



# Focus On

## Blacks

## RACE AGAINST TIME: EDUCATING BLACK BOYS

Black boys like Robert, John, and Devin don't have much patience for statistics on Black boys. Homeless for the third time this year, Robert is set to graduate from Washington, D.C.'s Cardoza High School with a 3.86 grade point average, fostering daydreams about his own college dorm room where no one can kick him out. His classmate and best friend John, a fine student and star athlete, has spent most of his young life in a group home; yet, when asked about his post-college plans, John's answer isn't pro football but physical education teacher. Then there's Devin, who having dropped out of Cardoza, is excelling in boot camp and has just passed the GED, step one in becoming a military police officer. The trouble with statistics, say all three boys, is that the numbers color them invisible.

*...the surprising news, at once puzzling and promising, is that we actually have tools to reverse this trajectory and success stories to prove it...*

As the nation enters its third year under the leadership of its first Black president, a man so well educated his critics have labeled him an elitist, the numbers tell us many Black male students are more likely to hit the streets than the books. In just 2010 alone, the release of three high-profile research studies generated national debate on the academic prospects of Black boys. The statistics describing Black boys as more likely than peers to be placed in special education classes, labeled mentally retarded, suspended from school, or drop out altogether is disturbing enough. But the surprising news, at once puzzling and promising, is that we actually have tools to reverse this trajectory and success stories to prove it—not just individual victories, like Robert, John, and Devin, but victory in numbers.

### WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

Several recent studies, including *Yes We Can, the Schott Foundation's 50-State Report on Public Education and Black Males*; *A Call for Change*, by the Council of the Great City Schools; and *We Dream a World*, by the 2025 Campaign for Black Men and Boys, report that Black youth are struggling along all points of the academic continuum.

- ▶ Forty-two percent of Black students attend schools that are under-resourced and performing poorly.
- ▶ Black boys are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their White peers, missing valuable learning time in the classroom.
- ▶ Black and Hispanic males constitute almost 80 percent of youth in special education programs.
- ▶ Black boys are 2.5 times less likely to be enrolled in gifted and talented programs, even if their prior achievement reflects the ability to succeed.
- ▶ Black male students make up 20 percent of all students in the United States classified as mentally retarded, although they are only nine percent of the student population.
- ▶ Twenty-eight percent of core academic teachers at high-minority schools lack appropriate certification.
- ▶ Less than half of Black male students graduate from high school on time, although many eventually complete a GED.
- ▶ In 2008, 4.6 million Black males had attended college, but only half graduated. Nationally, only 11 percent of Black males complete a bachelor's degree.



The same studies that describe Black male students in crisis also identify bright lights—individuals, schools, and districts—doing extraordinary work: A New Jersey school that graduates 100 percent of its Black male students. School districts like Montgomery County, Maryland, where Black male student graduation rates are significantly higher than the national average. An NEA Priority school in Ohio that has dramatically transformed school climate in just one year. U.S. Department of Defense schools around the globe that have narrowed or virtually eliminated achievement gaps. Some educators say these successes prove transformative work can be done if the nation focuses as keenly on solutions as it has on symptoms.

### MAKING IT COOL TO SOAR

The Schott Foundation report cites New Jersey as the only state with a significant Black male population with a greater than 65 percent graduation rate, due in part to increased funding from Abbott v. Burke legislation benefiting urban schoolchildren. New Jersey's 32 "Abbott" districts provide 0-4 preschool preparation, increased education hours for students, continuous professional development for school staff, improved facilities, and supplemental programs for students in poverty.

The performance of students at New Jersey's Newark Tech High School, recognized by U.S. *News & World Report* magazine as one of the best high schools in the United States, is particularly impressive. Of the 700 mostly Black and Hispanic students attending Newark Tech, more than 85 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. Last year, 88 percent of the student body tested proficient in math, 100 percent tested proficient in reading, and 100 percent graduated, begging the question: what is Newark Tech doing that many other schools aren't? In fact, Newark Tech principle Baruti Kafele believes that the picture the Schott report paints about New Jersey's success rate with Black boys is a bit too rosy.

"Most school systems are addressing this crisis as an academic problem, but these kids are in self-crisis," explains Kafele. "We can't address a crisis of self-image, self-esteem, self-discipline, and self-respect as an academic problem, and if we keep trying to solve it in terms of math and reading models, we'll be coming to the same conferences and reading the same reports 25 years from now," he warns. Kafele, whose African first name means "teacher," believes that schools have to address the "affective" before they address the academic. "The generic approach isn't working," he argues.

