

2017 BLACK HISTORY MONTH THEME

(as established by the Association for the Study of African American Life & History)

The Crisis in Black Education

Executive Summary 2017

The theme for 2017 focuses on the crucial role of education in the history of African Americans. ASALH's founder Carter G. Woodson once wrote that "if you teach the Negro that he has accomplished as much good as any other race he will aspire to equality and justice without regard to race." Woodson understood well the implications associated with the denial of access to knowledge, and he called attention to the crisis that resulted from persistently imposed racial barriers to equal education. The crisis in black education first began in the days of slavery when it was unlawful for slaves to learn to read and write. In pre-Civil War northern cities, free blacks were forced as children to walk long distances past white schools on their way to the one school relegated solely to them. Whether by laws, policies, or practices, racially separated schools remained the norm in America from the late nineteenth century well into our own time.

Throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century and continuing today, the crisis in black education has grown significantly in urban neighborhoods where public schools lack resources, endure overcrowding, exhibit a racial achievement gap, and confront policies that fail to deliver substantive opportunities. The touted benefits of education remain elusive to many blacks of all ages. Tragically, some poorly performing schools serve as pipelines to prison for youths.

Yet, African American history is rich in centuries-old efforts of resistance to this crisis: the slaves' surreptitious endeavors to learn; the rise of black colleges and universities after the Civil War; unrelenting battles in the courts; the black history movement; the freedom schools of the 1960s; and local community-based academic and mentorship programs that inspire a love of learning and thirst for achievement. Addressing the crisis in black education should be considered one of the most important goals in America's past, present, and future.