

*Become a Chalkbeat sponsor*

**Chalkbeat** *NATIONAL*

*Essential education reporting across America*

# 'Dysfunctional homes,' 'Play the radio': When Biden talks about poverty and parenting, criticism often follows

By *Kalyn Belsha* February 28, 2020



*Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden speaks at a town hall meeting in Sumter, South Carolina in February 2020.*

**PHOTO CREDIT: Jim Watson/AFP via Getty Images**



**Never miss out on the latest education news from across America. Subscribe to our National newsletter.**

*Email address*

**Subscribe**

Joe Biden confused debate-watchers this summer when, in a response to a question about how to remedy the legacy of slavery, he instructed parents to turn on their record players so that “kids hear words.”

He shocked and frustrated a group of black mayors last year when he said one problem the black community faces is that “parents can’t read or write,” according to a [New York Times report](#).

And he drew heat for seeming to equate low-income children with children of color at a campaign stop in Iowa last year. “Poor kids are just as bright and just as talented as white kids,” Biden said.

*Become a Chalkbeat sponsor*

“I meant to say ‘wealthy,’” he told reporters at the time, noting he quickly corrected himself. “I don’t think anybody thinks that I meant anything” else.

The former vice president has long been criticized for his tendency to make gaffes. But over the course of his latest presidential bid, Biden has made a series of statements referring to black parents and students from low-income families that have been seen as tone-deaf or racist — enough for some to see a broader pattern.

It’s a striking one, given how crucial African American support is to Biden’s campaign heading into this Saturday’s primary election in South Carolina, where the Democratic electorate is majority black. And while many of Biden’s black supporters say occasional off-color statements shouldn’t overshadow his legislative record — which includes fighting racial discrimination on many fronts — others say his words feed harmful narratives about the causes of educational inequality.

“From my standpoint, it does matter,” said William Darity Jr., a professor of public policy, economics, and African and African American studies at Duke University. The repetition of these ideas, he said, “does affect the kind of social policies we choose to adopt.”

The Biden campaign did not respond to a request for comment. In the past, Biden and his campaign have said his comments were calling attention to differences of class, not race, or were made in reference to his family’s personal experiences.

Bebe Coker, a longtime education activist in Biden’s home state of Delaware, says she understands people could be offended if they didn’t know Biden or his work.

“He was there with us,” she said of her fight to pass laws against racial discrimination in housing and public accommodations when Biden was in the Delaware legislature. “He sees humanity as humanity.”

Coker, who is black, sees Biden’s words as an attempt to highlight the struggles of children in poverty and the need for schools to better serve them. “Whether you

like it or not,” she said, “he’s telling the truth.”

## His language has evoked stereotypes about black families

One of the major problems with Biden’s comments, critics say, is that they sometimes recall a racist stereotype that black families are dysfunctional — whether he means to or not.

During the third debate of this Democratic primary cycle last September, a moderator [asked Biden](#) about race and inequality in schools, mentioning [a 1975 interview](#) about school segregation in which he said he did not “feel responsible for the sins of my father and grandfather.” Then she asked what Americans should do “to repair the legacy of slavery in our country.”

In response, Biden spoke about his education plan, drawing attention to his proposals to triple federal funding for low-income schools, raise teacher pay, and bring “social workers into homes” to help parents “deal with how to raise their children” — likely a reference to his [plan to expand a home-visiting program](#) aimed at improving school readiness.

“It’s not that they don’t want to help,” Biden said of parents. “They don’t know quite what to do.”

While Biden didn’t explicitly say the families who need help raising their children are black, [some interpreted it](#) that way because his answers came in response to a question about slavery and reparations.

A few months later, in a December [interview](#) with the New York Times editorial board, Biden was pressed again about how the country should confront its legacy of slavery. He made a similar pivot, mentioning black parents.

“I remember how much trouble Barack [Obama] got in when he said that parents, black parents, should take responsibility,” Biden responded. “That wasn’t my point. My point was to make it clear that there are a number of things we can do now to help parents who have been disadvantaged as a consequence

of lack of opportunity, to be able to provide more guidance and better guidance for themselves and their families.”