When Kafele first arrived at Newark Tech, the school was on the district's school improvement list. Kafele and his staff set about transforming school climate and culture, using a suite of student-centered strategies to turn the school around:

**School leadership.** No matter how highly motivated and highly trained the staff, they need the full support of a leader who takes ownership of the work, says Kafele, who personally greets each student at the school door every morning, Kafele also blasts a positive daily message on the public address system to counter all the negative messages students get outside of school.

**Male empowerment sessions.** Weekly sessions on manhood and classroom dynamics include one-on-one conversations, large and small group work, and frank discussions with men from the community. Senior students visit area elementary schools to model manhood for young boys. "A few years ago, it wasn't popular for boys at our school to be smart, confides Kafele. "We've made it cool for gangbangers to soar."

**Culturally responsive school.** Newark Tech staff utilizes culturally responsive curriculum and instruction that recognizes students' cultural backgrounds, home environments, and the impact of student experiences on the teaching and learning process. Instead of worrying about the achievement gap, says Kafele, educators focus on the learning gap (the reasons individual students aren't learning rather than the metrics), the attitude gap (the gap between students who believe in themselves and those who don't), the relationship gap (students who have a solid relationship with educators versus those who don't), the opportunity gap (students who have access to a great public school versus those who don't), and the relevance gap (lessons that students can apply to their daily lives versus lessons that are abstract and intangible.)

Committed educators and the funding that poured into New Jersey's poorest districts helped New Jersey narrow its achievement gap, says Jacqui Watts Greadington, President of the East Orange Education Association and Chair of NEA's Black Caucus. She's worried these gains will slip away, however, in the face of funding cuts and the absence of a dialogue between the current governor and the union. "What makes students successful," says Greadington, "is the communication between adults—school, home, community, and legislators—who have students' best interests at heart."

## BEATING THE ODDS

The importance of school-home connectedness and culturally responsive instruction can't be overestimated, says Mavis Ellis, chair of the Maryland State Teacher's Association Human and Civil Rights Committee and pupil personnel worker for Montgomery County, one of two Maryland school districts commended in the Schott Report. Montgomery County's 2010 graduation rate for Black males is 83 percent, 36 percent above the national average for Black males cited in the Schott Report. Last year, the district's Black students (23 percent of the total student population) made Adequate Yearly Progress across all grade levels, with the exception of middle school math scores.

As a pupil personnel worker who advocates for students and their families, Ellis works closely with students who have academic, attendance, and discipline issues. Sitting on special education teams, case managing students who've been expelled, and working with families in need had familiarized her with inequities faced by Black males.

Only 19 percent of Maryland's total student population in 2005, Black males comprised 62 percent of all male students identified as mentally retarded, 57 percent of males identified as emotionally disturbed, and 44 percent of those identified as developmentally delayed. In fact, notes Dr. Oscar Barbarin, a research psychologist known for his work with Black and Hispanic children, Black boys are stigmatized as being "bad" children as early as preschool.

Fortunately, says Ellis, in recent years there has been a change in Maryland's tracking of Black male students. To compensate for institutionalized inequity in the treatment of Black boys, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) began closely monitoring the process when minority students were placed in special education, labeled emotionally disturbed, or singled out for suspension or expulsion. As a result, the overall number of Black boys coded for special education has decreased in the last two years. The number of students suspended with recommendations for expulsion has also been significantly reduced. Ellis largely credits MSDE's Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports process, which emphasizes constructive interventions as an alternative to punitive disciplinary actions.

