

Confronting Double Standards By Hazel K. Palmer

I'll never forget the day when my daughter looked at me and asked, "*Mom, why do you make me keep my room cleaner than you make David keep his room?*" It was an excellent question and I had no acceptable answer. As someone who does not believe in a double standard, I had thought my behavior was vigilantly equitable. Somehow, an artifact of growing up in the 50s and 60s had sneaked out of my subconscious and left me with egg on my face.

Some high school students apparently believe they are being treated differently, too, according to the latest research by The Education Alliance, West Virginia's statewide public education fund. In eight focus groups conducted in 2004 involving 62 African American and low-income white students, students were asked about their school experiences and their explanation for the achievement gap. Both high-achieving and low-achieving students were involved in the focus groups in this study at four rural and urban high schools to learn what West Virginia students think about the achievement gap. This original research entitled, "Student Voice: West Virginia Students Speak Out About the Achievement Gap," is both thought provoking and disheartening for anyone who believes that every child should be provided an equal chance to succeed.

In the focus groups, students talked about favored treatment, such as deadline extensions and more attention in class for wealthier students, white students and athletes. They also discussed their perception that less effective teaching strategies, such as more worksheets and boring presentations, are utilized with low-income white and African American students. They talked about how they feel teachers and administrators have lower expectations for them and how they believe they are assigned to "left over" classes.

Regardless of the location or subgroup of student, there was an unexpected consensus that student achievement would improve if all students were treated with respect and given regular encouragement. All groups indicated that a variety of teaching strategies should be employed to help students with different learning styles, higher expectations should be uniformly applied to all students, and that assistance with course selection and scheduling must be readily available to all students. They agreed that parental support is essential, but not all students have that support.

Students are not alone in identifying many of these areas for needed improvement. In an on-going statewide effort to encourage communities to develop ways to support quality teaching, we are learning that teachers, parents, business and community members agree about needed actions. In general, they feel the public needs to be more appreciative of teachers; supportive of improved teacher salaries, benefits and evaluation; engaged in public education; and hold higher expectations for student learning.

Because I raised a son and a daughter, I learned a valuable lesson about having different expectations for my children. That question asked decades ago made me uncomfortable — but I dealt with it. Like my daughter, some West Virginia students are pointing to

areas of unequal treatment. Their comments are valuable — and we should deal with them.

Hazel Palmer, Ed.D. is President/CEO of The Education Alliance, a statewide nonprofit committed to higher achievement for every student. She can be reached at hpalmer@educationalliance.org.