in schools and that these teachers have a negative effect on student achievement. Of course, the "neediest students" and the ones who get the least from K–12 schools tend to be America's stepchildren. Haberman, for example, concluded that only 5 to 8 percent of teachers who teach low-income students are "stars" or exemplary teachers.[14]

Convinced that true school reform must begin with teachers, numerous politicians have begun to spread the same message. For example, at the beginning of 2005, in California, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington, D.C., among other places, government officials rang in the New Year with the message that America's public school system is in need of additional reform, and reform must begin with improving the quality of our teachers. In his State of the State Address, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California vowed to "expel" ineffective teachers and implement a merit-pay system for teachers. The governor referred to California's public school system as an "educational . . . and institutional disaster," and said, "The more we reward excellent teachers, the more our teachers will be excellent. The more we tolerate ineffective teachers, the more our teachers will be ineffective."[15] In Tennessee, Governor Phil Bredesen promised to create a program that would not only "teach teachers how to teach" but also catapult his state—which has one of the worst-ranked K–12 systems in the nation—to educational prestige.[16] In Texas, Governor Rick Perry also promised to reform the public school system by instituting a merit-pay system for teachers.[17]

These politicians' and others' plans to reform the public school system at the state level may have seemed ambitious, and they had their share of critics. But shortly before his second inauguration in 2005, President George W. Bush introduced a new reform plan that

made the politicians' plan seem modest, to say the least. Bush vowed to reform the *nation's entire high school system*. To do this, he promised to increase funding for NCLB and require more mandatory testing of high school students.[18]

Although Bush and other politicians may have had good intentions, like other policymakers and some "experts," they failed to realize an important point: true and lasting school reform can occur only with the cooperation of teachers and students, and history has shown that when people are forced to do things they don't want to do, they can retaliate and derail even the best plans. A recent example of this phenomenon occurred at one of the lowest-performing high schools in Los Angeles. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation offered to give this school more than $1 million to implement their talent development model. Despite the fact that the school principal was eager to receive this assistance, many teachers believed that their concerns were being ignored. The teachers voted against the plan, and the school lost the opportunity to receive a huge amount of money that may have benefited America's stepchildren.

What is most interesting to me about my decision as an adult to look to my sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Tessem, as an exemplar of good teaching is that even as a child, I could tell the difference between a good teacher and a bad one. Yet as researchers, policymakers, and others continue to argue over what constitutes good teaching and what should be done to reform the K–12 public school system, they rarely seek the input of students (or even of teachers). If they did, they would learn that students (and teachers) have plenty to say.

I learned this during my own years as a junior high school and high school teacher, and I am constantly reminded of this when I hear my own children describe their teachers. Further, when I collected data for *African American Teens Discuss Their Schooling Experiences*, the students from the seven participating high schools were quite certain about what differentiated good teachers from bad ones. The students at American High School who completed the

questionnaire and who participated in the focus groups were equally as opinionated about good and bad teachers. In the next section, we hear what they really thought about their teachers and their instructional practices.

What the Students Said

Most of the teachers at American High School rated themselves as outstanding teachers. Most said they loved their job, had a positive perspective of the school, and still planned to be teaching there three years later. The majority of these teachers also said that most of their students viewed them as outstanding teachers. In other words, most of the teachers undoubtedly would have labeled themselves as "highly qualified," even though at the time that they completed the questionnaire, many had taught for five years or less, and only 42 percent were fully credentialed.

Like the teachers at American High School who participated in the first part of the study, the majority of students said that most of their teachers were good teachers. However, students were less likely than teachers to rate the teachers as good. Furthermore, white students were more likely than Latino and black students to state this; black students, particularly males, were the least likely group to rate most of their teachers as good. (See Appendix E for the student questionnaire results that I describe throughout this book.)

Although the majority of students rated their teachers as good, more than half the black and Latino students said they wished they had better teachers. African American females and Latinas were a lot more likely than whites to want better teachers, and white males were least likely to hold this view. Most students also said that they got along with most of their teachers, but a lower percentage of black and Latino students did in comparison to whites. Latino males were the least likely group to say they got along with most of their teachers. In terms of fairness, black students, especially males, were less likely to say their teachers treated them fairly.

