

Mayor Kevin Johnson Warns of 'Crisis' in Education

Written by Judith Browne Dianis
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The education of Blacks has reached a state of crisis that demands a strong response from all African-Americans, Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson told members of the National Newspaper Publishers Association at its annual convention here.

“We have a crisis when it comes to public education in this country,” Johnson said at a luncheon on Friday. “Only 52 percent of our third- and fourth-graders are reading at grade level. If you’re Black, only 16 percent of our kids in the third and fourth grade are reading at grade level – only 16 percent. To make matters worse, if you’re not reading at grade level by the time you leave the third grade, 75 percent of the kids never catch up.”

Johnson continued, “So, essentially if you can’t read by the time you leave the third grade, the chances of you ever reading is very slim. This should be enough to outrage every single person in this room when 84 percent of the kids who look like us cannot read.”

Johnson, a former star point guard for the Phoenix Suns, is president of the National Conference of Black Mayors and is slated to become president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors next year. He is passionate about education, setting up his own private school in Sacramento prior to becoming Sacramento’s first Black mayor.

“That’s the third grade. Let’s fast forward to the eighth grade. Eight years ago, only 12 percent of our kids in the eighth grade could read at grade level. In the last eight years, we went from 12

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percent to 14 percent. In an 8-year period of time, we’ve closed the gap two percentage points,” he said. “... If our goal was 80 percent and continues at the rate of 2 percent [every eight years], it will take us 248 years before 80 percent of the kids of color can read at grade level.”

A gap between Blacks and Whites exists even after high school graduation, Johnson observed.



“When we do graduate from high school – which is one out of two Black kids – if you’re White, 75 or 80 percent graduate from high school,” he said. “If you’re Black or Latino, one out of two of us graduate. When we graduate, the sad reality – we’re thankful to those who graduate – we’re at the same academic level as a White kid in the eighth grade. This is our reality. Shame on us who are not talking about it.”

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Noting that 75 percent of all inmates cannot read, Johnson said there is a direct correlation between illiteracy and imprisonment.

"I know some of us got nice clothes, drive a cool car and live in good neighborhoods," the former NBA star said. "That's not enough. We win and we lose as a race. It's going to take all of us collectively to do our part to change those dismal numbers."

Even with a Black president, Johnson said, African-Americans still face serious challenges.

"Racism is not something of the past," he said. "It is still as prevalent today as it has ever been." And he said African-Americans look to the Black press to represent the best interests of the Black community.

Johnson said, "The role of the Black press is more important today than it has ever been, in my opinion."