## TEN THINGS YOU CAN DO TO PROMOTE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION

- 1. Validate students' cultural identity in classroom practices and instructional materials** by using textbooks, designing bulletin boards, and implementing classroom activities that are culturally supportive. This may mean using supplementary resources that don't perpetuate stereotypes or inadequately represent certain groups.
- 2. Acknowledge students' differences as well as their commonalities** and respond to their individual strengths and weaknesses.
- 3. Educate students about the diversity of the world** around them so all students learn to relate positively to each other regardless of cultural and linguistic differences.
- 4. Promote equity and mutual respect** among students in ways that a) ensure fair treatment across all groups and b) carefully monitor behaviors that are traditionally rewarded to ensure they're not culture bound.
- 5. Access students' ability and achievement validly** using appropriate and varied instruments and procedures that accurately reflect what students do know (not just what they don't know, e.g., mainstream language and culture).
- 6. Foster a positive interrelationship among students, their families, the community and school** based on respect for the knowledge students bring with them to school. Tapping into community resources, participating in community events, and valuing the contributions of families and community strengthen this bond.
- 7. Motivate students to become active participants in their learning** through reflection, goal-setting, self-evaluation, questioning, using feedback, and tailoring their learning strategies.
- 8. Encourage students to think critically** by teaching them strategies for analyzing and synthesizing information and for viewing situations from multiple perspectives.
- 9. Challenge students to strive for excellence** as defined by their potential to learn, *regardless of their past history of failure*.
- 10. Assist students in becoming socially and politically conscious** so they can be contributing, responsible participants in school and society.

*Adapted from the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems*

In addition to positive interventions, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has used an array of institutional strategies to improve the performance of Black male students:

**Expansion of full-day pre-kindergarten.** Investments in pre-kindergarten and direct linking of pre-K programs to high standards in the K-12 curriculum are paying huge dividends for students, especially poor children. A Pew Center report details how expanded access to full-day pre-kindergarten has helped narrow the achievement gap before MCPS students start kindergarten.

**Differentiation of resources.** Schools with high concentrations of historically underserved students (low income, high minority, and English language learners) receive more funding per pupil than those schools with low or no concentrations of such students. Differentiation also takes the form of longer school days at some of the more disadvantaged schools.

**Growing participation and success in Advanced Placement (AP) course taking/exams.** Between 2000 and 2010, the number of MCPS students who take AP exams has more than tripled, while the number of tests taken that earned a college-ready score of three or higher also tripled. By using a variety of tools to identify promising students who might not otherwise enroll in AP courses, MCPS has pursued a deliberate strategy to increase the number of poor and minority students in AP courses.

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“It’s not about hiring Hercules but about creating a welcome environment where adults can be skillful and students can get the support they need,” says Robert Balfanz, co-director of the Everybody Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, and associate director of the Talent Development Middle and High School Project, which is currently working with more than 50 high-poverty secondary schools around the country to translate research findings into concrete reforms. Balfanz credits multiple

strategies with driving improvements in a number of school districts: reducing chronic absenteeism and out-of-school-suspensions, organizing teacher teams, increasing instructional supports and professional development, providing wraparound social services, and enlisting community partners to increase the ratio of concerned adults to students in need. Baltimore, Maryland, the latest district to see notable improvement, has a “Great Kids Come Back Campaign” that sends volunteers out to knock on doors and coax dropouts back to school.

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Promising reforms are taking place in individual districts across the state and the nation, but they often happen in silos, says Michial Gill, Deputy Director for Governmental Relations and Minority Student Achievement Specialist for the Maryland State Department of Education. To make improvements statewide, MSDE formed the African-American Males Initiative, a workgroup charged with implementing the recommendations of an education task force. In addition to recommending a three-credit, MSDE-approved cultural proficiency course for educators, the African-American Males Initiative is launching an awareness campaign to promote widespread sharing of successful solutions.

#### **A FRESH START**

An NEA Priority School, Belmont High is located in Ohio, one of the nation’s ten lowest performing states for Black males, according to the 2010 Schott Report. NEA’s Priority Schools Campaign, which uses NEA members to raise student achievement in the nation’s struggling schools, is supporting transformative change at Belmont. Currently on “Academic Watch,” Belmont has begun implementing the NEA-recommended “transformation model” of school-reform for the 2010-2011 school year. Considered a “war zone” just three years ago, the ethnically diverse high-poverty school serves approximately 1,000 students,

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## STRAIGHT TALK WITH BLACK STUDENTS

College students Elijah and Rachel Jones, Guy Foster, and Nemya Robinson are friends who attended high school together in Montgomery County, Maryland. Fraternal twins, Elijah and Rachel went to the same schools and shared many of the same classes. The four friends talk frankly about their personal experiences as Black students.

**Q: Were you and your brother, Elijah, treated the same or differently at school?**

**Rachel:** My brother and I definitely got different treatment in elementary school.

**Elijah:** There were times when my friend C.J. and I would talk out of

tum and they tried to put both of us on Ritalin and certify us as stupid. Meanwhile, my White friend

threw temper tantrums where he flipped over tables and flung scissors. The principal would be called in, and the world would stop while everyone talked to him gently. Had I done that, they would have just put me in handcuffs.

**Rachel:** From my viewpoint, watching this happen, all the kids acted like kids, but Elijah and C.J. were picked on if they so much as dropped their pencils.

**Elijah:** I felt like they were trying to prove a point with me. Let's just catch him. I constantly got pulled aside and tested. I tested two grades higher than my grade level, and they couldn't explain it. They were kind of shocked. What does this mean? What do we do now?

*Black boys are punished more severely for the same infractions*

*as their White peers.*

—Schott Report

**Rachel:** I feel like when you're young, that's when they try to get you. Then when you're older, you'll fall into all the statistics we hear about.

**Q: How did you do in high school?**

**Rachel:** I was shocked by high school at first. In my middle school, it was all about respecting your teachers. My first day in high school, a girl cursed at the teacher and somebody threw a chair. The kids were out of control.

**Elijah:** Senior year was my favorite because I was involved in a lot of school activities and did my senior internship at an architecture firm. My senior grade point average was 3.8.

**Q: Which students did the best?**

**Guy:** The White kids.

**Elijah:** The students who knew how to make school work for them, whether they were White, Black, or Asian.

**Rachel:** Still, the majority of students who took AP classes and honors courses were White kids.

**Nemia:** I don't feel like it's about race. It's about environment. A lot of Black kids who went to my school were super smart. They were doing what they needed to do to get the grades. I would say 50 percent of Black kids were into

scholarships and good grades, whereas 80 percent of the White kids had an education mindset.

**Q: What can we do to make Black students, especially males, more successful?**

**Rachel:** I think it starts at home. As cliché as it sounds, we do need more Black male role models. If you're brought up to know better, then you do better, and you give back to the community. As for the school system, it's time for them to change what they teach everybody.

**Nemia:** People need good influences and role models, whether it's at school or at home. It's a collective effort. If you're teaching in a school, you need to be positive. If you're a [hip-hop artist], we need more Lupe Fiasco and less Lil Wayne.

**Elijah:** Did the majority of the Black kids I went to school with have a lot of self-esteem and self-love? Some thought they did, but they didn't. I thought I was doing well when I got an A on a test, but some guys thought they were doing well when they got 15 friend requests on Facebook.

**Elijah:** Someone needs to start a movement, and it needs to be us.

**Guy:** Yeah, we need a rebirth—a new Harlem Renaissance.

## WHAT CAN ELEMENTARY EDUCATORS DO?

The NEA seminar, “Promoting Success of African-American Boys by Understanding and Reducing Stigmas and Stereotypes,” highlighted eight overarching strategies elementary educators can use in their work.\*

### 1. Uncover and rid ourselves of attitudes, misconceptions, stereotypes, and inappropriate methods that undermine effective, nurturing teaching.

- ▶ When boys fail to respond in the desired way to methods educators are familiar with, some teachers respond by distancing themselves emotionally or developing negative ideas about a child’s motivation and abilities. Let go of assumptions, such as boys who don’t sit still or focus aren’t interested in learning, and unfamiliar or culturally comfortable behaviors reflect a learning or behavioral disability.
- ▶ Avoid punishment that denies a child the teaching methods he most needs to be successful, for instance, isolation rather than cooperative learning and extra sitting rather than large-motor, physical activity.

### 2. Build a strong, knowledgeable, empathetic caring relationship with students.

- ▶ Believe and make visible your belief in a child’s potential to succeed. Know every child as he is—not the mainstream cultural image of how a child should be.

### 3. Build strong, caring relationships with families.

- ▶ Learn about the family’s dreams, hopes, and expectations for their son and their expectations re adult-child relationships, management techniques, and cues. Ask what their son is like at home and about his relationship with his peers. Let families know their son’s (and daughter’s) successes on a regular basis.

### 4. Understand and plan for cultural and language discontinuity.

- ▶ See being bicultural as a strength, rather than a difficulty. Know management cues children learn at home, and help them make a bridge to the cues you use.

### 5. Recognize learning styles as strengths, adapt your methods, and re-teach concepts in ways a child can best learn.

- ▶ Work together in learning activities and maintenance tasks that promote community spirit.
- ▶ Use a 2-1 balance of teacher-initiated activities requiring interactive/free talk and focusing skills/quiet time that prepares students for independent learning behaviors typically required in primary schools.