Teacher Quality

The focus group participants made many statements about their teachers. Some of these statements illustrate why more than half of the African-American and Latino questionnaire respondents wanted better teachers. Numerous students complained about teachers having bad attitudes, abusing their authority, taking their personal problems out on students, engaging in unfair practices, using ineffective instructional methods, having poor classroom management skills (a topic I will say more about in Chapter Four), and wasting class time. For example, an African American student stated: "I think that a lot of the teachers misuse their authority. Like, me and another black student gave the teacher a pass to come here [to the focus group discussion] today, but just because the pass was wrinkled, the teacher sent us to the office. She could see that the pass is dated for today, but she had to create a big ordeal about it. She has a bad attitude."

Another African American female said:

> There's this one P.E. coach that threatens students. She says, "If I was younger, I'd beat you up." She gets a lot of kids suspended because if you come late, she'll yell at you. Then you'll say, "Well, I'm not late." Then she'll say, "Are you getting smart with me? I'm calling the principal." One day, it was real hot, and you could walk the track for extra credit. A group of black people were sitting on the bleachers. She said, "You're bothering my class." They were playing tennis and we weren't even doing nothing, but she called security on us.

Another focus group participant said, "They should check the credentials of some of the teachers. There's better teachers teaching math. Last year, in one class, all of the kids got A's but none of them passed the AP test. I don't want that same teacher teaching me next year. So, they should check the credentials, and some of these teachers are child rapists. They should check them too."

A girl said, "In my math class, we have personal tutoring available after school. But everyone's scared of the teacher and

intimidated by her, because she's mean. If you don't understand something, she gets frustrated and says, 'What don't you understand?' or 'How could you not understand *that*?' She makes you feel stupid."

A high school senior said: "You think as a senior that you have two main classes and you think everything else is easy and fun. I have this English teacher. She's really mean. She's a witch with a 'b.' She doesn't care. They'll give you the work. Once in awhile, you do a project, present it in class, and that's it. But more than half the time, you ask for help and she says, 'Come after class, because I'm not repeating things.' So, why is she here then? You go to a school to teach because maybe you like students and you like to help them out, but I don't see any of that."

Another student summarized what many focus group participants implied: "They expect us to trust them, but how can we trust them if they're just gonna blow up in our face and we can't even ask them anything?" Several focus group participants agreed with the student who made the following comment: "They need to learn different ways of teaching, because they're stuck in their learning. There's different types of learning for different students. They need to learn different ones. That way, they could teach and help all the students and not just those with a certain learning style."

The qualifications of Senior Seminar teachers, in general, were criticized by some seniors. At American High School, seniors are required to take the Senior Seminar, which includes the creation of a portfolio and a presentation. A senior remarked bluntly: "[The Senior Seminar teachers] are retarded. They have no clue what they're doing. You ask them, 'What is this?' 'Oh, I don't know; I'm gonna have to ask somebody else.' If you're teaching Senior Seminar, then you should know what you're doing. They give [that class] to teachers, like coaches and any teacher who would take the class. . . . They have no idea. So then, when we come to turn in our portfolio or go do our presentation, we're lost, because our teachers didn't know anything."

Another senior gave a mixed rebuttal to complaints about the Senior Project and Senior Seminar teachers, arguing, "It's actually

a good learning experience for you guys because it does take you out into the real world. It shows you what you're gonna be doing; it shows you what you need to do. The class is pathetic because the teachers don't know what they're doing. But once you get out and actually do your project and do your paper, you learn a lot and you actually get out into the real world. It's a good experience."

How Their Teachers Perceived Them

Most students who completed the questionnaire believed that the majority of their teachers liked them personally, but black students, especially females, were almost twice as likely as whites to believe that most of their teachers didn't like them. Black and Latino males were also more likely than other students to say their teachers viewed them as troublemakers. Among the three major racial and ethnic groups of students in the study, in general, males were more likely than females to say their teachers viewed them as troublemakers, and black females and white females were less likely than Latinas to say their teachers viewed them as troublemakers. I will return to this topic in Chapter Seven.

In the earlier phase of the study, almost all the teachers said they believed that teachers' attitudes and expectations can affect student achievement, that they wanted all their students to succeed in their classes, and that they cared about students' academic and personal welfare. The overwhelming majority of the teachers said they believed that most of their students would become successful adults; however, nearly one-fourth admitted that they believed some students weren't capable of passing their classes, and more than one-fourth said that most of their students wouldn't reach grade-level standards by the end of the school year.

