



Written by [Walter E. Williams](#) on July 10, 2013

Black Education Tragedy

As if more evidence were needed about the tragedy of black education, Rachel Jeantel, a witness for the prosecution in the George Zimmerman murder trial, put a face on it for the nation to see. Some of that evidence unfolded when Zimmerman's defense attorney asked 19-year-old Jeantel to read a letter that she allegedly had written to Trayvon Martin's mother. She responded that she doesn't read cursive, and that's in addition to her poor grammar, syntax and communication skills.



Jeantel is a senior at Miami Norland Senior High School. How in the world did she manage to become a 12th-grader without being able to read cursive writing? That's a skill one would expect from a fourth-grader. Jeantel is by no means an exception at her school. Here are a few achievement scores from her school: Thirty-nine percent of the students score basic for reading, and 38 percent score below basic. In math, 37 percent score basic, and 50 percent score below basic. Below basic is the score when a student is unable to demonstrate even partial mastery of knowledge and skills fundamental for proficient work at his grade level. Basic indicates only partial mastery.

Few Americans, particularly black Americans, have any idea of the true magnitude of the black education tragedy. The education establishment might claim that it's not their fault. They're not responsible for the devastation caused by female-headed families, drugs, violence and the culture of dependency. But they are totally responsible for committing gross educational fraud. It's educators who graduated Jeantel from elementary and middle school and continued to pass her along in high school. It's educators who will, in June 2014, confer upon her a high-school diploma.

It's not just Florida's schools. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, nationally most black 12th-graders test either basic or below basic in reading, writing, math and science. Drs. Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom wrote in their 2004 book, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, "Blacks nearing the end of their high school education perform a little worse than white eighth-graders in both reading and U.S. history, and a lot worse in math and geography." Little has changed since the book's publication.

Drexel University history and political science professor George Ciccariello-Maher disapprovingly says



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that the reaction to Jeantel's court performance "has been in terms of aesthetics, of disregarding a witness on the basis of how she talks, how good she is at reading and writing." Harking back to Jim Crow days, he adds: "These are subtle things that echo literacy testing at the polls, echo the question of whether black Americans can testify against white people, of being always suspect in their testimony. It's the same old dynamics emerging in a very different guise." Then there's Morgan Polikoff, assistant professor of education at the University of Southern California, who says: "Cursive should be allowed to die. In fact, it's already dying, despite having been taught for decades." That's the kind of educational philosophy that accounts for much of our nation's educational decline.

The educational system and black family structure and culture have combined to make increasing numbers of young black people virtually useless in the increasingly high-tech world of the 21st century. Too many people believe that pouring more money into schools will help. That's whistlin' "Dixie." Whether a student is black or white, poor or rich, there are some minimum requirements that must be met in order to do well in school. Someone must make the student do his homework, see to it that he gets a good night's sleep, fix a breakfast, make sure he gets to school on time and make sure he respects and obeys his teachers. Here are my questions: Which one of those requirements can be achieved through a higher school budget? Which can be achieved by politicians? If those minimal requirements aren't met, whatever else is done is mostly for naught.

I hope Rachel Jeantel's court performance is a wake-up call for black Americans about the devastation wrought by our educational system.

Walter E. Williams is a professor of economics at George Mason University. To find out more about Walter E. Williams and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate Web page at www.creators.com.

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