### 6. Recognize and use boys’ physical energy and kinesthetic learning as an attribute.

- ▶ Provide several opportunities during the day for physical activity, follow high-energy activities with sitting activities, and create literacy activities suited to kinesthetic learners.

### 7. Understand and actively counter the impact of racism on a child’s sense of competency and identity.

- ▶ Include community role models for Black boys in ongoing activities with children. Develop materials and activities to counter media-fostered negative images and messages about Black men. Regularly teach about the contributions men of color have made to our society, a lesson that benefits all children.

### 8. Practice anti-bias strategies.

- ▶ Build community among the children—caring for each other and working together.
- ▶ Foster children’s learning about, appreciating, and respecting their differences, commonalities, and contributions to the whole group.
- ▶ Foster critical thinking skills (e.g. use multicultural books that model or explore social justice).
- ▶ Immediately intervene in any hurtful behaviors related to identity (sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can break my heart). Help children learn ways to speak up when they experience or witness hurtful behavior.
- ▶ Be an advocate, speaking directly to any injustice you see in the learning environment.

\*Adapted from research by Oscar Barbarin, Ph.D., and materials prepared by Jawanza Kunjufa and Louise Derman-Sparks.

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40 percent of whom are Black. In just one year's time, school fights have decreased from 143 to 17, assaults from 83 to 10, and arrests from 53 to 1. Ninety-two percent of Belmont seniors are on track to graduate, and this past year, as many boys as girls made the honor roll, says Principal David White.

Although Belmont faces many challenges, particularly in the areas of student motivation and parent engagement, the principle and school staff credit initial gains to several factors:

**Staff collaboration.** Close collaboration is a foundation of the school's reform effort. During the summer, the entire staff met to plan a curricular scope and sequence for each day of school. Special education teachers wrote a modified version of the general education curriculum, ensuring that all students are moving through curricular targets at their own level.

**Positive use of data.** The school's new principal uses data feedback as a tool rather than a weapon report school staff, who say this is the first time they feel empowered by a reform effort. By looking at the data, school staff realized many students were missing school because they couldn't afford bus fare, says Principal David White. "Poor families were choosing between buying Thanksgiving dinner and bus passes."

**Community outreach and parent engagement.** Although Belmont's parent and community relationships need strengthening (staff will focus on this topic in the coming year), they're improving gradually as the school maintains a safer campus. The school recently became a partner with the Belmont Community Association and contributes to the community newsletter.

"Everything falls into place when you treat each child as if they were your own," says Jeffrey Mims, Ohio state school board member and former Dayton Education Association president. Mims, who managed district programs for at-risk youth after teaching at Belmont for seven years, credits the school's current principal and staff with developing critical personal relationships with each student. Treating every student with the dignity, respect, guidance, discipline, and caring passion you'd give your own child works well with Black males, asserts Mims, because many rarely receive this kind of treatment. "Our children start with a smaller basket

of resources but are expected to produce at the same level as kids in high-achieving, affluent communities," Mims points out. "Schools and communities need more support to close the quality-of-life gap so closely linked to the achievement gap."

## WAKE-UP CALL

In individual schools and districts across the country, educators are using a range of emerging strategies to narrow achievement gaps, boost graduation rates, and provide more equitable treatment for America's Black male students. The resulting evidence is clear: schools with the greatest success invariably address a combination of interrelated factors in a child's life: academic, emotional, and social. Despite promising reforms, as yet, there is no coordinated national response for what amounts to a national crisis. The 2009 PISA (or Programme for International Student Assessment), which looks at 69 countries and school systems, ranked the United States average in reading and science and below average in mathematics, prompting Education Secretary Arne Duncan to declare the results a wake-up call.

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Changing the trajectory of Black male students may not yet be a national conversation, but it's on the national radar screen. Just this year, the U.S. Department of Education convened "Increasing the Odds," its first panel on improving the academic prospects of America's Black male students.

The success of Black males has increasingly become a topic of research, dialogue, debate, and strategic planning. As we engage in the conversation, however, students like Cardoza's Robert Butler, John Young, and Devin Harrington are reminders that we're educating kids, not statistics, and that, as one Black student affirms, "The truth doesn't live in numbers. It lives in the person."



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