The majority of the students who completed the questionnaire also said that most of their teachers believed they had the potential to be good students, but Latinas and white males were less likely to agree that this was true. Most students also said that the majority of their teachers believed that they would become

successful adults, but black females and white males were less likely than other students to say this.

Caring Teachers

Although many of the students who participated in the study had a favorable opinion of their teachers, it was obvious that many others didn't. This was especially true when the students spoke about the topic of caring. In the earlier phase of the study, nearly all the teachers said they cared about their students' academic and personal success, but in the student phase of the study, nearly 40 percent of the questionnaire respondents said they didn't believe that most of their teachers cared. Blacks and Latinos were more likely than whites to believe that most of their teachers didn't care about them. Latinas were more likely than any group to believe that their teachers didn't care about them, and white males were the most likely to believe they did. During the focus groups, several participants commented on "teacher caring." One participant described her idea of a caring teacher as follows: "Caring teachers talk to you. My first period teacher, if she sees that you're sad, she'll ask you, 'What's wrong?' And she actually shows interest, not like some teachers that will say, 'What's wrong?' Then they cut you off halfway through when you're talking to them. She actually listens to you and she'll compare her own experiences with yours if she actually went through the same thing. She acts like a friend, but then, when she needs to be a teacher, she will be."

Another student equated caring with good instructional practices. She stated: "It's also the way they teach you. If they don't care, they'll just assign work, and then, they'll go to the back room, and do whatever. But if they actually stand up there and teach you, and you ask them something, they can be funny and sarcastic with you, but they will still help you, if they care."

Some focus group participants described teachers who actually admitted to students that they didn't care about them. For instance, one student remarked, "They'll tell you, 'I don't care. It's up to you

to pass your classes. If you don't, I'll still keep my job.' " Another student complained, "My math teacher screamed at the whole class that she didn't care if we failed; all she cared was that she was getting paid." One student summarized what many focus group participants expressed: "You can tell when they like teaching. You can tell the way they teach and the way they speak. You can tell that they're interested in wanting to teach you."

Teachers' Instructional Practices

Most of the teachers at American High School who participated in the first phase of the study had a very favorable opinion of their instructional practices. During the student phase of the study, several questionnaire items gave students an opportunity to share their views about specific aspects of their teachers' classroom practices that they liked or that they felt needed improvement.

Make the Course Work Comprehensible. Although the majority of the students said that most of their teachers did a good job of explaining class assignments, one-third disagreed; African Americans and Latinos were more likely than whites to disagree. In fact, black students were almost twice as likely as whites to say that most of their teachers didn't explain class assignments well.

Of the students who completed the questionnaire, 41 percent said that they were often confused about the work their teachers assigned. More than half the Latinas and nearly half the black females said they were often confused by the work their teachers assigned. During focus group discussions, several students made related comments. For example, one participant said, "My Health teacher, she just sits down, gives us the work, and she doesn't teach us nothing." A girl who participated in one of the first focus groups remarked, "People have different learning styles. So not everybody learns at the same rate or they learn different types of ways. The teachers should be able to explain it, because that's what they come to work for."

Another student stated:

> I would like for her to explain things, but she doesn't do that. Some of the teachers can explain the work to a point where you get it. Then, there are some teachers that just don't explain the work. They give you a page number and tell you what to work on and expect you to just go and work on it. Then, when you go ask them questions they say, "I just told you what to do and how to do it." But you just told me the page number to go work on. You didn't explain how to do it.

One focus group participant made a complaint that was common among students: "We need teachers who have patience in explaining things. I have a sixth-period math teacher. I asked her for help and she just read the directions from a paper. Every day, when we come to class, she looks like she's tired of seeing us and she wants to go home and not help us."

Give Extra Help. In the earlier phase of the study, nearly all the teachers said that their students knew they were available to give extra help on a regular basis, but one third of the students disagreed. White students were more likely than blacks and Latinos to say their teachers were willing to give extra help during class time. Females tended to be less likely than males to agree that this was true, and white males were most likely to agree. At the same time, African Americans and Latinos were more likely than whites to admit that they were often too embarrassed to ask their teachers for help. In fact, Latinos were four times more likely than whites, and blacks were three times more likely than whites, to say they were often too embarrassed to ask their teachers for help.

Respond to Students' Questions During Class Time. Nearly all the teachers claimed that they encouraged their students to ask questions on a regular basis, but one-fifth of the students believed that most of their teachers were not willing to answer questions if

they didn't understand an assignment. Once again, white students were more likely than students of color to agree that most of their teachers were willing to answer questions, and black students were least likely to agree. In fact, black students were eight times more likely and Latinos were seven times more likely than whites to indicate that most of their teachers weren't willing to answer questions if they were confused about class work.

Numerous focus group participants complained about this issue. For example, one student stated, "What I don't like is how the teachers will assign you work and then they'll get on the phone and talk to people and pay their bills. Then, when you ask a question, they'll say, 'Can't you see I'm on the phone?' That's not cool to me."

One girl remarked, "They should actually go over the stuff and answer questions. Some of them, if you ask a question, because you don't understand, they get irritated and they just don't want to answer your questions. They'll be just like, 'Oh, you should know.' "

Patience. A similar pattern emerged among the questionnaire results regarding patience. Although the majority of student questionnaire respondents agreed that their teachers were patient with them when they didn't understand an assignment, nearly 30 percent disagreed. Once again, there was a noticeable difference between the percentage of students of color who agreed and the percentage of whites, in that Latinos and blacks were a lot more likely to disagree.

According to one focus group participant, "They need to also have patience with students, because some teachers give up. They get into their teaching and they probably see students aren't taking it seriously. So, they're like, 'Fine, it's your grade, not mine. You do it.' They give up. A lot of teachers do that. I think they need to have more patience with us. It's not the whole class that doesn't want to learn. There are some students who do want to learn."

Another student summarized what many focus group participants implied: "They expect us to trust them, but how can we trust them if they're just gonna blow up in our face and we can't even ask

them anything?" Another focus group participant made a similar comment, stating, "Sometimes, the kids get out of control. That's why they lose their patience, but some of us, we need that patience, because some of us don't learn as fast."

Tying It All Together

Based on the study results that I presented in this chapter, it appears that most teachers at American High School had a favorable view of themselves and their students, and most students in the study had a favorable view of their teachers. However, students were less likely than teachers to have a positive impression of teachers. In some cases, there were distinct gender differences in how students responded to various questionnaire items, and in many cases, there were noticeable racial and ethnic differences, with higher percentages of African Americans and Latinos holding negative views of their teachers than whites. In other words, in a number of instances, students appeared to be having racialized and noticeably different schooling experiences and receiving differential treatment from teachers based on students' race and/or gender.

Two of the most troubling findings discussed in this chapter reveal that more than half the black and Latino students who completed the questionnaire said they wanted better teachers, and more than 40 percent didn't believe that most of their teachers cared about them. This first finding is especially important because it suggests that many teachers at American High School were not as effective as they thought they were or needed to be. In other words, they failed to meet the students' standard of "highly qualified" teacher even if they did meet that of the U.S. Department of Education.

The second finding is also noteworthy because some researchers have argued that students of color are more likely to be motivated to achieve academically when their teachers care about them on a personal and academic level. For example, in its study of high-performing, high-poverty schools in Kentucky, the Prichard

Committee for Academic Excellence identified seven common characteristics of high-performing schools. One of these characteristics involved relationships on campus. At the high-performing schools, "Respectful relationships were observed among adults, between adults and students, and among students."[19] Although this second finding may or may not have been correlated to the widespread student underachievement at American High School, the first undoubtedly was. As I stated earlier in this chapter, numerous researchers have maintained that teacher quality and student achievement are linked, and students know the difference between a good teacher and a bad one.

What We Can Do

In the next sections, I offer recommendations to administrators, teachers, parents, and policymakers.

Administrators

The research on high-performing, high-minority, high-poverty schools indicates that in these schools, administrators play an important role in improving students' academic performance. Most high-performing schools are led by effective school leaders who take a holistic and comprehensive approach to improving their schools. Providing adequate support for teachers and students is one way in which they do this.[20] Administrators must ensure that teachers have the resources, information, and technical assistance they need in order to teach well. But this isn't enough. They must also ensure that teachers have the right mind-set and attitudes about their students. To do this, administrators must first do their own personal and professional growth work in this area. If a school administrator, especially the principal, fundamentally believes that African American, Latino, Southeast Asian, Native American, and low-income white students are inferior to middle- and upper-class whites, this leader won't be effective in urban schools or

schools that are predominated by these groups—America's stepchildren. For one thing, such an administrator won't have high expectations because he or she believes that these groups aren't capable of academic excellence. Having high expectations is one of the hallmarks of high-performing schools.[21] An administrator with low expectations of students won't expect much from teachers either, and teachers with negative beliefs about these groups of students will be permitted to continue to promote inequality of educational opportunity through their low expectations. So before school administrators can create a school environment in which every student has caring and qualified teachers, each school administrator must do what I call "a checkup from the neck up": each administrator must examine his or her own mind-set about students, by asking the following questions:

