

Million mentor march

More minorities must volunteer to help make education relevant

It's not a black thing.

Just ask Larry Sullivan, superintendent of the LaVega Independent School District. As a neighbor district to the Waco ISD, his is an interesting perspective on race and achievement.

Sullivan says that in his district achievement levels track income levels more than race. Why? Because a higher percentage of his black and brown students are in middle- or upper-income levels than those in an inner-city district. Test scores reflect it.

Sullivan knows that minorities achieve at rates comparable to white peers if they come from comparable economic or educational backgrounds.

What does that mean in Waco schools, where low math scores by blacks have the two high schools at risk of being rated low-performing? It means, quite obviously, that the WISD has the very toughest challenge society knows: to take a child of grinding poverty and give that child hope.

'Tis the season of false comparisons. The TAAS scores come out and inner-city schools get battered like rocks on a stormy seashore. Tide in. Tide out.

False comparisons. Compare a student who lives in a \$150,000 house and one who lives in the projects. Compare one who has his own car and home computer with one whose family has neither. Compare one with two well-educated parents at home to one whose only parent at home didn't finish ninth grade.

Nothing about these children's environments is similar. We don't expect it to be — until TAAS scores come around. Then somehow we are to compare. It's bunk. Worse, it's poisonous bunk.

Enough excuses

Of course, one valid comparison is how a district improves on what it has, an area in which the WISD has made some strides but obviously has great deficiencies. It is unacceptable that only 21 percent of blacks at Waco High and 24 percent of blacks at University High passed the TAAS math portion.

While the school district continues to ratchet up its emphasis on this sore subject, as it should, the whole community needs to re-examine its role.



JOHN YOUNG
Opinion page editor

We've seen the formulation of Project Exodus — minorities threatening a breakaway district — as a response to what some consider an intractable WISD administration. Obviously minorities have very real concerns.

We've also seen the Million Man March, the professed and encouraging assertion of a new role of responsibility for black males.

All along I've wondered: With such expressed concern, what are citizens *doing* as individuals in our community to make things better?

They have outlets, like Adopt-a-School. Unfortunately, minorities in general are vastly under-represented in this volunteer effort, and not for lack of effort by the WISD to bring them aboard. A few concerned members of the Heart of Texas Black Chamber of Commerce tried to get a partnership rolling, but it fizzled. So, too, with the Central Texas Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

Similarly, predominantly black or Hispanic churches have been reluctant to get involved despite entreaties from WISD. Exceptions include St. Luke AME, Second Missionary Baptist Church, the Mighty Wind Worship Center and Omega Psi Phi.

And though volunteers span the social spectrum for the Bernard and Audre Rapoport Foundation "Waco 1000" drive to enlist tutors, the vast majority are white. And check the rolls of your local PTA. Minorities are the majority in WISD, but it's not reflected by PTA membership.

Yes, Waco schools need to do better tending to the needs of the economically disadvantaged. Yes, ultimately, they can't use ethnicity and poverty as excuses.

But neither are those conditions an excuse for citizens who don't care, who don't step up to help, who'd rather be pouters than partners. If you care, say so with your feet. Step up. Don't walk away.

John Young's column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday.