

Missing the Point – Say thanks, but no thanks to “affirmative action.”

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Going on to college? She wants to and has the potential, but may not be qualified. (Shutterstock)

For those of you – everywhere, but in Baltimore in particular – who are still experiencing the disadvantages of being denied a quality college education, you may not like what you’re about to read. I’m sorry for that but, while it may be too late to correct the inequities you’ve endured, it’s not too late for us to do a whole lot better for the next generation of public school children.

In March of 1961, then President John Kennedy signed [Executive Order 10925](#). It mandated, in part, that government contractors “*will take **affirmative action** to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin.*” And that began the still ongoing confusion and debate over one way that America might right the wrongs of long-term, continuing systemic racial discrimination.

Unfortunately, sixty-two years later, there may be no better example of well-meaning people doing the wrong thing for the right reasons.

Of course, there is no question that employers – whatever services or products they provide – should be fair, should not discriminate in their hiring and labor management practices. Discrimination is not only inconsistent with our founding principles of personal freedom. It doesn’t make any sense from a business point of view. You hire the best people you can afford to do the job for which you are engaging their services,

regardless of what they look like. The only legitimate basis for discrimination is whether or not they are technically qualified to do the work.

That was the idea, sixty-two years ago.

But then, somewhere along the line, affirmative action, which was originally about employment, has been more broadly applied to all manner of efforts to assure equal opportunity, including access to higher education. Without question, people of color, most notably African Americans, have been under-represented among the student bodies of our colleges and universities. In turn, this lack of diversity has prevented people who weren't able to attend college from being technically qualified for better jobs, for higher paying career positions that require a college degree.

And so, to correct this inequity, institutions of higher education took it upon themselves to establish quotas to make sure Black Americans were included in a properly diverse student body. Quota systems were eventually [ruled unconstitutional](#) by the Supreme Court – because those quotas were, in and of themselves, discriminatory – and replaced with less specific “goals,” but the basic objective was the same. If Black Americans represent 14% of our population, well then, they should have approximately the same representation on our college campuses and at graduating ceremonies.

At first, it makes sense, but then it doesn't. If colleges don't discriminate by race when admitting students and ***if enough qualified Black high school graduates apply***, then random, non-discriminatory selection from among all qualified applicants should result in student bodies that reflect the overall population. A program for affirmative action shouldn't be necessary – except, of course, to assure non-discriminatory behavior on the part of college admissions committees. Unfortunately, and here's the rub, there aren't enough qualified Black high school graduates. “Qualified” is the key word.

And that brings our discussion to the public schools of Baltimore City which are [currently ranked](#) last in the state behind all twenty-three of the counties. Dead last in the state. Now how, on earth, do you think Baltimore's Black public school students – those of them who actually graduate high school – can compete for college admissions with high school graduates from the other counties? ...[For your information](#), only 68.7% of Baltimore City high school students graduate. It's the lowest percentage among all 24 of Maryland's County/major city School Districts.

How, in other words, does affirmative action benefit students who have graduated from Baltimore City public schools? Who does it help? What's the point of having under-qualified Baltimore City high school graduates apply to colleges where they can't compete? Where, if the college admissions process fair and reasonable, they're not going to be accepted?

The fact is, affirmative action as a concept for adjusting the mix of college students to correct for social inequities is unnecessary and too late in the process. We, the

people, feel bad. Meaning well, we give the people we feel bad about a token program. And then go back to whatever we were doing. I know that's harsh, but not as harsh as allowing the inequities we're trying to address to continue indefinitely. Baltimore's public schools today are no better, and perhaps worse, in relative and absolute terms, than they were sixty-two years ago.

Affirmative action doesn't make any sense. It's outright patronizing and insulting. It's an embarrassment in the world of social programming. You can't correct the inequities we're talking about by waiting until minority students graduate (or don't) from high school. The real and enduring fix needs to start in preschool and play itself out as the next generation of high school graduates progresses from K through 12.

What does it mean to be last in the state and no doubt well behind so many, if not most of the public school systems in the country? It means that many potentially well-qualified kids – had they been better educated – won't read as well. May not graduate high school. And, for those who do, won't communicate verbally and in writing as effectively. Won't develop the cognitive, quantitative and creative skills on a par with predominantly White students graduating elsewhere. Won't be able to compete with other college applicants, giving admissions committees the perfect, legitimate excuse, to deny these students the access they need to realize their full potential. And that's a huge and unacceptable loss for all Americans.

Attending public schools ranked last in the state is a permanent, life-long disadvantage no affirmative action program, however well-meaning, will ever overcome.

It's been sixty-two years since Executive Order 10925. Can you imagine the difference it would make now had the program back then focused on improving public education from preschool on up, more than two generations ago? Fixing the Baltimore City schools will take the better part of a generation. That's unfortunate, but effecting a permanent solution to such an important problem takes significant resources, a clear and determined focus on the root causes of the problem – and time. The time to do it right.

When it comes to education, the concept of affirmative action misses the point and continues to waste the potential of large and important segments of our greater society that have already suffered enough.

In any case, affirmative action may be [on the verge of elimination](#) by the Supreme Court. Whatever the Court's reasoning, it's not a passing that deserves to be mourned. If only I had a scintilla of confidence that Congress will replace it with something more useful.

-Les Cohen

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