- Do I truly believe that *all* students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic background, are capable of being academically successful?
- Do I believe that *all* students deserve outstanding teachers?
- Do I have negative beliefs about the students' home life and community that prevent me from seeing their academic potential?
- Do I treat students in the manner in which I would want my own children to be treated by educators?
- Do I treat students' parents respectfully, or do I try to intimidate them or minimize their concerns?
- Am I strongly committed to finding the information and resources that are necessary to improve student achievement at my school?
- Am I familiar with the research on high-performing, high-poverty, high-minority schools?
- What can I do to change any of my beliefs that might prevent me from truly improving student achievement at my school?

- Am I willing to continue to work on my own beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors on an ongoing basis?
- What individuals, books, articles, and other resources might help me improve in these areas?

After each administrator has begun to examine his or her personal beliefs that might keep him or her from becoming an effective school leader and has created a related action plan, the second step is to begin to help teachers improve specifically in the area of their beliefs and attitudes about students. A teacher who believes that certain students are lazy, dumb, culturally deprived, and undeserving of an outstanding education won't ever become a caring and effective teacher. Unfortunately, because of the strong influence of teachers' unions, rotten teachers who are ineffective and who have bad attitudes and negative beliefs about students are often permitted to spend their careers indulging in unprofessional and destructive behavior, especially in urban schools and high-poverty, high-minority schools—in other words, in schools that are predominated by America's stepchildren.

Ideally, principals should hire teachers who have good teaching skills and great attitudes about students. In reality, of course, some principals are placed at schools where there is already a strong and powerful contingent of negative teachers. Other principals are duped into hiring teachers who know the right things to say during a job interview but who show their true negative colors after they get hired. Negative teachers can thwart even the most well-meaning principal's school reform efforts. Therefore, principals must do their best to help these teachers become effective or, in the case of teachers who refuse to change, help them leave the school permanently. This requires courage and persistence on the principal's part. It may also require battling the teachers' union.

The principal should also address teachers' mind-sets and attitudes through mandatory professional development workshops that focus on these topics and through the principal's behavior and the messages that he or she gives to teachers about students and

expectations. After realizing that a teacher or group of teachers isn't willing to improve in these areas, the principal should start creating a paper trail by documenting negative comments and behaviors that go against the school's explicit vision statement for student achievement. Teachers' attitudes and behaviors should also be addressed during formal and informal evaluations conducted on a regular basis. One of the main reasons bad teachers are able to shortchange students academically is that in too many schools, the administrators rarely visit classrooms and are out of touch with what is really going on behind closed doors. Administrators should visit classrooms regularly, give deserving teachers positive feedback, and provide teachers who are struggling in any area—including their beliefs and attitudes about students—with the assistance they need.

Another way that administrators can help teachers improve in these areas is to believe students and parents when they complain about negative and ineffective teachers. When a pattern of complaint about a teacher's negative behavior begins to emerge, the worst thing a principal can do is to ignore the complaints. As the designated school leader, the principal has a professional obligation to investigate these complaints and help the teacher rectify counterproductive behaviors stemming from the teacher's negative beliefs.

Teachers

Like school administrators, teachers must be willing to examine their beliefs and attitudes that impede their efficacy with students. Teachers shouldn't wait until they're required to attend professional development workshops or conferences that address these topics. Every teacher walks into the classroom with a set of beliefs and attitudes that are a product of his or her socialization and upbringing, the media, and other influences. Because most Americans have been socialized to believe that whites are superior to people of color, and most teachers in the United States are white, teachers are very likely to bring negative "mental baggage" into the classroom with them that can have a detrimental effect on student learning and their

relations with students. Sadly, this problem is prevalent among teachers of color as well as white teachers. For example, on several occasions, various educators have complained to me about black teachers who didn't want to teach black kids and who made derogatory comments about the home lives of low-income black students. In *Black Students/Middle Class Teachers*, Jawanza Kunjufu writes extensively about black and white teachers who are ineffective with black students for a number of reasons.[22] This book should be required reading for all teachers, including Asian American and Latino teachers.

