

Basic Black

This independent school is turning around many troubled Black students.

By Paul Dodds

Before the debate about Black-focused schools goes much further, it would be instructive to take a look at Shiloh Christian Institute in Brampton. It's been a Black-focused school for more than 10 years.

Shiloh Christian Institute is an independent school run by an expatriate Jamaican teacher. The student body is Black, as is the vast majority of the staff. Not by design, but by necessity, Shiloh has become, at the secondary level, a school of last resort.

The students who come there have usually gotten themselves into trouble both academically and behaviourally in the public system. Some have been banned from attending any school operated by their local school board.

The school enforces strict discipline. Students are required to be neat and wear a uniform, including dress shoes and tie. Boys cannot have long hair; girls are not allowed to wear jewelry or make-up.

Every student is required to have a homework assignment book in which all tasks are listed. This book is signed by the teacher after each class and is available to parents wanting to check on their children's progress.

One advantage to a Black-focused school is that the issue of racism disappears. In their old schools, these students often complained that the discipline meted out to them was based on race.

At a "Black" school, the issue of race simply disappears. In fact, a remarkable bond among students develops. More than I have seen in any other school setting, these students genuinely want their fellow students to succeed.

Their applause for each others' achievements is spontaneous and boisterous. In many public schools under-achieving Black students bond to encourage each other not to conform to the school's discipline and expecta-

tions — represented by white teachers and administrators. To these students, working hard at school is to play the white man's game and betray their friends.

In a school with Black students and staff, this formula changes. Superior academic performance no longer represents a "betrayal" of friends and race.



Shiloh is effective because it has a family atmosphere.

It is small, the principal knows each student and parent personally. This is crucial in matters of discipline. Students at the school are disciplined for seemingly small offences involving tardiness, appearance or manners that no public school would dare punish.

At the same time, students can be forgiven offences that in other schools would see them expelled. The decision is based not on an inflexible code of discipline laid down by some distant board, but involves the personal knowledge and understanding held by staff about that particular student.

Discipline is respected by troublesome students when they realize that it is based on concern for the well-being of the student as an individual.

Black students in the Toronto area are overwhelmingly of Caribbean origin where family life, discipline and personal communications follow certain patterns.

Caribbean-Canadian teachers at Shiloh fully understand these patterns and use them for more effective communication, discipline and motivation every day.

A low student-teacher ratio is another essential element. The seriously alienated student almost always lacks fundamental skills. The student often reacts with embarrassment and anger at this weakness. The only effective instruction involves direct one-on-one involvement from a teacher outside the usual classroom setting.

Yet even Shiloh is not able to help every youth in trouble. Many students know within hours of arriving that they simply cannot meet the expectations of behaviour and academia. These students are free to depart and many do leave. But many others do make remarkable turnarounds in their academic progress and behaviour.

Considerable challenges face any public board seeking to establish an effective school for alienated students. Teachers' unions stand in the way of selecting the best teachers, regardless of seniority.

At Shiloh, some of the finest teachers do not have teaching certificates; in the public system these teachers could not even have been hired.

School board budgets dictate against the low student-teacher ratio needed for success. A disciplinary regime that is not inflexibly controlled by a set of objective rules would probably run afoul of our courts.

Yet, the remarkable difference that such a school can make in the lives of young people is most certainly worth overcoming these obstacles.

(Adapted with permission from "Here's one that's working", Toronto Star, Sept. 16, 2005. Mr. Dodds is a lawyer and teacher who taught At Shiloh Christian Institute for five years. He can be reached at pauldoddstoronto@yahoo.ca.)