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## Education, Education, Education

By BOB HERBERT

It's an article of faith that the key to success in real estate is location, location, location.

For young black boys looking ahead to a difficult walk in life, the mantra should be education, education, education.

We've watched for decades -- watched in horror, actually -- as the lives of so many young blacks, men and boys especially, have been consumed by drugs, crime, poverty, ignorance, racial prejudice, misguided social pressures, and so on.

At the same time, millions of blacks have thrived, building strong families and successful careers at rates previously unseen. By far, the most important difference between these two very large groups has been educational attainment.

If anything, the role that education plays in the life prospects of black Americans is even more dramatic than in the population as a whole. It's the closest thing to a magic potion for black people that I can think of. For boys and men, it is often the antidote to prison or an early grave.

A new report from the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston tells us that young adults in general have been struggling in the labor market. Many have been left behind by the modest economic recovery of the past few years, especially those with limited education credentials.

The report, which focuses on black males, emphasizes the importance of education in overcoming this tough employment environment:

"For males in each of the three race-ethnic groups (blacks, Hispanics and whites), employment rates in 2005 increased steadily and strongly with their educational attainment. This was especially true for black males, for whom employment rates rose from a low of 33 percent among high school dropouts to 57 percent among high school graduates, and to a high of 86 percent among four-year college graduates.

"The fact that only one of every three young black male high school dropouts was able to obtain any type of job during an average month in 2005 should be viewed as particularly distressing, since many of these young men will end up being involved in criminal activities during their late teens and early 20s and then bear the severe economic consequences for convictions and incarcerations over the remainder of their working lives."

There is no way, in my opinion, for blacks to focus too much or too obsessively on education. It's the fuel that powers not just the race for success but the quest for a happy life. It represents the flip side of failure.

The differences in rates of employment between white men and black men narrow considerably as black men gain additional schooling. After comparing the percentage of the male population that is employed in each race or ethnic group, the Northeastern study found:

The gap in [employment to population] ratios between young white and black males narrows from 20 percentage points among high school dropouts, to 16 percentage points among high school graduates, to eight percentage points among those men completing 1-3 years of college, and to only two percentage points for four-year college graduates."

For anyone deluded enough to question whether education is the ticket to a better life for black boys and men, consider that a black male who drops out of high school is 60 times more likely to find himself in prison than one with a bachelor's degree.

Black males who graduate from a four-year college will make, over the course of a lifetime, more than twice the mean earnings of a black high school graduate, which is a difference of more than a million dollars.

According to the study, "Black males with college degrees and strong literacy/math skills also are far more likely to marry and live with their children and pay substantially more in taxes to state and national government than they receive in cash and in-kind benefits."

This is not a close-call issue. It is becoming very hard for anyone to succeed in this society without a college education. To leave school without even a high school education, as so many males -- and especially black males -- are doing, is extremely self-destructive.

The effort to bolster the educational background of black men has to begin very early. It's extremely difficult to turn a high school dropout into a college graduate. This effort can only succeed on a large scale if there is a cultural change in the black community -- a powerful change that acknowledges as the 21st century unfolds that there is no more important life tool for black children than education, education, education.