The first thing that teachers can do is to be honest with themselves as they examine their baggage. Many teachers remain in denial about their negative beliefs, but students can detect the truth. The three-part, long-term professional development plan that I included in *Through Ebony Eyes* is one resource that teachers can use in the privacy of their own home. Another is *Overcoming Our Racism: The Journey to Liberation*. In this outstanding book, Derald Wing Sue, a Chinese American professor who has studied racism for more than thirty years, includes many great exercises that educators can use to uncover their baggage and improve their teaching efficacy. Teachers should also read Gary Howard's *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know*.

One of the best strategies that teachers can use to work on their mind-sets and attitudes is to listen to messages from students and parents. When a parent or student accuses a teacher of being racist or uncaring, for instance, the teacher can choose to ignore the allegation, become defensive, or use it as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. Of course, parents and students can be wrong, and teachers can be falsely accused. However, when there are patterns and the same complaints keep surfacing, a wise teacher will examine his or her own behavior to try to identify the source of the problem.

Finally, to become highly qualified, teachers must

- Know their subject matter well
- Know how to make the subject matter interesting and comprehensible to students by using diverse teaching strategies

- Be well prepared on a daily basis
- Know how to write good lesson plans
- Write their objectives and agenda on the board each day
- Make their objectives clear to students
- Be willing to give extra help
- Have good classroom management skills
- Be patient with struggling students
- Give a "reasonable" amount of homework that is relevant to class work, tests, and quizzes
- Understand their students' cultures
- Genuinely care about students' personal and academic welfare

Teachers who need help in any of these areas must be honest with themselves and seek related information by reading professional literature; attending conferences and workshops; and requesting assistance from mentor teachers, good veteran teachers, and school administrators.

Parents

Parents should know their children well enough to be able to determine when a child is telling the truth and when he or she is lying. If a child who has previously loved school and loved his or her teachers starts to complain about a specific teacher, a parent should pay close attention. Parents who are able to visit the classroom and observe what's going on should do so. Asking the child for specific reasons why he or she dislikes a teacher is another strategy. Sometimes a child who has been subjected to low expectations by teachers in the past may assume that a teacher with high expectations and a rigorous curriculum is being mean. In that case, the parent should explain that the teacher with high expectations believes that the child is smart enough to rise to the challenge. If the child is struggling, the parent should find ways to assist the child through

tutoring, helping with homework, buying related workbooks, and so on, and asking the teacher for additional strategies. However, if a child says that a teacher is singling him or her out, engaging in unfair disciplinary practices, making racist or sexist comments, not giving extra help to struggling students, or embarrassing students who ask for help, the parent should be assertive. Contacting the child's counselor or the school principal, and even insisting that the student be transferred to another class are options that the parent should consider.

Policymakers

One specific way that policymakers can increase the likelihood that students will have caring and effective teachers is to enact policies that make it easier for school principals to get rid of bad teachers. Another is to make the improvement of low-performing schools—which of course are usually situated in high-minority, low-income communities and populated by America's stepchildren—a national priority in word and deed. This is a recommendation that I will make repeatedly in the remaining chapters of this book.

Policymakers must be willing to address systemic problems in the communities surrounding underperforming schools. These problems often affect students' learning and behavior at school, and increase the likelihood of teacher attrition. When a low-performing school has a high rate of teacher turnover, principals become desperate to hire teachers and often have to settle for underqualified candidates. Underqualified teachers are unlikely to have the knowledge, skills, and experience needed to prepare students for standardized tests or to offer them an outstanding quality of instruction. As long as policymakers refuse to provide adequate funding to resolve many of the problems in low-income communities and their schools, true reform will never occur in America. Instead, America's stepchildren will continue to be viewed and treated as second-class citizens and forced to attend second-, third-, and fourth-rate schools.

A Final Word

In every profession and organization, many employees would be considered average in terms of their productivity and the quality of their work. There are also employees who are slackers. These people do mediocre work or the bare minimum required to keep their jobs. Then there are the overachievers—employees who go beyond the call of duty. They work hard and try to do their very best. I have met numerous educators who fall into each of these three categories.