That emphasis on parenting reinforces thinking that there is something “culturally pathological about black Americans,” said Darity — thinking that has played a prominent role in American culture and politics for decades, from racist scholarly writings in the 19th century that argued black Americans were culturally inferior to the influential 1965 Moynihan report, which said black poverty was rooted in a high rate of single-parent households.

As Biden noted, Obama also faced criticism for comments he made as a presidential candidate about black families and fathers.

“For the African American community, that path [forward] means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past,” Obama said in his famous 2008 speech about race. “And it means taking full responsibility for our own lives — by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them.”

## He zeroes in on parent literacy and ‘word gaps’

Biden has also faced criticism for implying that black Americans struggle to read, affecting their ability to help their children.

In response to the Times’ question about how the country should address the legacy of slavery, Biden told a story about his father — a “well-read, high-school-educated guy” — not wanting to tour colleges with his son because he was embarrassed he hadn’t attended college himself. Then he mentioned his wife’s experience as a teacher in public schools and at community college.

“The people who don’t show up on the nights when there’s a parent-teacher meeting are not people who in fact don’t care, but folks from poor backgrounds,” Biden said. “They don’t show up because they’re embarrassed. They’re embarrassed the teacher’s going to say — and it’s hard to say, ‘Well, I can’t read.’ I’m talking about not just people of color, but poor folks.”

Recently, Biden's campaign didn't deny the Times' reporting that in response to a question about education reform he told a group of black mayors that one problem black communities face is that the "parents can't read or write themselves." Instead the campaign provided a statement saying Biden "regularly talks about how his father's experience has shaped the way he feels about and views the relationship between parents and their children's learning."

Another common touchstone in Biden's education speeches is "word gaps," or differences in the number of words children hear in their first years based on family income — a concept based on popular but widely debated research. Biden has sometimes veered far from the research findings, though, implying that low-income or black parents don't read or speak to their children.

For example, Biden brought up word gaps in a 2007 interview with the Washington Post editorial board while discussing differences in school performance.

"It goes back to what you start off with, what you're dealing with," he said, during his second run for president. "When you have children coming from dysfunctional homes, when you have children coming from homes where there's no books, where the mother from the time they're born doesn't talk to them — as opposed to the mother in Iowa who's sitting out there and talks to them," he said, going on to mention the word gap research.

Biden said this after pointing out that Iowa has a much smaller black population than cities like Washington, D.C., "leaving the impression," the paper wrote, "that he believed one reason so many Washington D.C. schools fail is the city's high minority population." (At the time, Biden's campaign said he was calling out disadvantages stemming from socio-economic differences, not racial ones.)

The original 1992 study, of 42 families in Kansas, found large differences in the number of words that young children heard each hour during monthly observations. The researchers came to the conclusion that children from the lowest-income families would hear 13 million words by age 4, compared with 45 million words for children from higher-income families.



These findings have been used to help expand Head Start and early intervention programs. The Obama administration, in partnership with the Clinton Foundation, worked to raise awareness about the importance of closing the word gap — which likely contributes to why Biden cites it so often.

Since the publication of the original study, some critics have taken issue with how it was conducted, including that all six of the lowest-income families in the study were African American and only one of the 13 high-income families was African American.

Attempts to replicate those findings have found gaps do exist, but that they are smaller. Biden seems aware of that: On the campaign trail this time — when he called on parents to “play the radio” so that “kids hear words” during the September debate — he cited newer research that found a 4-million word gap between children from low- and high-income families.

“It’s so much more complex than politicians or people listening to debates would like to think it is,” said Douglas Sperry, an associate professor of psychology at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College. His own research found that the number of words children heard varied widely within income groups and across five different places. His research also found children from low-income black families in Alabama heard almost three times as many words per hour as the original study’s lowest-income black families in Kansas.

So why have word gaps continued to be such a focus for Biden and many others?

Sofía Bahena, an assistant professor of education at The University of Texas at San Antonio, who has critiqued how the original word gap research was conducted, thinks it’s partly because word gaps fit with preconceived notions many Americans have about the language abilities of students of color, and the idea that structural inequities can be toppled with individual hard work.

“We have this whole American theme of ‘pick yourself up by the bootstraps,’” she said. “It’s not just Biden.”