Recently, after one of my presentations, I met an individual with a negative attitude toward students. This new teacher, a young white man, taught at a predominantly Latino school. Throughout my presentation, I had noticed that he looked bored and sometimes even downright hostile. Afterwards, he approached me to tell me that he hadn't learned one valuable thing during the entire four-hour presentation. Why he chose to stay for the duration when he could have walked out is a mystery to me. As I listened to him speak, I gradually learned more about his background and how his own schooling experiences had affected his attitude toward his students.

He said he'd grown up in a farming community in the northwest and had had a difficult childhood. At school, he was a marginal student who felt that his teachers didn't care about him. In spite of this, he had somehow eventually gotten his life together, earned a college degree, and entered the teaching force. For some reason, the difficulties he had experienced during his own childhood hadn't created a sense of caring or empathy in him toward other students who were experiencing hardship. At the time of our discussion, he was teaching at a high-poverty school in a community in which unemployment and crime rates were high. When I told him that he was in a position to make a lasting positive impact on his students, he coldly replied, "No one helped *me* when *I* was growing up. *I* had to do it all by myself. Why should *I* help *them?*"

His reply unnerved me, but it also convinced me that there was no way that I'd be able to change this man's mind-set about

his students. After all, if he had "listened" to a four-hour presentation that I'd just given and hadn't learned anything useful from it, how likely was it that the follow-up conversation would really matter? His mind was made up, and at best all I could do was give him advice that was in his students' best interest: "You teach at a school where the kids really need good, caring teachers," I said. "Please do me a favor and leave that school. With your attitude, you're going to do a lot of damage, because I'm sure your students have already realized that you don't care about them."

In the twenty-four years that I've been an educator, I've met many teachers who behaved as if they didn't care about students' personal or academic welfare, especially students from low-income backgrounds and black and Latino students. But these were usually veteran teachers—teachers who were suffering from burnout, hopelessness, and an underlying fear that they weren't effective. Of course, some of these individuals were color-blind racists—teachers who were in denial about their own fundamental belief that blacks and Latinos are cognitively inferior and culturally deprived, and who engaged in grade inflation and had low expectations as a result of their deficit mind-set. But I'd never heard a *new teacher* say outright that he didn't really care about his students.

Although there are far too many educators who have negative attitudes about their students and aren't willing to go the extra mile, I'm grateful that there are countless others who choose to be different. Of all the presentations that I'm invited to give at schools and conferences throughout the nation, my very favorite presentation is called "Becoming a Life-Changing, Powerful, Influential Teacher of Children from Challenging Backgrounds." During this resiliency presentation, I get to describe educators who try to make a lasting impact on students. One of my favorite stories is about a white vice principal who became a strong advocate for children who were being mislabeled and mistreated.

When I first met him, he worked at a predominantly white school that had an unwelcoming attitude toward black children who were bused to the school from a low-income neighborhood.

Predictably, the same things that happen at schools throughout the nation began to occur quickly at that school: black students, especially boys, were labeled as troublemakers, and teachers were kicking them out of class on a regular basis. But the vice principal decided to become proactive. Although he didn't receive extra pay for choosing to go the extra mile and becoming an advocate for the children who were being mistreated, he made a choice to do so anyway. Besides trying to serve as a mentor to several of these students, the vice principal tried to help teachers see when they were unfairly targeting black students and overreacting to behaviors that they ignored in white children. He also created a formal mentoring program in which he encouraged retired adults to come to the school to work one-on-one with struggling students.

During my resiliency presentation, I tell many similar stories about great educators. My goal is to convince the audience that each teacher and administrator can *choose* to make a positive impact on students. In addition to telling them about educators who have done this, I also tell them about students who benefited from having powerful, influential, life-changing teachers. I tell them about Mrs. Tessem, my sixth-grade teacher, and about how her dedication changed the course of my life, and I tell about many others, such as Gavin De Becker.

De Becker had a horrific childhood. His mother was not only addicted to drugs but also mentally unstable, and got involved with a string of abusive and dysfunctional men. At an early age, like many children from troubled homes, De Becker had to find a way to survive in the midst of this turmoil. One of his teachers stood out above the rest and changed his life. Today, instead of being a failure, De Becker is an extremely successful business owner and author, and is an expert on stalkers and serial killers.[23]

All students deserve to have great teachers and an outstanding K–12 education. Unfortunately, this is not the experience of countless students throughout the nation, especially America's stepchildren. Instead of shaking our heads and ignoring the situation, there is much work that each adult can do to bring about reform.